

Authentic Faith Engenders Humility

In the preceding lessons we have heard James develop his case for what authentic faith is; and in the process he has pointed out the prevalent behaviors of Christians that contradict the teachings of Jesus. We have explored the idea that genuine faith rejects favoritism moving the faithful towards true acts of charity and kindness; and, it refrains from harmful and evil speech teaching self-control and submission to the Word of God. In our class lesson last week we learned that authentic faith engenders humility born in the understanding that our goodness comes from the gift of Godly wisdom, not the wisdom of the world. James exhorts us to remember from where that wisdom comes so as not to deceive ourselves and in arrogance boast in our own abilities. Our lessons this week will continue with the theme that authentic faith engenders humility.

Ambition and Envy

We begin today's lesson with James admonishing the brethren about fighting and quarrelling amongst themselves. This passage is a continuation of the preceding discourse on Godly wisdom versus worldly wisdom we discussed previously. We learned that following worldly wisdom results in disorder and strife. We may expect divisions, angry words, quarrels and posturing for power in the world. James told us in 3: 16, *"For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."*¹ The effects of worldly wisdom which plays by the rules of selfish ambitions striving and scheming for what others have with a "me first at any cost" mentality leads to disorder and wickedness. It leads to all sorts of quarrelling and fighting. We have come to expect this behavior of the world, but not within the church. Yet many churches do face power struggles, quarrels, envy and ambition amongst not only their congregants, but also within the clergy and those in positions of prominence within the individual churches. It is to this issue that James takes to task the Jewish Christians he is addressing throughout the Diaspora. This was clearly true of the ancient church, and is still true today. Before we start today's lesson, take a few minutes to prepare for your study by bringing yourself before the Lord. Reflect upon whether or not you may harbor envy or ambition, or are part of a quarrel with a brother or sister in Christ. If so present these before the Lord and ask him for wisdom and understanding in dealing with these matters. Ask him to open the scriptures before you so that you may hear the truth, be convicted by it, and change your pattern of behavior. God bless you in this endeavor. We again have a hard lesson before us which will no doubt leave you feeling a little sore. I know it did me, but thankfully we have a kind and loving Lord who will tend to our hurts. We are his beloved. No matter what we find to confess he is faithful to redeem and heal.

¹ NRSV



Read James 4:1-6 and answer the following questions.

What does James say is the source of our quarrels?

What do these unrestrained desires lead to?

In verses 2-3 it says, *“You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”*

What is it you think they are not asking for?

What things are they asking for instead?

Why do they not receive what they ask?

Sum up the prayer life of these brethren. What do they expect of God? What is wrong with their expectations? What are they motivated by?

What should their prayers be motivated by? Read 1 John 3:21-22 as a contrast to the prayers condemned by James.

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

1 John 3:21-22 (NRSV)

Notice John tells us that we “have boldness before God”, which means that we can boldly ask of God and expect to receive from God that which we ask. While the brethren James is reproaching seem to pray with boldness, what is the difference?

In verse 4, James calls the brethren “adulterous”. What about their behavior reveals spiritual adultery?



How is friendship with the world hatred towards God? See John 15:18-19 and 1 John 2:15-16.

James quotes scripture in verse 6 and says, “*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*” What is the cure for the arrogance of the brethren?

Verse 1 begins “*Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?*” The NIV translates the word “cravings” as “desires” both of which come from the Greek *hēdone*², having to do with the gratification of lusts and pleasures either natural desire or sinful desires. It implies the giving in and pursuit of the very physical feelings associated with bodily appetites, in other words: hedonistic pleasure. The brethren James is addressing are lusting after the pleasures personified by the very things they envy of others or desire to achieve. They are attempting to live according to the ways of the world yet at the same time call themselves Christians. They are deceiving themselves. The values and motives of living according to the way the world lives focuses on self and leads to self-centered thoughts and actions, often at the expense of others. When we are consumed with envy (the desire for something someone else has) or by selfish ambition (the desire to obtain power, position, recognition, prestige beyond all else) we become blinded to the needs of others around us. Every thought and action is focused on how to get to the next level, what needs to be done to achieve or accomplish something, how to get above and beyond someone else. There is no room for love, compassion and mercy when one is consumed by envy or ambition. Pleasure and riches are not sinful in and of themselves. It only becomes sinful when what we are striving for or seeking comes at the expense of another or leads to disobeying God. The Jewish Christians James was addressing had turned their focus from loving and serving others to serving themselves at the expense of the brethren. Individuals were seeking power or recognition in the church, money, influence, etc., all of which leads to the strife caused by jealousy, ambition, slander, anger. The brethren were using the church to further their own status and in so doing were bringing strife, quarreling and dissension along with them. They were employing the ways of the world in seeking to further their own agenda or serve themselves.

James tells us in verse 2 that God was not answering their prayers because they were not asking for the right things, asking for the wrong things or asking for the wrong reasons. They likely were praying for things to benefit themselves rather than seeking the things the Lord has for them. Their motives were impure and their hearts stood condemned before God because their desires were self-serving. Perhaps they didn’t pray at all because they knew God would not approve what they desired. Or when they did pray, they sought his approval after the fact or as a bargaining tool attempting to control God like a genie granting wishes. Whatever they prayed for,

² Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

their hearts were infected by selfish ambition and envy, not love of God or neighbor. God withheld his good gifts from those who would squander them on hedonistic pleasures.

James describes the progression of uncontrolled envy and ambition. First the deceived Christian³ desires something, he attempts to act upon it and not getting it he fight for it, demanding it as his right as though entitled to it. He resorts to any variety of the modus operandi of the world in justifying his behavior. Full blown uncontrolled lust or envy for what he wants but cannot have results in destruction or murder. (Think of King David when he gave into his lust of Bathsheba!) Covetousness results when desires are not met. While envy is willing to destroy in order to gain what it doesn't possess, covetousness is willing to steal. He become "friends" of the world – living and acting the way the world does in arrogant defiance of God, and spitting in the face of our Lord and Savior who died that he might be saved. Rightly does James call the brethren adulterers. In Scripture, the phrase "adulterous generation" is always applied to those who assume they are living in covenant relationship with the Lord, but in truth are embracing the ways of the world.⁴ They have turned their back on the Lord and abased themselves in the pursuits of pleasure, power or greed. They have become proud and arrogant in their self-serving pursuits. In fact these Christians have found themselves in a position worse off than those of the world whom they have come to emulate. They are prideful and rebellious Christians engaged in illicit relationships with the world at enmity with God.⁵

But, God has given the gift of the Holy Spirit to each of us to convict our hearts of our selfish desires. He moves us to repent of our sins seeking his great grace to overcome the sin-sick selfish desires of our hearts. His grace is greater than our sin and if we humble ourselves he will forgive us. James tells us that "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*"(v.6). Just as the rebellious Christians have allied themselves with the world in enmity with God, God stands battle ready against the proud. The word translated "opposes" comes from the Greek word *antitassei* which is a military term meaning "to battle against".⁶ The rebellious Christian is called to recoil from pride and submit humbly to the Lord. The cure for a prideful heart is humility before God which is rewarded with God's undeserved grace.

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The Cure

Now that we have seen the self-deception and depravity our unfettered and deformed desires can lead to, James gives us hope. In verse 6 we learned that God's grace is greater than our sins and that if we humble ourselves he will extend that underserved favor to us. The next verses will lead us back from self-deception and arrogance to an appropriate relationship with the Lord.

³ We will call him a deceived Christian because he is under the self-deception that his behavior is acceptable.

⁴ NIV Application Commentary (NIV AC)

⁵ Bible Knowledge Commentary (BKC)

⁶ BKC



Please read James 4:7-12 and answer the following questions.

What does it mean to submit to God?

The root of sin we've spent so much time discussing in this study of James' letter comes from our own pride and desires leading us into self-deception. What part does the devil have to do with our sin?

How will resisting the devil cause him to flee from you?

What does the first part of verse 8 promise?

What are sinners and the double-minded to do?

Why are we told to "lament, mourn and weep"?

What is wrong with laughter and joy in this context? Instead we are to turn our laughter into mourning and our joy into dejection. Why mourning and dejection?

What does it mean to humble ourselves before the Lord?

James paints a portrait of true humility of one who has woken up to the depravity of his life and has turned back to the Lord. He humbles himself and submits to the Lord. He commits himself to obeying God, not his desires that lead to depravity. He resists the temptations of the devil. Scripture tells us "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Resist means to stand against. When we stand against the devil, we've got the Lord of Hosts at our back. Of course, the devil will flee!

Our now repentant Christian mourns his previous activities, has confessed and recommits himself to living in purity. He washes his hands of the filth of sin and purifies his heart. Sin causes spiritual uncleanness. The hands and the heart symbolically represent the members of the body contaminated by sin. It is those parts that need to be cleansed. For the 1st century Christian

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Jew, the cleansing of the hands and purifying of the heart would call to mind the ritual purity required in worshipping the Lord; additionally, the call to purify the heart would be an echo of the prophets calling Israel back from sin and into right relationship with the Lord. At one time the call to purify oneself came before drawing near the Lord, but now the approach has changed! As followers of Christ, God already planted his Word in us and has chosen us for a new and spiritual birth (James 1:18). The act of cleansing is allowing *God* to wash our sins away and purify our hearts.⁷ The hands and the heart that once wallowed in the mire of sin are now prepared to serve God again.

The prodigal Christian recognizes himself in the Lord's description of sinners like he had been: "*You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked*" (Revelation 3:18). He trades haughty laughter and worldly delight for mourning, weeping and lamentation over his self-delusion, arrogance and contempt. He wears his heart on his sleeve for all to see that he has truly turned away from and scorns his previous life. He is cloaked in sorrow and dejection. He walks humbly before the Lord and amongst his brethren, grateful for the forgiveness and grace he has received from the Lord. Once again he is counted among the friends of God.

Verses 11-12 seem to shift from this portrait of a no longer deceived, but now humble Christian to admonitions against slander. This may seem disjointed, but James points out yet another behavior of deluded Christians in this congregation.

Who is James addressing in verse 11?

Who are they slandering?

What do you think "speaking against" means?



How is speaking against or judging a brother against the law? (See also Matthew 22:37-40 and 1 Peter 2:1)

Read Luke 18:9-14. How does this parable reflect this passage in James?

Who is given the authority to stand in judgment of mankind?

- Romans 14:4
- Matthew 10:28
- Revelation 20:11-15

When we dare to criticize another we usurp the throne of God and render an unfounded judgment against another of his beloved children

⁷ New American Commentary

Who is the “neighbor” (v.12) that is being criticized?

The brethren of the congregation are slandering or speaking against one another. The phrase “speaking against”, also translated “speaking evil” comes from the Greek word *katalalos* meaning “to speak evil”, or the more vivid “back-bite”⁸. A back-biter speaks critically behind the back of another. He or she gossips and whispers criticisms of others and renders judgments of their behavior. They may be gossiping and criticizing those who are living like those of the world, deceived by their desires and in their pride trample over the laws of the Lord. Or they may be criticizing the one who recently repented. Whispering among themselves, “Who does he think he is? Just last week I saw him running around with a married woman, and here he is today making a show of repentance.” Ever heard similar gossip whispered in the church pews? Ever been the one doing the whispering? (Ouch! I think I’ll let my blush stand for my answer to that question!) We cannot see what goes on in the hearts of others. Only the Lord can, the one appointed by God to stand in judgment, able to save the humble repentant or destroy the proud sinner. When we dare to criticize another we usurp the throne of God and render an unfounded judgment against another of his beloved children upon whom he has shown undeserved grace and favor – just as he has shown to each of us on innumerable occasions when we least deserved it. Does the idea of it just make you shudder down to your very soul? Me, too.

Personal Reflection

This lesson spoke loud and clearly to me about gossip and criticism. If it did for you too, please take some time to write out your thoughts, reaction or even a prayer.

The Boastful

Dear one’s, we are in the homestretch for this week’s homework. I know our previous lesson was a tough one, but the point of studying scripture is to allow it to reveal our sinful ways, to learn from our mistakes, change our attitudes, and be healed by the Lord. At times the words of scripture may be harsh and bitter, seemingly hard to digest and leaving us feeling a bit queasy when we compare the words of the Lord with our own actions. That is because we all have experienced the deadly cancer of a sin-sick heart. God once instructed the prophet Ezekiel to take a scroll from his hand and to eat it. Upon the scroll, written front and back were “*words of lament, mourning and woe*”⁹ because the people of Israel had rebelled against the Lord. This is how Ezekiel described the taste of God’s word when he was instructed to eat it: *‘Then I ate it; and*

⁸ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

⁹ Ezekiel 2:10

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in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. [”]¹⁰ As we work through some of these lessons we will find that the Lord’s words are medicine to our soul and sweet as honey, because as Mary Poppins says, “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down”.

Our next segment of scripture addresses the sin of boasting as it is the pinnacle of self-deception and an evil. Boasting, along with wealth which we will address later, can lead to self-exaltation and apathy to mercy allowing evil to grow within the church at the expense of the needy.



Read James 4:13-17 and answer the following questions.

What is the plan of this Christian business man? What is his motivation?

What are James’ two objections?

- 1.
- 2.

How does James describe a person’s life? What does that mean?

What does James say this man ought to be thinking and doing?



Why does James call this man’s attitude boastful and bragging? Why is it evil?

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Jer 29:11 (NRSV)

Read Jeremiah 29:11. What are God’s plans for us?

If God’s plans for us are for our welfare and not for harm, what ought we to do with the blessings that come of his plans for us?



Explain what James means in verse 17. Why is failing to do good as much a sin as doing what is wrong?

¹⁰ Ezekiel 3:3

Once again James uses an illustration of a self-deceived Christian to reveal the arrogance and evil of boasting. At first pass upon reading this passage we may be tempted to think, “What is wrong with planning for our futures?” Nothing, as long as we remember to not only keep God in those plans, but put him first in those plans. James gives us a picture of a Jewish Christian merchant seeking to grow and expand his business in efforts to increase his wealth. His focus is completely on making money, nothing else. This merchant doesn’t say, to himself, “What would the Lord have me do with this business?” “What can I do with my business to help others?” or even, “Lord where would you have me go that this business will benefit your agenda?” No this man is all about making more money according to his own plans. There is no point in making plans for your future as if God does not exist. He has a plan for our lives and it may take a significant departure from where we want it to go. Instead of making plans purely on a human plane, we must take into consideration that God may have other plans. We must allow for him to work out his plan for our lives. He has given us gifts, blessings and talents not solely for our benefit, but for Him to benefit and serve others through us. The key to avoiding the sin of boasting of our own plans and selfishly applying our gifts and talents for our own benefit is to keep God in the big picture.

Planning for the future is not a sin if we keep in mind that God has an agenda of his own and at anytime may upset the plans we make. We must be ready at a moment’s notice to abandon the plan we had for His. His plans are always for our benefit. He promises that they are for our good, for our prosperity. Our good, our prosperity, our welfare are not always the gain of wealth. His idea of prosperity is on a spiritual plane. His plans lead to a deeper faith and relationship with him, not necessarily the accumulation of wealth, and may take us down paths we would rather not go. Although, sometimes his plans do include monetary blessings but those blessings may come with an intention that they be shared with the less fortunate or be used to further his work here in the kingdom of God. They are not for our selfish pursuits as we will see in the next passage of scripture. His blessings, whether monetary or not, should flow from our hearts and hands to help and lift up those in need. Failing to share such blessings, failing to do what is good, compassionate, and merciful is a sin. James’ epistle has abounded with exhortations to do good and teachings on what is good verses what is bad. If we have been taught what is good, we have no excuse preventing us from doing what is good. And failing to do what is good is a sin.

Lastly, life is short. We have no idea how long we have on this earth to love our families, enjoy God’s creation, His gifts, and the people he has drawn into our lives. In essence, time is fleeting. We must use what time we have to love others, share our blessings, show God’s love, and serve where we can and when we can. If we keep God up front, and act with love, compassion and mercy we will have fulfilled God’s plan for our lives no matter how short a life we might have.