

September 22nd, 2024

James 3:13-4:8 “Living the Good Life”

Last year, the Chico Area Interfaith Council received a grant to develop an education and prevention program addressing the increasing wave of hateful speech and actions in our community and world. The rationale for applying was, “Who better to address hate than a coalition of faith communities whose task is to teach others about God’s love?” So now we’re making plans for how to spread this love. We’ve been working on some projects that address bullying in schools and later this year, we’ll discuss strategies for creating safer worship spaces so we can talk about what we have in common and how we can stand up to hateful words and actions. Starting yesterday and continuing for the next six days, we’re observing “United Against Hate” week. The council asked faith communities to consider focusing on how we can use our words and actions to restore broken relationships that cause the kind of conflicts that give birth to hate. The Christian pastors who follow the lectionary said, “We can do that! We’re working through the Book of James! James is all about how our words and actions matter!”

So here we are! Week one’s lesson in James was, “Words matter.” Week two was, “Actions matter as much as our words.” Week three was, “We need to be mindful of the power of our words and learn how to use those words wisely.” This week, James is encouraging his church to use wisdom to figure out why we tear each other down with conflicts and disputes. In chapter 4 verses 1 and 2, James asks, “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.” According to James our desire to want what we don’t have is the source of many of our troubles. That shouldn’t surprise us because, “Thou shalt not covet” is the last commandment in the Ten Commandments. What does it mean to covet? It means that you spend your time perseverating on what

someone else has that you do not. Most of the time, when we talk about coveting, we think about material possessions. We compare what we lack with what those around us have. We say, “Golly, I sure wish I had that person’s fancy car, or bigger house, or fuller stock portfolio, or better clothes.” But James says that a better life is not found in collecting more material goods. Instead, it’s found in works that are done with “gentleness born of wisdom.”

That’s a phrase that only occurs in the Book of James. James says wisdom is the key to building and healing our relationships. Where does this wisdom come from? “From above” according to chapter 3 verse 17. This is Godly wisdom we’re talking about here, not earthly wisdom. Okay, how do we know whether something is Godly or not? I hear a lot of preachers who start their sentences with, “God told me,” or “God revealed to me,” but sometimes the next thing that comes out of their mouths sounds awful. I say, “God told you what?!” See, it’s my understanding that scripture needs to back up what God tells you. Otherwise, I’m going to be suspicious about the source of your revelation. To be fair, we’ve got to acknowledge that the only scripture James’ church had was what we call the “Old Testament,” which was the standard for Jewish communities in that day. But remember, there were plenty of Gentiles in those churches too. The source of their revelation was usually logic and good moral fortitude. Thankfully James recognized this and gave them a tool that those Gentiles could get their heads wrapped around. He gave them a good old-fashioned Greco-Roman-style vice and virtue list.

How do you know when you run across “wisdom from above” and how do you distinguish it from “wisdom from below?” According to James, you can be sure it’s Godly wisdom if its gentle in word and action, peaceable, willing to yield, merciful, bears good fruit, impartial, and sincere. Good wisdom leads to peace and reconciliation. Earthly wisdom, however, is distinguished by envy, self-ambition, disorder, wickedness and bad fruits. In James’ day, there were a lot of religious people who were claiming that they had spiritual authority, but they

were really just wolves in sheep's clothing that were preaching a message that was in opposition to Christ's teachings. Okay, but how did they get away with this? Wouldn't it be obvious to people in the church that they weren't preaching the gospel? Wouldn't people say, "Whoa, wait a minute, this doesn't sound right!" Well, think about how many pseudo-Christian cults out there who have led or are leading God's people astray and quite often into harm's way. I know it seems like we over-use Jim Jones as the poster boy for a wolf in sheep's clothing. Back in the 1970s Jim Jones led his church of close to 1,000 people down to Guyana, South America where he convinced them to drink poisoned Kool Aid. Jim Jones started out as a Disciples of Christ preacher. That's us. As much as we'd like to sweep him under the rug and pretend he wasn't one of ours, the truth is he was. What's embarrassing is that we have a reputation for being smart, practical, down-to-earth and not easily fooled. And yet, Jim Jones managed to fool 918 people to the point that they would end their lives at his command. Truth be told, there are many other false prophets out there who might not go as far as Jim Jones did, but they're still leading their flocks astray. So again, how do we know which ones are faithful to the Gospel of Christ, and which ones are in it for themselves?

James gave his people a clear path to discovering the difference between "wisdom from above" and "wisdom from below." It's very similar to Paul's "fruits of the spirit versus the deeds of the flesh" that we mentioned last week. James teaches that Godly wisdom leads to peace and reconciliation. Think about some of the terms James uses – "Gentleness in word and deed." Sometimes the word "gentleness" is used interchangeably with the word "weakness." But that's not the case. When I think of "gentle," I think of "calm." Let's say you run into someone who is having a mental health crisis and is acting out in a negative way. If you want to make a volatile situation worse, get up in their face and yell at them. Say something like, "calm the heck down and quit acting crazy!" But if you want to de-escalate the situation, remain calm. Stay engaged. You have a much better chance of succeeding if you approach the situation gently. That's not weak. In fact, if anything, it's an

act of strength. Then there's, "willing to yield," which, in some situations can mean, "admitting when you're wrong." But that doesn't seem to be in style does it? In fact, the rules of engagement these days seems to be, "Even when someone provides evidence that you're wrong, double down and *never* yield." How about "be merciful?" The prophet Micah said that the Lord requires us to act justly, *love* mercy and walk humbly with God. Jesus, according to Luke's gospel, told his disciples to "be merciful as your God is merciful." In his sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said, "*Blessed* are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." In Ephesians the Apostle Paul writes that God is *rich* in mercy. Mercy is showing grace and forgiveness even when someone has not earned it. We can't even get our heads wrapped around giving aid or resources to people who "don't deserve it." Okay, what about "impartial?" Impartiality requires a willingness to hear all sides of an argument and be open to changing our minds. None of these things are easy nor do they come naturally. And yet these are the characteristics of Godly wisdom. There's the virtue list. Let's look at the vices.

Earthly wisdom, or "wisdom from below" is marked by envy that leads to coveting which, again, is prohibited in the Ten Commandments. Then there's self-serving ambition. Jim Jones did not do what he did out of love. He did it because he was able to get people to serve *him* rather than God. That is a true sign of a cult leader right there. A cult leader will *always* choose selfish desire over serving God or others. Always. James also lists disorder. You might think, "uh-oh, my life is far from being orderly ... does that mean I'm out of favor with God?" Not necessarily. It's one thing to have a messy garage or kitchen, but it's another thing to constantly be sowing chaos and drama. People who are motivated by "wisdom from below" cause trouble and confusion wherever they go. They can't even function unless they're stirring something up. Wickedness - that's pretty straightforward. If you haven't kept up with the news this week and you want to see a shocking list of wicked behavior, check out the charges against, music mogul Sean "P-diddy" Combs. If this guy is convicted of even *some* of the charges that have been brought against him, he's going to be in prison for a *long* time.

Think of how many cult leaders and false teachers who've been brought down when their wicked behavior comes to light. Finally, James mentions "bad fruits." We've already talked about that when we mentioned Paul's "fruits of the spirit versus deeds of the flesh" in the book of Galatians. In Paul's list, "bad fruit" includes jealousy, strife, anger, quarrels, dissention, factions, drunkenness, fornication, idolatry and impurity. These are the byproducts of relying solely on earthly "wisdom" which always leads to conflict and division.

So how do we turn from earthly wisdom and embrace Godly wisdom? Chapter 4, verse 7-10 says we must submit to and focus on God. We need to be cleansed and purified from that which drags us down and causes us to be fractured and divided, distanced and distracted. We've got to be willing to be made whole and be perfected. You might say, "Okay, but nobody is perfect." True, but there's a difference between perfection and being perfected. Perfection is the end result. And no, you're right - nobody is perfect. But being perfected is a process. James mentions this five times in his book. It means we should be working toward becoming whole and intact - not fractured and divided.

James' entire focus is to be whole in one's faith and devotion to God and that our words, actions and faith are all focused on love of God and neighbor. In verse 8 he writes, "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you." This is not a conditional "if/then" clause. It's not, "God won't draw near to you until you draw near to God," it means, "draw near to God who is *already* drawing near to you."

Here's where I get to throw in some of that "Chico Area Interfaith Council" stuff that goes along with this grant we got -- The idea of healing the fractured self, centering ourselves, faithfulness, mindfulness, and humility isn't just a longstanding tradition of the Christian faith. The process of perfecting and working towards unity is universal in every faith tradition. James just happens to be the best spokesperson for this idea in our tradition. But because humility is so difficult for many Western Christians to grasp, we sometimes avoid talking about it.

Remember when we started our study on James, we acknowledged that James isn't everyone's favorite book. Maybe it's because the wisdom that James teaches requires that we become doers of the word, not just hearers of the word. After all, as James said in chapter two, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."