

Sermon for Sunday, October 3, 2021
James 3:13 – 4:10

With Wisdom from Above

When I first read this lection from James two weeks ago, supposedly in preparation for my sermon that Sunday, I confess that it made me mad. It didn't matter that all of the second person pronouns—all the “you”s and “your”s—were plural. It felt like they were all referring to me. Singular. It felt like James had taken me into a room, sat me down in an uncomfortable chair, and given me a major league scolding. Worst of all, I felt like I deserved it. As the saying goes, the truth hurts.

Nevertheless, the second person pronouns in this passage are all plural. They are addressed to all of James' listeners, and not just to one person. And so ultimately, this is how this text must be understood.

But this morning, I want to be transparent, and say first of all how the text impacted on me. And maybe then we can consider how it might be impacting on us.

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks. Well, I am. I happen to have not just one but two advanced degrees, a doctorate in music and a Master of Divinity degree. I consider myself a pretty good scholar of the Bible. “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” My . . . good life. I assume, James, that by that phrase you mean living the way God wants me to live. Well, I try. Sometimes. But if I'm honest, I've also failed a lot. And sometimes—I admit it—I don't even try. Because when push comes to shove, I'd rather live life the way I want to live it. And when it comes to gentleness, I have to be honest again. I am not always a very gentle person. I'm intense, goal driven, perfectionistic. I can be blunt, and even harsh. I'm afraid that the word “gentle” just doesn't really apply to me. But, right, you're not talking only about me, are you? You're talking about us. Does the word “gentleness” apply to us? As a church? As individuals within the church?

James talks about there being two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom from above, and the wisdom from, presumably, below. And he makes things easy for the listener by listing the characteristics of each. He starts with the wisdom from below. He lists envy, selfish ambition, boastful, false to the truth, earthly, unspiritual, devilish, disorderly, wicked. And as he lists these, it feels like he's looking me right in the eyes. Okay! I admit it. I have been and can be all those things. I'm often envious of what others have and I don't, or what others are and I'm not. My ambition—and by the way, I am ambitious—is often selfish or self-serving, even when I try to say it's not. I can be boastful, can feel pretty good about my skills and achievements. I don't know about “earthly” but I'm definitely “earthy.” (You've undoubtedly heard me use “earthy” language, haven't you James?) Disorder? Yes! My office is a mess. And so is my life sometimes!

But . . . could we maybe talk about the wisdom from above for a while?! You know, something happy? Sure, James says to me. Here it is. Pure. Peaceable. Gentle. Willing to yield. Full of mercy and good fruits. Without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

I . . . I don't know what to say to him. I strike out on everything. Pure? Give me a break! Peaceable? I mean, I care about peace; I care a lot about it. World peace. Peace out

there. But then, why am I sometimes in conflict with people? Is it, maybe, because I can be arrogant? What's next—oh yeah, gentle. I've already talked about that, and not exactly in my favor. Willing to yield? Ouch. I know, James. I want my own way a lot. It's hard for me to let go. "Full of mercy and good fruits"—I don't know that I'm full of anything. Except anger sometimes. Sure, I have some mercy and a good fruit here and there. But I'd hardly call that being full of them. Without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy? C'mon! Of course I have a trace of partiality or hypocrisy! Doesn't everybody? I'm not talking about everybody, James says. I'm talking about you. At this point I don't even notice whether his "you" is singular or plural. I'm too mad. This is impossible, James! The wisdom from above is impossible! I mean, what do you all think?! (And I do mean "you" plural.) Are any of these things, these impossible ideals, possible for you?

Here's an ironic thing. The Bible study class that I was supposedly teaching on Wednesday night ended up teaching me something. One person suggested that maybe James is not first and foremost saying that this is what we're supposed to be like, especially 100% of the time, but what the wisdom from above is always like. And we're simply supposed to strive for it. And, we're never going to embody each one of those qualities perfectly. Huh, I said. I hadn't thought of that. Okay. That feels a little better.

But then James goes and calls us—me—an adulterer. And the editor adds an exclamation point. I have never committed adultery! I have never been unfaithful to my wife! But then I think about it. Yes I have. There are all kinds of ways to be unfaithful. All kinds of ways to violate the covenants I have made—to Lois, to God, to you.

"Adulterers" is exactly what the Old Testament prophets accused the Israelites of being. Because they were trying to worship more than one God. They said that they would worship Yahweh only. But they kept trying to worship Baal on the side. Baal was widely considered the god of fertility. And the Israelites wanted to make sure that their crops would be good each year. But God wouldn't have it. And neither would God's prophets. Adulterers!

Jesus, of course, talked about a different "god on the side." He said "you cannot worship both God and mammon." "Mammon" being the Hebrew word for "wealth" or "money." Oh, no. I worship money on the side. At least, I worry about it. (Are worship and worry the same thing?) I never feel like I have enough; I always want more. And more things, too. I always want more things. Especially things that other people have and I don't. Alright, I admit it. I sometimes worship things. I'm unfaithful! I'm an idolater. I'm an adulterer.

What about . . . you guys? Is that something that you ever struggle with? Are there other gods that you worship?

You can't be a friend of the world and a friend of God at the same time, James says emphatically. "But, I like the world!" I say timidly and fearfully. You can't strive after the wisdom from above and the wisdom from below at the same time! James repeats. It just doesn't work. You have to choose one or the other. Our God is jealous; he wants you to choose Him and him only.

"Al . . . right," I say timidly and still a bit fearfully. I'll try harder. I will. But what if I screw up? "God gives all the more grace," replies James. In fact, it says so in our Scripture, in the Book of Proverbs, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves to God. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

But, as I wrote in Wednesday's e-newsletter, it's hard to be humble. It's hard to admit I'm wrong, and others are right. It's hard to apologize. It's hard to let go of what I want, and think rather about what others want.

Just try it, James says. And remember always: God gives all the more grace. Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (By the way, those second person pronouns? They're plural.)

As a way of practicing humility, and I need a whole lot of practice, I'd like to end with a few apologies. I apologize for pushing my own agenda. I honestly thought it was God's agenda. But if I didn't convince you of that, then either I was wrong, or I did it badly.

I apologize for my arrogance. Thinking I knew why God had called me here to FMC. I guess I didn't listen to God enough. Or maybe at all. I apologize for my self-centeredness. For just seeing what I wanted to see.

I apologize for causing division among this body. Partisan politics is a poisonous thing. I admit that I am a Democrat. Or maybe, was. Now I'm not so sure what I should be. I mean, what would Jesus want me to be?

I apologize that I didn't always show up when I said I would. I could try to explain. But that doesn't heal the hurt feelings, or undo the hurt.

I could keep going. I have plenty of apologies to make; seems like I always do. But that will have to be enough for now. So I'll end with a prayer. God. Help me—help us—to do better. And grant us your grace. Amen.