



“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
September 19, 2021
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/Rally Day

James 3:13-4:8

Two Kinds of Wisdom

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Friendship with the World

4 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² 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. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in

order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,

"God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble."

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

This is the word of the Lord

James wrote his epistle giving specific instructions for Christian behavior. It has been likened to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus Himself gave specific teachings for Christian thoughts and attitudes. The writer James wants us to know that our belief in God, our work for God and our communication is meant to knit us more closely together rather than to alienate us.

Today we heard the writer James give:

- warnings concerning bitter envy and selfish ambitions. He said that where there is envy and

selfish ambition, there is disorder and evil of every kind

- he asks: Are there fights and quarrels among you? To which James speaks to the source of fighting and quarreling – he said it is desires that live in us – wrong motives

What is James antidote for this quarreling and fighting? We are to seek wisdom from above – God’s wisdom. As we seek God’s wisdom what others should see in us as followers of Christ are:

- Deeds done in humility
- Intentions that are pure, peace-loving, submissive to God’s way, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere

Sounds straightforward as if we all could do this. The reality is that we all have our struggles. Even those who seem to have it all together – they have their struggles too.

It is why I included the story of Solomon this morning. Now if anyone should have been able to live out this teaching of James, it should have been Solomon. He had God given wisdom and was wiser than all men. He wrote over 3,000 proverbs and men from all nations came to hear his wisdom. Surely this man of God could resist temptation and remain completely submissive to God.

Nope Solomon had struggles too. Scripture tells us in chapter 11 that Solomon began to love other women, many other women and while the wisdom of God came to

Solomon and warned him not to intermarry with them, he did it anyway. His wives turned his heart towards other Gods.

The reason that James writes his epistle and addresses these issues is because he knows that our beliefs, our works and our communication is meant to knit us more closely to God and to one another rather than to separate us.

Our beliefs separate us. There was a book published in 2000 written by Mark Juergensmeyer, entitled, Terror In The Mind Of God, The Global Rise of Religious Violence. Written before the 9/11 attacks on the world trade towers, he addresses the issue of religious violence. In this book Juergensmeyer looks at the ways that all religions have killed in the name of faith. The commonality he sees is when people believe they are serving God and fulfilling God's purposes as they kill.

Our works separate us. Becoming a pastor as a woman separated me from long time friends who saw me through a difficult time in my life because they did not believe that women should hold positions of leadership in the church. When the Black Lives Matter movement began, some saw this an alienation or disenfranchising of their own race or that the Black Lives Matter movement was working to say that only Black Lives Matter; while others understood that this movement was NOT saying that ONLY Black Lives Matter but that our society has not taken the time to understand all the complexities and additional challenges that face people of color. If we did, then people of color could say that their lives matter to.

Our communication separates us. How many times have we witnessed people talking past one another rather than to one another? We tend to listen only to people who we agree with. Most of us are uncomfortable and do not get into conversations where we know we might disagree. We are like that in the church. I have witnessed church sessions and leadership talk about everything except where the deepest pain and anxiety lie within the church. We have not learned the art of healthy conflict. A person who thinks differently than I do often sees a perspective that I don't see. A person who thinks differently than I do holds a different value that is important for me to hear. A person who thinks differently than I do does not and should not exclude us from having a relationship.

James says, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere and it is the peace-makers who sow a harvest of righteousness.

James emphatically does *not* justify the use of violence or coercion in support of godly purposes; like Jesus, and Paul, James repudiates the use of unholy means to attain alleged good ends. Instead, James articulates a theology that refuses to sacrifice the personal righteousness that a disciple manifests in honesty, mercy, and faithful trust in God to attain what we believe is a better good. James warns that our struggles to prevail in worldly conflicts lock our loyalties to the sinful structures themselves in an attempt to correct a world that James understood as passing away.

According to James, the exercise of coercion falsifies the claim that one is representing God's will. The (violent) compulsion to attain victory over adversaries very quickly entangles us in lies, brutality, and the boastful sense that God is *on* our side, *against* their side when scripture tells us over and over how God is on the side of the oppressed and those who struggle (which is all of us).

Let me remind you again something about the epistle of James. James wrote his epistle and addresses these issues the way he does is because he knows that our beliefs, our works and our communication is meant to knit us more closely to God and to one another rather than to alienate us. James warns us of attitudes that will spiritually bankrupt us.

The challenge from James is to make a choice. Daily we make the choice. We can either choose the ways of the world – seeking to satisfy our own cravings for power, pleasure and possessions – our way even at the cost of others - - or we can allow God to bring grace, peace and righteousness to fill our lives. Which way will you choose? Even if we choose God's way, it doesn't mean that our struggles will be gone – but even in the midst of struggle we do our best to turn our eyes towards Jesus. Amen

Let us pray: Holy God, thank you for the reminder of ways that we have much to learn from following Jesus. Learning how to hold differences and yet remain in relationship is challenging. We admit that we do not do this well. Help us this day to allow our beliefs, our works

and our communication to bring us closer to you and to one another. Amen