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The seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2021

**James 3:13 - 4:8**

**13Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17But 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. 18And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.**

**4Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2You 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. 3You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.**

*4Adulterers! 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. 5Or 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”? 6But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*

**7Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.**

*Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

**BACKGROUND:**

 The letter of James is a moral exhortation in the form of a general letter. There is little detail of the intended readers, a generic address to the 12 tribes of the Diaspora could indicate a Jewish-Christian audience. The authorship may be James the brother of Jesus or an unknown author. The teaching is general, traditional and moral rather than theological. The dominant mood is imperative and theocentric rather than Christocentric, hence Luther’s objection that there is plenty of straw but little Jesus. The book holds a positive view of the Torah to the messianic community. The many brief exhortations concerned with practical behavior resemble the OT wisdom tradition. The reading under consideration here draws a stark contrast between the divine peace sent and intended as God’s gift, and the all too real divisions that form in a congregation as the effects of unrepentant personal sin bear communal consequences.

**VERSE BY VERSE:**

Vs 13-17 – (Form a singular cohesive literary unit, wt Vs 18 standing as a independent literary verse)

Vs 13 – **Who is wise, understanding** – not a search for roster of wise ones, but seeking out qualitative description of wisdom, with an ear to the distinction that follows, separating human wisdom from divine wisdom. “Wise and understanding” is a common phrase in Hebrew Bible. James real question here might be framed as “Your leaders, what kind of wisdom do they express?”

 **Show good life** – While we might hear James harping on good works this is more a matter of the preacher living what they preach and the teacher living and doing what they teach. Cf Matt. 11:19. “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”

 **Works done with gentleness born of wisdom** – Hb. anava, is a common trait of moral wisdom, gentleness/humility especially in the face of criticism (Num 12:3, Matt 11:29 2Cor 10:1) For James wisdom is grasping God’s will and the life lived in conformity with that will.

(Here follow two contrasting descriptions of wisdom 3:14-16 = from below and 3: 17-18 = from above)

Vs 14 – **If you have bitter envy, selfish ambition** –

 **In your hearts** – Zelos = zeal, envy, doithiea = ambition, Bitter envy amplifies the destructive nature of ambition, both are rooted in the heart meaning that these are not externals but attached to the very core of ones being. What becomes of the community whose leaders are expressing such envy and ambition? The outward signs may show growth and success, but what lies at the heart of the community, will be what lies in the hearts of its leaders.

 **Do not be boastful, false to the truth** – Boast in your accomplishments draws attention to yourself, when the messianic community ought to make Christ known. The TRUTH of the Gospel is thus diminished and obscured.

Vs 15 – **Such wisdom does NOT come down from above –** the source is clearly not from God, even if it attributed to God’s blessings

 **earthly, unspiritual, devilish –** The source is earthly at best or at worst from below, of the evil one

Vs 16 – **Where there is envy/selfish ambition there is disorder wickedness of every kind –** The consequences for the community of false wisdom are disorder, division, and wickedness of all kinds. CF the Crystal cathedrals demise as family fought over leadership.

 FALSE WISDOM has four characteristics: 1 not from above, 2 earthy epigeios 3 unspiritual psyckike (psychotic) 4 devilish, (deceiver)

Vs 17 – **Wisdom from above** – lit. come down from above, anothen ie the source is God, sent from God as the sent son, messiah whose community this is, and the one whose its leadership ought reflect, listen to, & proclaim.

**First pure** – Holy, undefiled, without defect, of the full essence of its intended created being. James listing of wisdom characteristics follows Wis 7:22-33, a list which shows the true gift of a teacher is not a mastery of facts and information but skill in living according to God’s order

 **then peaceable** – Not a mere feeling but shalom, characterizing God’s intended way of living in relation to God, neighbor, creation, self

 **gentle** – epiekes – friendly equilibrium, mild, benevolent, generous

 **willing to yield** – eupeithes persuadable, concillary, knowing their limitations good teachers listen to and learn from others. A good teacher knows what they do not know.

 **full of mercy** **good fruits** – both mercy and goodness flow from Jesus command to love neighbor as self.

 **without trace partiality or hypocrisy** –anypokritos the opposite of the Pharisees, to be consistent in behavior and speech, a sound leader, an accountable teacher

Vs 18 - **Harvest of righteousness –** karpos, fruits/yield , concrete acts of justice Cf Isaiah 32:17 “the effect of righteousness is peace, the result of righteousness quietness and trust forever”

 **sown in peace** – present tense, to do everything peacefully, and to expect the fruits of this sown peace to be evident in the life of the community.

 **by those who make peace** – to pursue peace by peaceful means not at any cost.

Vs 4:1 **Those conflicts, disputes among you** – polemoi/machai whether physical or verbal disputes there is clearly something amiss and well known among the community, something not befitting its messianic character.

 **Where do they come from** ? A call for self examination and communal discernment that does not lead to finger pointing blame, but diagnostic healing

 **From your cravings** – hedonai (hedonism) These questions are directed directly to the teachers, and more indirectly to the members of the community, with teachers being held to a higher standard due to their position of influence

 **War within you** – among your members, as members of church but even more the living body that is the Jesus community, the war image clearly points toward violent unsettling division, Since James is here pointing this out in an exhortative manner, is he speaking a vision contrary to the communities self-understanding? Are they fully aware of what James sees happening among them?

Vs 2 - **Desire what you do not** **have** – epithymeo ties cravings to desire, not rational but rmotive, need vs want…..broad urges, covet,

 **So engage in disputes, conflicts** (murder) The deep urge of teachers is to put down/out of mind those who disagree with them. (Luther/Zwingli at Marburg at best, Spanish Inquisition at worst) To win the day is a matter of personal power, not making. Christ known.

 **Do not have do not ask** – a poor prayer life is constrained by doubt, prayers go unanswered for not asking, asking for the wrong things, or for the wrong reasons.

Vs 3 **You ask and do not receive, ask wrongly** – Real prayer is not words alone, but attitude of heart set upon God in trust, knowing that God will supply our need, not necessarily our wants/desires.

 **To spend what you get on your pleasures** – even when God provides for our needs our zeal,desires,cravings and urges cause us to spend our physical and spiritual capital on want pleases us rather than what draws us closer to God and neighbor. Truly wise teachers want what God desires, not what they themselves want. The real danger being human desire, clothed in the appearance of diving promise.

Vs 8 **Draw near to God** – the command is full of promise. Drawing NEAR to god is to enter the proximity where the Word can be clearly heard, the covenant lived, prayer offered in confidence and hope

 **God will draw near to you** – the effect is a life lived in God’s ongoing presence. What begins in worship flows over into daily living. God is not safely contained in the God box we call Church but in the world through each and every disciples who bears God’s name and even more God’s divine wisdom/Gospel truth

**THEOLOGY:**

 The Messianic Community of Jesus is qualitatively unique in all the world. Without leaders who keep this community centered on Jesus, and God’s people who make this unique love known through their daily living, God’s true wisdom is lost forever. Lord keep your church faithful, bold and true for the sake of the world your Son was sent to save.