

CALL TO CONVERSION

Jas 3:13-4:10

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The front page of today's *The Detroit News & Free Press*, the headline reads: "Millennium sparkle fades into darkness." The sub-headline continues: "Looming war, corporate scandals, economic downturn take toll on American psyche."

We live in a time of turmoil and tension. The talk of war is in the air. Some want to wage war; others wish to preserve peace. To be fair to both sides, I must say that, generally speaking, everyone desires peace. No one, except the crazed fanatic or cold-blooded radical, wants war for the sake of war. What is at stake is whether or not it is necessary to fight to achieve peace. Is peace so precious that we must wage war for it? Or, is war so heinous that we must avoid it whatever the cost? Both choices entail sacrificing our lives for the sake of peace. But, do we lay down our lives by fighting or by refusing to fight? And so, we find ourselves entangled in a war of words, hoping that we will not engage in a war of worlds. Looking, however, at human history, we see that war has proven more effective at abolishing nations than nations have at abolishing war.

Perhaps we have come to expect this of the kingdoms of the earth. But should not the kingdom of heaven be different? After all, is not Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace—the savior and sovereign of His church? We would expect, therefore, that His kingdom would be different; that His church would proclaim a gospel of peace and be populated with a people of peace. Unfortunately, this is far too often the ideal rather than the real. We live in a world at war, both *outside* the church and *inside* the church.

It is to this very issue that the New Testament Letter of James addresses itself. James offers us words about wisdom and words about war. *In short, we must choose whose wisdom we will follow: the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of God. And the wisdom we choose will determine our way of life and the way of our world.* Let's read together, beginning at verse thirteen of chapter three.

^{3:13}Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷But 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. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

^{4:1}What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up (Jas 3:13-4:10, NIV).

First, in 3:13-18, James focuses on the contrast between true wisdom—God’s wisdom—and false wisdom—the world’s wisdom. (1) Contrast in *origin*: false wisdom is of this world and is inspired by the devil; true wisdom is of heaven and is inspired by God. (2) Contrast in *operation*: false wisdom works by means of envy, selfish ambition, strife, and boasting; true wisdom, on the other hand, is pure,¹ peace-loving, considerate, open-minded and single-minded, merciful, impartial, and sincere. (3) Contrast in *outcome*: false wisdom produces disorder and destruction; true wisdom produces peace and goodness—peace that is more than merely the absence of strife, peace that makes possible the abundant life God intended.

Second, in 4:1-10, James focuses on the fruit of wisdom: the way of wisdom we choose determines the way of life we live. The existence of strife, conflict, and war

¹“Purity” is not just one quality among others but the key to them all. Søren Kierkegaard (A.D. 1813–A.D. 1855), who was a lover of the Letter of James, declared that “purity of heart is to will one thing”: *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, trans. by Douglas V. Steere (Harper Torchbooks, 1948).

demonstrate that all too often it is the wisdom of the world that prevails leading to the wars of the world. And this “wisdom”—if we can even call it “wisdom”—exists far too often among God’s very own people. The Greek philosopher Socrates (469 B.C.–399 B.C.) called “envy” the “ulcer of the soul.” Someone has remarked, “Some ulcers are caused by inflammation of the wishbone.” Another Greek philosopher, Epictetus (A.D. 60?–A.D. 120?), commented, “He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.” And it was John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States (A.D. 1917–A.D. 1963), who warned, “Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.”

The climax of James’ instruction and indictment comes in 4:5-6; unfortunately, these verses are notoriously difficult to translate. Is v. 5 a statement or a rhetorical question or two rhetorical questions? Does the phrase “toward envy”² refer to God as its subject or to the spirit God made to dwell in humans? In other words, whose spirit has envious or jealous longings? And what does James mean by “the scripture” that speaks in vain? Is he alluding to a specific text, perhaps Prov 3:34 or 4:6, or to Scripture in general or to an apocryphal text? I think the simplest solution to these questions is suggested by comparing several Bible translations. The NIV takes 4:5 as one question and refers the envy to the human spirit (but then adds two other possibilities in the footnotes):

Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? [Footnote: Or *that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us*; or *that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously*.]

The NRSV makes God the subject and takes the phrase “toward envy” as indicating God’s “yearning jealously” over the spirit of humans:

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”?

Similar to the NRSV, but more interpretative, is the NLT:

What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, jealously longs for us to be faithful? [Footnote: Or *the spirit that God placed within us tends to envy*, or *the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, opposes our envy*.]

Well, without belaboring this point, it seems best to read 4:5 as a double rhetorical

²πρὸς φθόνον (*pros phthonon*).

question³ and to see “the spirit” as the human spirit⁴:

Does the scripture speak in vain? Is the spirit God made to dwell in us for envy? The expected answer to both questions is “No.” James then introduces Prov 3:34, his point being that God provides us with the strengthening grace we need to overcome the spirit of envious desires. The REB reads:

⁴Unfaithful creatures! Surely you know that love of the world means enmity to God? Whoever chooses to be the world’s friend makes himself God’s enemy.

⁵Or do you suppose that scripture has no point when it says that the spirit which God implanted in us is filled with envious longings? ⁶But the grace he gives is stronger; thus scripture says, “God opposes the arrogant and gives grace to the humble.” ⁷Submit then to God. Stand up to the devil, and he will turn and run.

⁸Come close to God, and he will draw close to you. . . . ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (Jas 4:4-8a, 10, REB).

It is easy to rail against and rebuke the bickering, bitterness, and battles of this earthly world. It is far more difficult to realize and remedy, as the professed people of God, our own disputings, dissensions, and divisions. Let’s be brutally honest this morning, for James will permit nothing less of us. *Have we—the Churches of Christ—been anymore successful in achieving unity among ourselves than we—as human beings—have been at achieving peace in the world?* The same spirit that stirs up and supports strife in the world is the very spirit that splits our churches. Does this not rebuke us as worldly? Do we display the way of God to the world, or do we display the way of the world to God? How much money have we spent on buildings because we cannot assemble together in one place to worship the God who makes peace possible? How much energy have we expended on internal wars at the expense of external works to ease the pain of our warring world? We serve the Prince of Peace, preach a gospel of peace, and yet our practice is too often one of power struggles, party spirit, and petty selfishness. We pray for world peace, and yet we are unable to pray together under a single roof for that peace! In the words of James, “My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be!”

³Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, NIB, vol. 12 (Abingdon, 1998), 210.

⁴The noun φθόνος (*phthonos*) is never applied to God in the LXX (Septuagint: Greek translation of Old Testament), and in Greek usage it is always used for the human vice of envy, with which God has nothing to do. If “spirit” is taken to mean the human spirit that turns towards envious desires, then the grace of v. 6 likely refers to the good impulse or the Holy Spirit that counters the evil impulse in those who submit to God. For a thorough discussion of the issues involved in the translation of v. 5 (that also takes God as the subject, and thus a reference to God’s jealousy), see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Eerdmans/Apollos, 2000), 188-191.

When it comes to matters of faith and practice, we ask, “Where is the authority? Where is the scripture? Where is the example?” And yet, no New Testament writer ever suggests that the solution for our differences is to divide! No New Testament writer ever encourages Christians to leave the church to which they belong! Not even at messed-up Corinth! Have we not repeatedly chosen an option that is absent from Scripture and unacceptable to God? I will let you wrestle with this question and others like it. “Humility” is James’ answer to this haunting question.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord,
and He will lift you up.

Whose wisdom do you follow? The wisdom of the world or the wisdom of God? Don’t answer verbally, because *your life is the answer!* “Actions speak louder than words,” and your way of life speaks louder than the words of your mouth.

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