

Faith with Hands and Feet.
Part 12: Relating with Wisdom
James 3.13-4.3

April 23, 2023

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This morning I'm going to read our shared reading in the form of a prayer for us. Pray with me:

Shared Reading

We are the beloved of the Lord.
 In love He created us.
 In love He came to us.
 In love He died for us.

Lord, we are your beloved children.
 In love you created us.
 In love you came to us.
 In love you died for us.

In love He makes us His own –
 folding us into His love
 transforming us by His love
 sending us out in His love

In love you have made us your own –
 Folding us into your love
 Transforming us by your love
 Sending us out in your love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
 by our love this world will see Him in us –
 as He lives His life of love in us and through us,
 to the glory of God.

May it be, Lord, that by our love this world will know that we are yours –
 that by our love this world might even see you in us –
 as you live your life of love in us and through us.
 Make it so, Lord, to the glory of your name. Amen.

We've been walking our way through the letter that the disciple James wrote to the early church that was preserved for us in the New Testament.

This morning we come to the center of the letter not only physically but also thematically. As far as I'm concerned, this is the pivotal passage that holds all the rest together. Every other passage is the outworking of the idea that James presents here.

Whatever else God may have for us, I'm convinced these six verses are central to God's invitation to us as a church over the next year.

In this section James contrasts two kinds of wisdom. The first kind of wisdom, wisdom from below, is a way of seeing the world that leaves God *out* of the picture. The second kind of wisdom, wisdom from above, is a way of seeing the world that puts God at the *center* of the picture.

As we've seen as we've gone through this series, that contrast between those two ways of seeing, one that leaves God out and one that puts God at the center, is the thing James is addressing again and again and again in this letter.

Which will we choose – when we face difficult circumstances, when the path is unclear and we are at a loss as to what to do, when we encounter need in someone else, when we face temptation, when we feel angry or hurt, when things don't go the way we want, when we make plans for the future, when we are sick or grieving or under attack – which will we choose? To include God or not?

What do you think of when you think of wisdom? Good judgment, helpful perspective, valuable insight?

What James makes clear in this passage is that wisdom is a way of *being*. It's a way of reflecting the reality in which we live, the world from which we come.

Some of you have seen the incredibly creative movie *Spiderman: Into the Multiverse*. In it, five different Spidermen from five different alternative realities all converge here on earth. There's Peter Parker, and Peter B. Parker, and Peni Parker, and Peter Porker, and Miles Morales – who are Spider Man and also Spider Man and Spider Gwen and Spider Ham and Spiderman Noir.

The point is that each of those different characters comes into that moment as citizens of, and as expressions of, completely different realities.

I think that's a really helpful way to think about what James is getting at in this passage.

When James here contrasts two kinds of wisdom, he doesn't have in mind seeing things from two slightly different vantage points, through a slightly different decision making calculus. He has in mind two completely different expressions of reality, two completely different ways of being.

With that in mind, let's jump into James 3.12-18:

James 3.13

Who is wise and understanding among you? [Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.]

This phrase "wise and understanding" was a familiar one from Deuteronomy 1, one that everyone knew. That's where Moses talks about the criterion that set apart those he selected as leaders. That phrase became a sort of common currency expression among Jewish people to describe someone who was spiritually mature, in the same sort of way we Christians might use "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" from Acts 6.5.

Both of these words – wise and understanding – suggest being knowledgeable and skilled, having accrued great learning and expertise.

Situated as we are in the backyard of Purdue, we live in a climate where expertise is highly valued. Every single member of the Purdue faculty is expected to be an expert in their field.

If you go to the Purdue media website, you'll find a list of dozens of faculty members who are Subject Matter Experts, willing to share their expertise with the community, with expertise in everything from reconstructing stellar explosions and perfecting hypersonic flight to preventing potholes and identifying counterfeit whiskey.

When I was 13 I went with my Boy Scout troop to Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, a gorgeous mountainous region where we went camping and hiking for ten days and I fell in love with the mountains. When we got back to base camp, before we left for home, we discovered that they had a name tag maker, where for a dollar or two you could get an official looking nametag with your name and then some role or title on it. I got one that said, "Dave Henderson: Expert."

I think there's a part of all of us that wants to be considered something of an expert at something. Or at everything, as the case may be.

James 3.13

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it [by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.]

James asks: do you want to be known as something of a spiritual expert?

Do you think of yourselves as spiritually mature? Do you desire to be known for the depth of your spiritual life? What a great thing to aspire to! Here's what to do.

Show it. How?

Not the way the world puts its wisdom and expertise on display.

Put your spiritual maturity on display not by what you know or by what you accomplish. But by *how* you do what you do. By what sort of person you *are*.

In 1607 an English pastor named Joseph Hall published a book called *Holy Observations*. Here is holy observation number 14:

God loveth adverbs; and cares not how good, but how well.

Think about that. What I do reflects on me. How I do it reflects on *him*.

James 3.13

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

How would God have you put your spiritual maturity on display?
Through a life that displays *humility*.

Humility could be considered the primary and foundational Christian virtue.

It's one of the only two words that Jesus used to describe how he did what he did, and what sort of person he was.

Matthew 11.29

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am *gentle and humble in heart*,

Rightly understood, humility has two dimensions.

It begins with how I view God. When humility marks my life, I have deep confidence that God is involved, and he is good, and he is to be trusted. I know he knows and will meet my every need.

It's the posture of resting trust that comes through in George Herbert's translation of "the 23'd Psalm":

The God of love my shepherd is and he that doth me feed.
While he is mine, and I am his, what can I want or need?

Notice James talks about "the humility that comes from wisdom." Remember we've said that the heart of biblical wisdom is seeing everything with God at the center.

As it says in Proverbs 1.7

Fear of God – profound awe and respect and reverence for God – is the beginning of wisdom.

Here's the second dimension of biblical humility. My reverence for God as King and my confidence in him as Shepherd lets me lay down my concern for myself.

I'm not the most important person here. God is.
And I don't have to think about my needs. God does.

When I am humble, all the self-concerned needs, desires, and ambitions that rise up within me can be laid aside. None of them needs to have the last word. None of them needs to drive or control my life.

In the 1300s an anonymous monk from Frankfurt, Germany, wrote a book called *Theologica Germanica* that was enormously influential in the life of Martin Luther, among others. It also really impacted me. In it he captures beautifully the essence of humility:

The more the Self, the I, the Me, the Mine, that is, self-seeking and selfishness, abate in a man, the more does God's I, that is God Himself, increase in him. (27)

For in this True Light and True Love there neither is nor can remain any I, Me, Mine, You, Your, and the like . . . And therefore where this Light is, the man's end and aim is not this or that, Me or You, or the like, but only the One. . . Behold, in such a man must all thought of Self, all self-seeking, self-will, and what comes thereof, be utterly lost and surrendered and given over to God. . . And in this heart there is a content and quietness. (79)

Humility lifts God high and bows self low in a posture of God-dependence that stands in marked contrast with the self-importance and self-reliance that is pride.

It means laying down whatever has us scheming and scrambling to serve ourselves; it means releasing, yielding, acquiescing to God, rather than taking things into our own hands and insisting things go our own way.

Also translated gentleness or meekness, it is the opposite of that ugly pushy spirit of competitive elbowing and clambering that has us grabbing and shoving to get what we want.

We don't need to clamber, taking the meeting of our needs or desires into our own hands. Humility is the peace and self-control that remain after I have laid down, offered up, set aside, my self-serving desire, trusting God to be the one who meets my needs.

Do you want to show that you are spiritually mature? James asks. Here's how.

Not with words and deeds that show *ability*. But with words and deeds that show *humility*.

Lord, form your humility in us.

Now James is going to contrast two different ways of living, of being, of understanding reality.

Source of Wisdom	Earthly unspiritual, demonic	From heaven
Characteristics	bitter envy selfish ambition	humble shown by deeds pure peace-loving considerate submissive full of mercy full of good fruit impartial sincere
Results	disorder every evil practice	peace righteousness

The first one is a “wisdom” that is no wisdom at all, but folly. It is the way of being that leaves God out of the picture altogether. When God is taken out of the picture, then humanity looms large.

When God is taken out of the picture, all my self-concerned needs, desires, and ambitions rise up within me – they can’t be laid aside. They are what drives and controls my life. My concern for me has the last word. It’s all about me.

That’s the first “wisdom” James presents. It’s the wisdom of me at the center and God at the periphery.

Then in comes another wisdom, a wisdom that represents another realm altogether, an alternative reality. The wisdom that comes from above.

That’s the wisdom of God at the center and me at the periphery.

Augustine says in the end there are two kinds of loves. Love of God that leads to forgetfulness of self, or love of self that leads to forgetfulness of God.

That’s exactly what James is getting at here.

Which reality to you represent? Which realm does your life embody? Which multiverse do you portal?

Let's listen as James compares the two.

James 3.14-16

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

According to James, two qualities mark the wisdom of this world: bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Envy is a word that has at its root the idea of wanting what we don't have. And not just wanting it, but going after it. It's a self-oriented desire to have something you lack or get something you want.

The only time this word "envy" is used before the New Testament was when it showed up in a work by Aristotle, and had the meaning of "the narrow partisan zeal of factional, greedy politicians in his own day." That's a pretty good sense of its spirit here too.

To that James adds the word "bitter," which means something that stabs or cuts. It's the same word he uses in 3.11 when he talks about fresh water and water that is acidic and undrinkable.

Bitter envy is camp concern, tribal line-drawing, partisan pushiness. It is us thinking about us, and going after what we want in ways that are pushy and insistent and hurtful and divisive.

If bitter envy is us thinking about us, *selfish ambition* is me thinking about me. It is individual selfishness and all the ugliness that comes with it.

Just like the English word "mercenary," the Greek word for selfishness comes from the word for day laborer. The idea is that, unlike an owner or a vested worker, who care about their business and care about their product, someone who just works for a day and expects to be paid at the end of the day is just thinking about himself and getting his due.

So the word came to refer to the things I do with me in mind, for my own benefit, with thought only of what I will get out of them. Interestingly, like envy, it was often used in the Greek world to refer to jockeying and jostling in the arena of partisan politics, pushing my agenda over against another.

From there the word broadened to mean self-promotion, seeking my own advantage, serving myself.

So here's the essence of the world's wisdom. *We are thinking about us, and I am thinking about me.*

Our world trains us, doesn't it, it disciplines us, to be masters of self-concern. It raises us up to be people of contention and ambition and self-protection and self-promotion.

We become masters of selfolatry, expert in the dark arts of snidery and smuggerly and snipery and putdownery and divisery and tribalry and all other manner of self-concern.

When that's true, according to James, here's what will be the inevitable result.

James 3.14-16

[But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For] where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

Disorder is the opposite of the word for peace. The word literally means not standing solidly, without sure footing, unanchored.

In the ancient world it was the word for instability, confusion, and anarchy.

It's a word that James has already used twice in his letter, once in 1.8 to describe a person who is waffling between relying on God's wisdom and relying on their own and who is unstable in all he does, and once in 3.8, the section just before this, to describe a person whose mouth is used to honor God and dishonor others at the same time, and whose tongue is a restless evil.

You can see from the way Paul uses the same word in I Corinthians 14.33 that the word is the opposite of peace. Paul describes the way their gatherings are intended to go, with brothers and sisters taking turns to speak, not talking over each other, listening to one another, not competing in their display of gifts, no one-up-man-ship, and then he says,

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

How could party spirit do less than disturb the peace and bring division and confusion?

It also results, James says, in every sort of evil practice. Evil, of course, is the opposite of good and the opposite of God.

If, as James insists, there is no shadow of any evil in God, but only good marks who he is and what he does, then the way of earthly wisdom with its self-concern and party divisiveness impedes and quenches God's best. It is contrary to his good and loving purposes and undermines his work in the church and in the world.

In his wonderful little book, *Spiritual Maxims*, written in the 1700s, Jean Grou writes:

Self-love will have nothing to do with virtue which is humble, hidden and unnoticed by others . . . 195

Good deeds done in secret and with no sounding of trumpets are not to its liking. It loves to appear in full daylight. It seeks display, recognition, esteem and applause, which it obtains craftily, invites deprecatingly, receives hypocritically, and enjoys immensely . . . 196

Lastly, self-love robs God of His right to be the soul's centre, a right which it would take to itself. 198

Source of Wisdom	Earthly unspiritual, demonic	From heaven
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Results	disorder every evil practice	peace righteousness

Now we'll turn and look at an altogether different reality, a wholly different realm, the Kingdom of God, and see the qualities that mark those who come from it into our world.

James 3.17-18

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. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

James 3.17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure . . .

The word *pure* means not mixed with anything that dilutes it or colors it. It's just the thing itself.

The I-want-it, I-need-it, I-have-to-have-it self-seeking that's described in 3.14, and again in 3.16, has no place in this other realm.

By contrast, the person who enters into relationship or community with purity comes into free of a self-serving agenda, and not wedded to things being seen how they saw them or going their way.

Another way to think of purity is selflessness. When I'm pure I'm free of me.

James 3.17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving . . .

This means relating in a peaceable and non-combative way. You approach interactions as partners in the conversation rather than opponents, seeing the person you are interacting with as a friend, not an adversary, and seeking to speak the truth in love, not to win.

In his book *How To Have Impossible Conversations*, Peter Boghossian says:

Shift your goal from winning to understanding. Abandon adversarial thinking (conflict, strife, arguing, debating, ridicule, and the idea of winning), and adopt collaborative thinking (cooperation, partnership, listening, and learning). Shift from, "This person is my opponent who needs to understand what I am saying" to "This person is my partner in a conversation and I can learn from him." (12-13)

James 3.17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate . . .

Considerate is a word that conveys the idea of not ramping up or coming on strong when you encounter disagreement or feel offended, especially if you are a person who is in a position of authority or expertise, and responding gently and free of defensiveness instead.

It can be really hard, especially when we consider ourselves pretty knowledgeable about something, or when we are in a position of responsibility, to respond graciously when someone pushes back. But that's a way we can expect the wisdom from above to show up.

You might think of being considerate as another way of saying deferential.

James 3.17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive . . .

Probably a better translation for this word is “teachable.”

It means having a humble enough view of your knowledge and its limits that you realize you could be wrong, and even if you are right, there is always so much more to learn.

In their book *Uncommon Ground*, Tim Keller and John Inazu quote Shirley Hoogstra as saying, “Humility is rooted in the knowledge that some aspect of your starting point – a fact, a perception, a [point of] understanding – could be wrong.” (134)

This is a place where we evangelicals can get ourselves in trouble. At the heart of our theology of Scripture, and rightly so, is a bedrock belief that the Bible is completely trustworthy and without error because it was inspired by God’s Spirit.

But just because I have a perfect source of truth doesn’t mean I understand it all perfectly, or that I understand perfectly how it applies in every situation – especially in the sort of complex societal situations that face us every day.

Think about it. Pick any cultural issue – immigration, race, poverty, the value of human life, gun control, caring for the environment, changing state relations with other world powers. You could probably find ten different passages that speak with relevance in some way to each of those issues.

The kinds of discussions we have need to shift from, “How could you call yourself a Christian and hold that view?” to “Tell me how the Bible has shaped your thinking on this? Which are the passages that most inform your view? And could I share with you j

Being teachable doesn’t mean I’ll step out from under the authority of Scripture. But it does mean I’m willing to acknowledge I may not know everything there is to know about Scripture, and how it applies to complex societal issue.

James 3.17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit

Mercy is a deep regard for the struggles and challenges of the other person. Being full of mercy means being genuinely concerned for them and what they are going through, seeing the other person not as “the opposition” but as a real person with real needs and hurts and struggles, and as someone who is touched by this issue in real ways.

When I am full of mercy, I seek to understand well before I seek agreement, and I continue to regard the other person with care and compassion whether or not we ever come to a place of agreement.

Full of mercy and good fruit. Jesus offers a provocative definition of good fruit. According to Matthew 3.8, it is doing deeds consistent with a changed heart.

This takes us back up to 3.13, where James speaks of deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. Words of love are crucial. But words of love alone are inadequate. We are called not just to words of love but to acts of love as well.

Good fruit is about motions, not notions. It is mercy in action, showing a genuine desire for the other person's good in tangible ways.

In a hard conversation, that might mean things like unwavering warmth, eye contact, not raising your voice, picking up the tab, expressing thanks.

James 3.17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial

Impartial means not drawing lines between us: my camp versus your camp, with me or against me. There is so much polarizing language right now – so much that reinforces our us-versus-them tendency to divide up along lines of difference and band together with those who are like us.

Whatever those programs are that people watch on TV, we can't call them news agencies any more. We should start calling them skewed agencies.

Impartiality is respect. When you are impartial, you view the other person as a fellow human being created in the image of God. Impartiality is finding a way of saying "Really, in spite of our different views, we are just the same, you and I."

Francis Schaeffer in his wonderful little book *The Mark of the Christian*, writes:

The command [to love one another] . . . is [a command] to love our fellow Christians. . . . But, of course, we must . . . not forget the other side of Jesus' teaching: We are to love our fellowmen, to love *all* men, in fact, as neighbors. All men bear the image of God. They have value, not because they are redeemed, but because they are God's creation in God's image. . . .

There are two humanities. That is true. . . . Nonetheless, there is in another very important sense only one humanity. All men derive from one origin. By creation all men bear the image of God. . . . Christians are not to love their believing brothers to the exclusion of their nonbelieving fellowman. (15-18)

James 3.17-18

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.

Sincerity is the difference between a meaningful connection between two fellow human beings and a game of chess between two opponents trying to bring about a certain outcome.

According to the wisdom of the world, the ends justify the means. The goal is to score the points, to win the argument. I'll do whatever it takes.

You may remember Bing Crosby's character in *White Christmas* saying, "Everybody's got an angle." That's the opposite of sincerity. .

Wisdom that comes from above rejects maneuvering and manipulating. Instead, it is straightforward, vulnerable, transparent, unguarded, and motivated by pure intentions.

James 3.17-18

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.

What's the result of this sort of way of being, this way of wisdom from above?

James already cautioned us in chapter to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because

James 1.20

Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

But when we relate with the sort of humility that comes from seeing God in his rightful place at the center of all things, then both peace and righteousness are the result.

James 3.18

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

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		full of good fruit impartial sincere
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So why would James consider a passage like this be so important that he would put it at the center of his book?

It doesn't tell me what to say or do. It doesn't focus on what I know or accomplish.

All it tells me is how to say what I say, or do what I do. Why is that so important?

Because how we relate isn't just part of how we communicate the truth. *It is part of the kingdom truth we communicate.*

God loves adverbs.

Manner, demeanor, matters to God.

What we do reflects on us. But how we do it reflects on Him.

We are called to reflect well on the one who has conquered us. To reflect the world we came from and the King who reigns over it.

When I become part of the Kingdom of Heaven, my me-before-you, self-at-the-center, scrambling-to-get-what-I-want spirit is subdued by the Spirit of God within, and a Jesus-like gentleness and otherishness rises in its place. Contentiousness is replaced by peace, impatience is displaced by gentleness, comparing and competing and envy and jealousy are expelled by love. And what happens?

When that's how I live, I give this world a glimpse of the King I follow. A King whose way of fighting, of pushing for his rights, of thinking about himself first, of taking offense, of fighting back . . . looked like this.

Christ Crucified by Diego Velázquez



May our lives look like this too.

So we pray again, as we prayed when we began . . .

May it be, Lord, that by our love this world will know that we are yours –
 that by our love this world might even see you in us –
 as you live your life of love in us and through us.
 Make it so, Lord Jesus, gentle and humble in heart, to the glory of your name.
 Amen.

Continue your conversation with the Lord as the worship team comes and leads us.

Closing Song

Worthy of every song we could ever sing
 Worthy of all the praise we could ever bring
 Worthy of every breath we could ever breathe
 We live for You, oh, we live for You

Jesus, the Name above every other name
 Jesus, the only One who could ever save
 Worthy of every breath we could ever breathe
 We live for You, we live for You

Holy, there is no one like You
 There is none beside You
 Open up my eyes in wonder
 And show me who You are
 And fill me with Your heart
 And lead me in Your love to those around me

Benediction:

The sanctuary, the Landing, the Hub, the Family lobby and children's entrance – they all look absolutely amazing, don't they?
Our parking lot? Does *not* look amazing!

The final 100,000 dollars in our Covenant Next renovation project is designated to completely repair and repave our pathetic parking lot.
We want the outside of our building to communicate the same fresh and inviting welcome that the inside does. Would you help us get our outside to match our inside?

Some of you are newer to our church family and weren't part of the initial fund raising effort. We'd love to have you jump in and take part. And others of you are in a place where you could make an additional pledge or gift. We'd be grateful for anything further you can do.

Let's finish strong. Let's get this thing done.
Otherwise we'll need to start a new Pothole Search and Rescue Team to start pulling the cars out that plunge into them.