

The Good Life

September 23, 2018

James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

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. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness... ¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures... ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you.



Our passage today opens with verse 13, which reads, *"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"*. Sometimes life tests our wisdom and understanding doesn't it? Sometimes it is hard for the "good works" that James has been calling for from us to be done with gentleness. Wisdom can even fight against our inclination to try and do good works. To begin, a story about how good

works can sometimes be quite frustrating and even humorous, in hindsight, of course:

One day a kindergarten teacher was helping one of her students put on his cowboy boots. He had asked for help and soon enough she could see why. Even with her pulling and him pushing, the little boots still didn't want to go on. Finally, when the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked down and sure enough, they were.



It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. But she managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on - this time on the right feet. And it was only then that he announced, "These aren't my boots."

She bit her tongue rather than scream, "Why didn't you say so?" like she wanted to. And, once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off his little feet. No sooner had they got the boots off then he said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them today."

Stifling a scream, she mustered up the grace and courage she had left to wrestle the ill-fitting boots on his feet once again. Helping him into his coat, she asked, "Now, where are your mittens?"

To which he replied, "I stuffed them in the toes of my boots."

Have you ever had a similar experience when you were trying to offer a good work, when trying to do the right thing? I think we all have. Let us pray...



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In our passage today, James addresses a much more serious issue that challenges our ability to live as God intends than some ill-fitting cowboy boots. Today James addresses two things that really prevent us from living the good life that God desires for us to live: envy and selfish ambition. As was the case last week, when we looked at the evil words of the serpent causing damage to the relationship and their place in the Garden of Eden, envy caused the first murder soon thereafter. In Genesis 4, we recall Cain being envious of his brother Abel's offering. Abel gave his offering from the first fruits of his flock and, because of this, God found the offering pleasing. But Cain did not give from the same place in his heart. Verse five tells us, *"For Cain and his offering, God had no regard. So, Cain was very angry"*. The anger and envy rose up in him and drove him to murder his brother. Cain wanted to be the one receiving God's approval. He coveted God's approval. But his selfish heart showed through in his offering. Cain gave out of his surplus, whereas Abel gave the first lambs of his flock, trusting that God would provide more.

To this day, we continue to wrestle with the idea of trusting God. We struggle to believe that God will really provide all that we need. Therefore, we cannot seem to be content with what we have. This gives birth to the twin evils of believing that we have to take charge and make success happen ourselves and to the equally dangerous belief that more is better. The illusion of needing "more" is what James would say drives much of the conflict and broken relationships that he was observing in his era and that continue to create the broken relationships that are so typical today. When we talk of "more" we are usually talking about material possessions. We look at what others have, and we crave a bigger

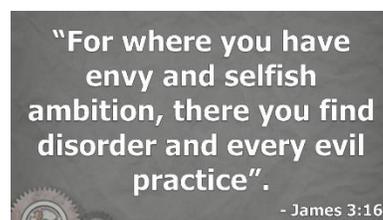
house, a newer car, a fancier boat, a fuller bank account, finer clothes. We fall into the trap that says better things brings a better life.

This desire for more can spill over into other areas. We want more friends, more ways to entertain ourselves, more recognition, more titles, more achievements. The



list can go on and on. In today's world, "more" means better. To attain more, to get more, we can find ourselves being less than godly. In verse 16 James warns, *"For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice"*.

When we cannot work hard enough to get that new car or nicer boat or that promotion, we can try and find other ways to attain it.



We see it all the time. People bend the rules to make

an extra dollar, take the pills to run a bit faster or jump a little higher. People lie, steal, and cheat to attain what they cannot get otherwise. There is disorder and wickedness of every kind in our world today. James saw this behavior as *"earthly, unspiritual, demonic"*. It is the same today.

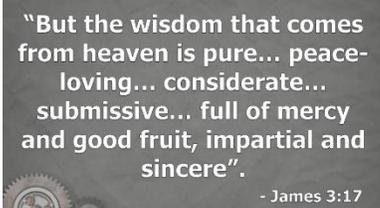
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As was the case with Cain and Abel, it can also be the case with us. To get at the root of the problem, James asks these questions of us: *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"*

When we find ourselves questioning what we are about to do or say, we must stop and consider the source of the craving or think hard to discern the seeds of the conflict. Is what we are about to say or do coming from the good in our hearts and minds, or is it rising up from the evil that has taken root there? We must also be sensitive to and attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit when it

whispers a warning, when the voice says, "Just a minute". When we choose not to pay attention to the Holy Spirit, James warns us, *"You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight"*. When we live by the wisdom and ways of the world, then we are far from the true good life of faith.

James argues that instead of relying on the wisdom of the world, we must seek wisdom from above. In verse 17, James describes this wisdom. He writes, *"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"*. This verse connects back to two weeks ago, when we talked about not showing favoritism or partiality. And it connects back to last week's advice about taming our tongue so that we are not hypocrites, saying one thing here and another thing there or saying one thing and doing another. And it also sounds a lot like a list we heard last week, where Paul uses Philippians 4:8 to establish our standard for what we are to put into our hearts and minds. Do you remember what Paul advised us to put into our hearts and minds as our standard? He said, *"whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, worthy of praise"* – these are the things that we should fill our hearts and minds with. James is in agreement with what wisdom we should use to guide our daily living. Only the wisdom from above will produce what is true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and worthy of praise. For James, when we fill our hearts and minds with these characteristics, they will produce in us the good life.



"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is pure... peace-loving... considerate... submissive... full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere".
- James 3:17

As we delve into James 4, he addresses the evils of envy and selfish ambition.

In verse 3, James writes, *"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures"*. When we ask for our own selfish desires to be met, then we are

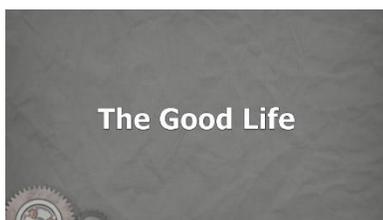
"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures". - James 4:3

certainly not content with what God has blessed us with. We selfishly ask for what the Jones' have or we ask for just a few more hours or another side job, sacrificing time with family to get what we want. Just as it did with Cain and Abel, these longings negatively affect our relationships with the Jones' and with our families. But more importantly, these desires also adversely affect our relationship with God. When we are not content, we are saying, in essence, that God is not loving or caring for us enough. We are saying we know what we need better than God does. Being content is the sure cure to envy, jealousy, and selfish ambition. When we truly believe that we have all that we need, then we are content. And when we are content and trust in God's provision, then our relationships with God and with others is radically different as well. We are more willing to be generous and giving; we are less likely to take advantage of others or to mistreat others. When we find contentment with what we have, we find a freedom unlike any other in the world. We find the best life.

In order to ask "rightly" instead of wrongly, we must understand what our heart truly desires. To illustrate what this can look like, I would like to share a snippet from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. As the story is unfolding, Harry discovers the Mirror of Erised. Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster, explains to Harry that the mirror reflects back to the observer that which they most deeply and



desperately desire in their lives. When Harry looked into the mirror, for example, he saw the image of his long-dead parents. When his friend, Ron, looked into the mirror, he saw himself holding the house trophy. Dumbledore explained the power of the mirror to Harry this way: "The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised just like a normal mirror; that is, he would be able to see himself exactly as he is".



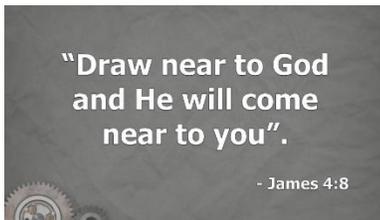
James suggests to us that the best life can be defined in precisely that manner. The best life is a life in which contentment and trust, not envy and selfish ambition, are the rule of life. We find contentment and trust only through our relationship with God. James also has a word to say about this. In verse 7, he writes, *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"*. When we are willing to submit ourselves to God and His love and care, then we do not long for the things of this world. When we do not long for the things of this world, then we find that envy and selfish ambition have no place in our hearts and minds. And when they do try and pry their way in, when Satan goes to work to draw us away from God, we must simply call on the name of Jesus as we resist the devil, and he will flee.



Martin Luther, the German priest who began the Reformation back in the 1500s, was often very graphic in his description of the activities of the devil. When asked one time how he overcame the devil, Martin Luther replied, *"Well, when he comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks, 'Who lives here?' the dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, 'Martin Luther used to live here but*

he has moved out. Now I live here.' The devil seeing the nail-prints in the hands and the pierced side, takes flight immediately." This same Jesus lives in you and in me. We too can introduce Satan to Jesus when he comes knocking next time.

In order to submit to God, we need to know God. In order to know God, we need to spend time with God. We spend time by being here in worship, by spending time at home reading and meditating on God's Word, by being in prayer with God, and by all other means that fill our heart and mind with the things of God. In verse 8, James reminds us of this promise: "*Come near to God*



and he will come near to you". God desires a deep, intimate, personal relationship with each of us. When we make efforts to draw near to God, He will certainly draw near to us. God's loving presence is one of those

things that we can always count on. As we seek the good life, may it come to rest upon our steadfast, loving relationship with God. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) God desires a faith that is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and worthy of praise. Where do you need to grow most?
- 2) Do you battle envy or selfish ambition more? Pray for God's help!
- 3) Service draw us closer to God. Who can you serve this week to help you draw closer to God?