

HUMBLE YOURSELVES

James 3:13-4:10

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson comes from *The Letter of James*, beginning at chapter 3, verse 13, reading through chapter 4, verse 10. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From James 3, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

^{4:1} What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴ You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives 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. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

James hits a lot of topics in this passage. Wisdom, selfishness, conflict, murder, coveting, pride, prayer, friendship with the world, enmity with God, the devil, and demons. But there is one continuous theme that he's really honing in on: humility.

Humility is a great virtue. If you can learn to fake it, you'll be very likable. But it's pretty hard to fake. People can usually see through it, even when we think they can't. And the reason they can see through it, is because they're just like us. They're also trying to pretend to be humble, and they use the same tricks, so they know them. And, sooner or later, our pride and

HUMBLE YOURSELVES (James 3:13-4:10)

selfishness bleed through. Eventually, it becomes apparent that “I want to talk about me, wanna to talk about I, wanna to talk about number one” (Toby Keith, Bobby Braddock). Our selfishness eventually bleeds through, and it becomes obvious that I care about my own self more than anyone else. I take care of my needs before I take care of others. Humility is surprisingly hard to fake. Even when we think we’re pulling it off, we’re probably not.

Now, I’m not saying we shouldn’t try to be humble. Don’t fake it. Don’t pretend to be something you’re not. But we should act as if other people are more important than ourselves, even if we don’t feel that way. We should still treat them as more important, because it’s the right thing to do. It’s the will of God. If we wait for our hearts to want to do the right thing before we do it, we’re going to be waiting a long time. And maybe, if we treat people as more important than ourselves, we might start to actually think that way, at least a little bit.

There are two sides to humility. There is humility before other people, and there is humility before God. At first, James starts out talking about humility before other people, but he eventually transitions to talking about humility before God.

Humility before other people means considering others more important than ourselves. In Philippians, the apostle Paul says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). That’s humility in regards to other humans. We might confuse humility with self-deprecation. That’s when we downplay our own intelligence, ability, or goodness. We say or pretend that we’re not very good at something. But self-deprecation is false humility. True humility doesn’t really think about ourselves very much. True humility thinks about other people. And in this way, humility is related to love. Humility is the attitude that leads to actions of love. When we consider others as more significant, that’s humility. Then we will treat them as more significant, and that’s love.

Humility before God is a little bit different. It has more to do with humbling ourselves before him. That means that we confess to him our sin and our weakness. We confess to him that our hearts are not right. We confess that our thoughts, words, and actions are not right. And beside our sin, we confess that we are just weak and vulnerable in this world. We are vulnerable to the attacks of the devil. We are vulnerable to the many dangers in this world. We are so small and fragile. To humble ourselves before the Lord means that we seek his shelter. We seek forgiveness for our sins, protection and provision during this life, and deliverance from all evil. In short, it simply means that we humble ourselves and seek his help. We cannot stand on our own, so we humble ourselves beneath his shelter and seek his help.

That’s the overview of this passage. Now for the details.

James starts with wisdom. “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom” (3:13). It’s kind of like, *Who thinks himself wise? Don’t say it; show it.* We often think that we have wisdom. But there are more people in the world who think they are wise than there are people who are actually wise. That is because folly masquerades as wisdom. A few weeks ago, our Old Testament lesson read from Proverbs 9, where wisdom is personified as a woman who invites the simple to come and learn (9:1-12). But immediately after that, folly is also personified as a woman who invites the simple to come and learn (9:13-18). Read Proverbs 9 sometime to compare and contrast wisdom and folly. There are some differences between the two, which help us discern them, but folly is shrewd enough to masquerade as wisdom. Or, I should say, the devil is crafty enough to dress foolishness up to look like wisdom. So we might be duped. And the only thing worse than a fool is a fool who

HUMBLE YOURSELVES (James 3:13-4:10)

thinks he is wise. So how do we know the difference? The biggest difference, and we should always remember this, is that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

So James tells us to stop. Instead of asserting our own wisdom, we should let our actions do the talking. And if we are truly wise, it will be seen. And if we are fools, we will spare ourselves the embarrassment of being proven wrong. It’s like what Jesus said, “**Wisdom is justified by her deeds**” (Matt. 11:19). If you have wisdom, just put it into practice, and then it will be seen for what it truly is.

But, often, instead of wisdom, we have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition (3:14). And we’re prideful enough to think that we are wise, when we really just want to be ahead of other people. James identifies the true source of this: “This is not the wisdom from above, but it is earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (3:15). Notice how binary James is. There are only two sides. And the Bible is often like this. There is light, and there is darkness. There is good, and there is evil. There is wisdom, and there is folly. There is no in between. We often do not think that way. We might think more in terms of three realms: the heavenly, the earthly, and the demonic. But James equates the earthly with the demonic. And this is the trick of the devil. He knows he won’t get far if his ways are obviously demonic. So he presents them as earthly. He would like us to think of his ways as just “normal,” and don’t we all just want to be normal? He wants us to think of some things as earthly truths that don’t really have anything to do with God. But this is not true. Everything true comes from God, and anything that is not from God is false. And if it is false, then it is from the devil.

The biggest example, and this is what James keeps attacking, is selfish pride. We think of looking out for ourselves as simply “normal,” when, in reality, it is demonic. The world keeps saying, “You have to do what’s right for you.” And we hear it so often that we might actually think it’s true. But it’s not. And it’s certainly not found in the Bible. But a good summary of many of God’s commandments would be, “You just have to do what’s right for your neighbor.” Or, to use the actual language of the Bible, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jam. 2:8).

In many ways, biblical Christianity is counter-cultural, and this is the greatest of those ways: that we consider others ahead of ourselves. There are other ways in which we are counter-cultural. The world mocks many of our beliefs as foolish. They consider our morals to be old-fashioned or even repressive. That’s because the world’s morals are all selfish. In many ways, we are counter-cultural, and we should be. But the biggest of these is that we consider our neighbors more important than ourselves. And if we’re counter-cultural on all those other things, but not on this one, then we give them cause to accuse us. Selflessness, humility, love. This is our counter-cultural revolution. So James says, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (3:17).

But our selfishness is the reason for quarrels and fights. James says, “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” (4:1). Our passions or desires lead us to murder and coveting. We fight one another in order to get our own way or maybe to get what they have and we want. It could be to get the place of honor in the church. Or it could be to get ahead of them at work. Or it could be to get more friends at school. We fight, quarrel, lie, covet, or even murder because of our selfish passions. Even when we’re sure we’re right, our selfish desires get us into fights and quarrels. We might even actually be right, but we might be right in the wrong way. That is, we might be factually correct, but still selfish, competitive, and boastful.

HUMBLE YOURSELVES (James 3:13-4:10)

It even affects our prayers. God invites us to pray, but sometimes our prayers are selfish. Last Sunday we heard Jesus say to a man, “**All things are possible for one who believes**” (Mark 9:23). We might interpret that wrongly to mean that, if we want something, all we have to do is believe firmly enough that we will get it, and then we will. That is to think of God as a giant cosmic vending machine, and our faith as the currency.

Here James gives a simple and balanced understanding of prayer. He says, “You do not have, because you do not ask” (4:2). That’s the first part. And think about that. God invites us to be bold. Why should we expect to receive anything from God if we do not ask? To be sure, he gives us more than we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). But sometimes the reason we do not receive, is simply because we do not ask. So God invites us to be bold. The second part tempers our greed. James goes on, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (4:3). Does God invite us to pray for anything? Yes. But there are some things that we really know we shouldn’t pray for. There are times when we are simply being selfish. We should be bold enough to pray for everything we think is good, but our prayers are often tainted with sin, and we might not recognize it.

There’s a comedian by the name of John Crist. C-R-I-S-T. Sometimes I give you homework during sermons. This is your homework. On YouTube or wherever good videos are distributed, look up “John Crist prayer requests.” He has some great bits about all the stuff we probably shouldn’t pray for. He’ll illustrate James’ point, and it might be good for a laugh.

The basic problem with all of this is selfish ambition. And James gets rather harsh. He says, “You adulterous people!” (4:5). You know what adultery is: it’s when you belong to one person, but you go and give yourself to someone else. We do that when, in our selfishness, we make ourselves friends with the world. And friendship with the world doesn’t mean that we’re just kind to the people of the world. We should be kind. But friendship with the world means that we put the world in the place of God. We serve the world, and we seek fulfillment and meaning from the world. It could be financial gain, respect, or peace. James says, “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (4:4). Now, how does that work? Is God like a jealous ex-friend who says, *Well, if they’re going to be friends with them, then I’m not going to be their friend anymore?* No. God is jealous, but not like that. God is jealous for us for our sake, not for his. We usually think of jealousy as selfish; we want something for ourselves, and we want to keep it to ourselves. But God’s jealousy is selfless. He sees all the destructive things of the world that we chase after. They might be evil things that the devil dresses up as wise or attractive. Or it could be anything that we fear, love, or trust in above the one true God. They could even be good things, but we elevate them to the wrong place. God is jealous for us, because he knows these things cannot save us. So he warns us, sometimes gently, and sometimes harshly, not to chase after these things and not to be friends with the world.

And this leads us back to humility before God. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (4:6; Prov. 3:34). Humility before God means that we submit to him. “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (4:8). Of course, he is always near to us, calling us to repentance. But when we finally humble our hearts and confess, he is so quick to forgive. He promises to forgive. He promises that when we humble ourselves before him, he will be there to shelter us. This can be a scary thing for us, because we know that we are sinners. We know that we are “double-minded” as James says (4:8). That means that our minds should be set on the things of God, but we always have a part of our minds that wants to be friends with the world.

HUMBLE YOURSELVES (James 3:13-4:10)

We know this about ourselves. Our consciences know that we do not deserve God's mercy. So we feel that instead of sheltering us with his presence, he will squash us. But it's not true. His jealousy for us is his powerful desire to lift us up.

God does this by coming down for us. He tells us to humble ourselves. And he also humbled himself. The Son of God humbled himself by taking on human flesh. He considered others as more significant than himself. He took the form of a servant, and he humbled himself to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:3-8). So when God calls us to weep and mourn and humble ourselves, he's inviting us to join Christ in his humility. He's inviting us to confess our sins, leaving them with Jesus on that cross. And as we join Christ in his humility, we are also raised with him. That, really, is what it means when James says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (4:10). We might read that wrongly. We might read it selfishly as a recipe for how to get exalted. But this exaltation is not about selfish ambition. Selfish ambition is the way of death. The exaltation God promises is to be lifted out of that futile path toward death. It's about being forgiven and finding our hope in something better than ourselves, something pure: the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That exaltation is about being raised from the dead, not just spiritually, but also physically, like Jesus was.

To humble ourselves before the Lord means to confess our sins, to seek his shelter of mercy, and to submit to his wisdom. And God's promise is certain. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.