

J The Book of James

Session Eight:
November 16, 2004

James 3:9-12—Christians and Contradictions

❖ The Text (NRSV)

[James continues to speak about the capacities of human speech; he has just referred to the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison;” the tongue, then, is the “it” of 3:9.]

⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

❖ What’s going on here?

-v.9—We saw in 3:1-8 that James recognizes the immense power of human speech, potentially for either good or for ill. But in 3:6-8 especially, James emphasized the destructive power of human speech, especially from the mouths of teachers and community leaders. Here we see the connection to James’ continuing concern with completion and wholeness. We have again and again heard James call us to integrity in our persons—to coherent and consistent love, and away from divided allegiances and hypocrisy. Here James exposes that recurring problem of divided loves and divided selves in terms of our speaking—we bless and we curse with the same tongue. This is quite literally a *contradiction* in James’ eyes—we speak opposing sentiments at the same time and expose how fractured we are inside.

James invokes the Gen. 1:27-28 language of humanity made in “the image of God” here, and by doing so he raises the stakes for acts of hate toward fellow humans. To insult, to hate, to curse another is to curse one who represents God, tantamount to actually cursing God. James sees an intrinsic worth to

humanity here, a worth grounded as always in the character of God. This sharp criticism of James, exposing the severe disconnect between our vertical relationships (our relations with God) and our horizontal relationships (with our neighbors), echoes Jesus’ teaching about making peace with our neighbors before presenting offerings to God, as well his teaching about the need to forgive each other as God has forgiven us (see especially Matt. 18:23-35).

In terms of the church context of these verses, James probably still has in mind those church leaders that he sees as misleading the congregation. He has warned generically about the powers of leaders’ speech, but here may be focusing in on those who lead separatist factions within the church. Again, considering the strong possibility of an original setting in 1st-century Jerusalem in the center of a gathering storm between the oppressive Romans and the resistant Zealots, James could be speaking against those in the congregation who profess faith and love for God but who in the same breath seek to kill and curse their neighbors. Such groups might not only be breeding hate toward the Romans and their co-conspirators but also those Jewish-Christians who were not part of their violent Zealot program. James, then, is saying that to truly love God, one must love neighbor—and this is to happen in action (2:8ff) as well as speech and thought (3:9-10).

-v.11-12—This images from nature function in two ways in advancing James’ argument. First, the idea of fresh spring yielding saltwater or of a grapevine bearing figs exposes is meant to be laughable. The notion is so absurdly inconceivable that as James compares it to our speaking, he exposes how absurd the disconnects are in our own speech. There is a rhetorical force to these illustrations that makes it clear that the blessing-cursing issue of vv.9-10 is more than just a quirky foible of human conduct or minor inconsistency. Rather, James shows how radical a

contradiction it is when we are able to say we love God and then hate our neighbor; indeed, it reflects not just a division in what we say but a betrays a deeper fracturing of ourselves. In some ways, James' examples are so obviously impossible as to be funny—*of course* a fig tree cannot bear olives; it would make no sense. But for James this is precisely the point—he wants to see how tragically absurd the disconnects of our speech can be.

This dovetails with the second thrust of these verses—the assumption of human design and purpose. That is, the disconnects in our speech violate God's will for us to lead whole, integrated lives. James' analogy exposes this for us. The idea is that a grapevine bears only grapes in nature because that is how God made it—its purpose includes bearing grapes. Similarly, it is physically impossible for a freshwater spring to give saltwater—again, this is simply the design of nature.

James suggests, if not quite so simplistically, that humans and our capacity for speech also has a divinely-designed purpose—to build up the neighbor and to praise God. In 3:9-10, James pointed back to the creation story of Genesis 1, and that calls to mind the idea that God has ordered, designed, and formed us, and further that the fullness of life happens when we live in the design of God. What James sees all around him—hateful speech, hypocrisy, pretended piety—are not just minor peccadilloes but a rejection of God's design for humanity. To reject God's purpose and intent for our capacity of speech is yet more serious, too—it is to do violence to who we are.

If James sees the progress and growth of the life of faith as “becoming what we are,” our rejection of God's will in our hateful speech is a refusal to be who we are and who we have been made to be, just as if a fig tree wanted to get into the grape-bearing business. For James, we are designed for love of

God and neighbor in all our faculties, so the way we use our gift of speech is more than a matter of our free choice. It is a question of living within the gracious will and design of God. James understands that one of the fundamental predicaments of human nature is that we find ourselves rejecting that design—he just can't understand *why* as the people of God we would want to persist in that rejection.

Connections: Is Talk Cheap?

-James rules out hateful speech toward those made in the “likeness of God.” Think of some persons or groups toward whom you have strong negative feelings. Maybe it's the people in the red states, maybe the blues. Maybe there's a particularly frustrating co-worker, a gossipy neighbor, another religious denomination or foreign ethnic group that rubs you the wrong way. What does it mean to view this person/this group as made in the image of God?

-Think of a time in your life when you realized you were speaking or acting hypocritically—what does it feel like to come to that realization?

-Are there Christian religious leaders whose messages seem to foster hate for neighbors in the name of love for God? How does it feel to hear them speak? What would James say to these people?

❖ Themes

-*faithful language*—It's easy to treat James' discussion in 3:1-12 about how we speak is generic and dull (if well-intentioned) moralizing. One might even ask whether there is anything explicitly Christian about these verses and their warnings about how we talk—what difference does the gospel make to James' concerns here? As we have seen in the first two chapters before, much of the theological thinking is present in James, but is implicit and standing behind what he says. In chapter 1, we heard the command to be doers of the word, but only *after* James already declared that this word was already *implanted* in us and

had given us birth as God's new creation (1:18, 22). The implicit point was not that we have to earn our status by *doing* enough but that we are called to act as what we already *are*.

There is a similar implicit background in chapter 3—both James' concern for the life of the community of faith and his sense of God's gracious purpose, or *telos*, for humanity. As for the first, James wants it to sink in that what we say matters—our speech especially has the power to tear other people down and to lead people astray. And so all of these harsh words need to be understood from the perspective of the sadder but wiser church leader who has seen this destruction before. James wants the believers in his community to thrive, to grow, and to live in the fullness of God's will for them. His hope is for them to have life in its *completion* and *maturity*, and he writes against anything that threatens this.

There is also a lot of theology of human purpose and design at work in these verses. We have seen wisdom used by James to refer to that ability to tap into the rhythms and cadences of God's design of all creation. He uses the same kind of thinking in 3:9-12, insisting that we have been created *for* a purpose—life together in praise of God and love of neighbor—and that this purpose permeates all of our lives, including our speech. To speak rightly, faithfully, and with integrity, then, is a part of living in the fullness of God's design for us.

James 3:13-18—A Tale of Two Wisdoms

❖ **The Text (NRSV)**

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 from above, but is earthly, unspritual, 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 of hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

-v.13-15—In contrast to those in the church who have claimed the status of being teachers for themselves and who James now sees as leading people astray, we are now presented with an alternative—true wisdom. So here in 3:13-18, James sets up another dualism, a contrast between earthly (false) wisdom and that wisdom which comes from God. We saw James set up a pair of alternative paths between desire-sin-death and God's grace-faith (through trials)-maturity in 1:14-18. This kind of contrast between God's ways and human ways is frequent in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The psalms and wisdom literature are peppered with contrasting pairs of the righteous and wise lifestyle versus the life of folly and sin (see esp. Ps. 1, Prov. 9). But Paul, too, especially in the letters to the Corinthians plays with the contrast between the wisdom of human thinking and God's wisdom—which looks wonderfully foolish to the world. James seems to draw especially from the Old Testament tradition and wants us to see the real difference in ways of life between the two kinds of wisdom, and so he paints in broad brushstrokes with black-and-white distinction in order to get us to choose the way of God's wisdom.

As James draws this contrast, it is important to notice that he does so in very practical terms as well as rhetorical ones—the false wisdom is on the one hand described generically as “unspiritual” and “devilish” but also is seen in real life in acts of “selfish ambition” and “bitter envy” (the Greek could also be rendered “harsh zeal”). Similarly, godly wisdom is described in lofty terms but also in very practical, real life images—acting with gentleness, letting wisdom be seen in how we live, etc. The point, then, is that wisdom is not understood to be a esoteric knowledge possessed only by an elite of mystics, but rather is a way of life seen most clearly in patient love and humility.

v. 16-18—James continues his contrast between the wisdom “from above” and its foil which is “earthly.” And much as he did in chapter 1, he presents each wisdom as a process leading toward alternative conclusions. To be “wise” by the world’s rules is ultimately to live by the rule of one’s own desires—and consequentially, it ends in chaos with everyone trying to grab all they can for themselves. This kind of thinking leads to violence, to that kind of fanatical zeal that hates all who are different, and to a willingness to step on anyone who stands in my way of getting what I want. This may have been precisely what James was fearing in his community—people who, in the name of godly wisdom, were willing to use violence to achieve their means and sought their own good at the expense of others. There is a sort of logic to this self-interested approach, but it is a logic completely at odds with God’s kind of wisdom.

So James presents in more practical kinds of terms what God’s kind of wisdom really looks like. In some ways, this echoes Paul’s discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul has spent much of 1Cor. 12 discussing the ways spiritual gifts were being abused and division was erupting, and then he offers what he calls “a still more excellent way”—the example of love. James has a similar tone—he describes the consequences of earthly wisdom and then offers us God’s alternative—a yet more excellent wisdom, as it were.

What is wonderfully refreshing about this description of wisdom is how very much it is concerned with character above knowledge or even rigid morality. If you were to ask James how one could tell what wisdom looked like, he would respond as he does here in 3:17—it looks like purity, peacemaking and gentleness, patience with others, truthfulness, and mercy. In other words, it looks an awful lot like love for neighbor and love for God. It is further of note how much James’ litany of attributes for wisdom sounds like Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes or even

Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit and the character of love. Wisdom is not an unrelated quality to love and to life in the Spirit—these are all ways of describing a whole way of life that has been radically re-oriented around God’s ways and God’s character.

Finally, James offers the conclusion of a life lived in God’s wisdom—“a harvest of righteousness” and “peace.” Clearly, James knows that the life of faith is one of struggle, temptation, and testing. But he also knows, somehow even more clearly if yet more distant, that living in accordance with God’s ways brings peace. It is not given as a reward for being good enough but is itself the fruit of living with the peaceful, gentle, humble love that is godly wisdom. When does James see this “harvest of righteousness” coming? In some sense, we may catch glimpses of it now, but the language of harvest is often associated with God’s final coming and the consummated Reign of God when Jesus returns. James doesn’t give us a clear answer here—only the promise that even when God’s ways seem at odds with the world’s, the selfless love and genuine truthfulness of the “wisdom from above” leads to the gift of God’s peace from above.

Connections: What is Wisdom?

- What does wisdom look like to you? How do you know it when you see it? How do you get wisdom?
- We use words like “worldly” to mean bad, and James seems to do so as well—what exactly do we mean by “worldly”? What makes “worldly” things bad, and how does this relate to God’s creation of the world as good?
- Why do you think James connects being wise and being humble so closely?
- Who is someone in your life who you regard as wise? What makes them stand out as wise? What gave them the wisdom you see in them?