

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 23, 2018

[James 3:13-4:3,7-8a](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on James 3:13-4:3,7-8a (From *Homiletics*; “Two Kinds of Smart”, Sept. 23, 2012)

The opening verse of James 3:13–4:3, 7-8a conceivably captures the précis of this letter. Verse 13 adroitly recapitulates James's prior exhortation and nicely anticipates his closing directives, that is, wise people live in ways that serve others, produce "a harvest of righteousness," and "make peace" as they work to eradicate conflict both within themselves and with others.

Without a doubt, James's question in verse 13 -- "Who is wise and understanding among you?" -- and his answer -- "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom" -- echo several recurring themes that undergird much of his letter. As he has already made clear, wisdom is a gift with divine origins (cf. James 1:5, 17-18). It grows out of an understanding of "God's righteousness" and "the perfect law, the law of liberty," or as James later refers to it, "the royal law" (cf. James 1:19–20, 25; 2:8–13). For that reason, authentic disciples are "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (cf. James 1:22; 2:14-26). In short, they not only promise to act on behalf of the poor, but also follow through on their pledge with tangible gifts that aid and sustain.

Having described one of the chief attributes of believers, James warns his community about two character flaws that undermine a person's ability to live up to the ideals of the Christian faith. With an authoritative tone that rips through any pretension, he contends, "But if you have bitter envy [ζηλονπικρον] and selfish ambition [επιθειαν] in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth" (v. 14). One of the most unexpected aspects of this admonition isn't the latter charge -- "do not be boastful and false to the truth" -- but the lack of a specific mandate that directs the disciples to remove all of their "bitter envy and selfish ambition." This aspect is even more startling given that James had previously urged them to "rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness" (cf. James 1:21).

Instead of instructing believers to stop being envious and ambitious, he knows that at various times everyone feels envy and has ambitions. Given that reality, James's initial concern isn't the actual presence of these darker interior

impulses, but how we view them. From his perspective, whenever we envy others and hold self-serving postures, the critical issue is first to recognize the origin of such attitudes. If we are to be persons who are "wise and understanding," we ought to acknowledge that "such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish [επιγειος, ψυχικη, δαιμονιωδης]" (v. 15). Our failure to own up to this reality indicates that we are "boastful and false to the truth."

Lest anyone presume that the only issue James has with "bitter envy and selfish ambition" is recognizing their carnal point of origin, he goes on to stress the pervasive and destructive nature of these sins. After all, envy is one of the archetypal seven deadly sins in traditional church theology. Highlighting the injurious effects of these "unspiritual" and "devilish" desires, he declares, "For where there is envy [ζηλος] and selfish ambition [eriqueia], there will also be disorder [ακαταστασια] and wickedness of every kind [παν φαυλον πραγμα]" (v. 16).

Furthermore, in contrast to earthly wisdom -- that is, wisdom from below -- "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (v. 17). This catalog of virtues resonates with many of James's prior exhortations. Wisdom that is pure has "endured temptation and has stood the test" (James 1:12). It bears the fruit of righteousness and welcomes "with meekness the implanted word" (James 1:20-21). It extends mercy to "orphans and widows in their distress" and to anyone who needs food and clothing (James 1:27; 2:14-17). It neither plays favorites nor has a self-serving objective (James 2:1-13). Rather than living and dying by the sword, Jesus' disciples are to understand that "a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace" (v. 18).

Even though James has previously stated without equivocation that the "earthly, unspiritual, devilish" sins of "envy and selfish ambition" produce "disorder and wickedness of every kind," he circles back to this topic in 4:1-3. He inquires, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" (v. 1). Not only do "envy and selfish ambition" come from below, they also originate within us. As it was with temptation, so it is with "envy and selfish ambition." No one can say that God made me an envious and self-preoccupied person (cf. James 1:13-16). On the contrary, these base desires flow out of our own evil and selfish hearts. Whatever conflicts and disputes we have with others, it is because, as James says, "You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts" (v. 2a).

This moral destitution, whatever form it takes, is due to a failure to ask God and to ask him with right motives. Pressing his point, James declares, "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures" (vv. 2b-3). Instead of demanding that others satisfy their needs, they ought to have appealed to God. But unfortunately, even if they had placed their requests before God, they still would have remained impoverished. In sum, they were utterly self-preoccupied, driven by their own desires, and guided by wisdom, not from above, but from below according to James.

It is appropriate, then, that James concludes this passage with a clear and resolute admonition: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (vv. 7-8a). Whenever we choose to reject "wisdom from above," wisdom from "the Father of lights," we experience conflict with others and conflict within. Rather than receiving from God the resources we need to help the poor and destitute, we remain trapped in a spiritual poverty of our own making because we are following wisdom from below.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Psalm 116:1-9:

1. Where do you see and/or experience the kind of “wisdom from above” about which James speaks here? Who has provided living examples of such wisdom and understanding in your own life?
2. From Margaret Aymer (*Commentary*, workingpreacher.org, 9/23/2018): *James, here, invites meditation on godly leadership. How do we, as Christians, through prayer and attention to the will of God, exercise such leadership? How do we encourage such attributes in our leaders and future leaders?*
3. Again from Margaret Aymer: *From what worldly so-called wisdom might James be calling the church to repent? What might it mean for the church, once more, to draw near to God?*
4. Consider the question that begins chapter 4: *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?*
5. From Sandra Hack Polaski (*Commentary*, workingpreacher.org, 9/23/2012): *What is it, exactly, that we crave and cannot have and fight over, that we forget to ask for, or ask in vain because we ask selfishly?*

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?