

St James Epistle and the main themes - Part 2

Activity

Refer to the attached handout giving an overview of the Epistle of St James, and the aims and outcomes of the Lesson.

After giving an overview of the main themes in Chapters 3-5 of this Epistle, you may wish to divide the class into 2 or 3 groups, and allocate a passage (as listed below) to each group to read, discuss and share, with the rest of the class at the end, the message that St James that he is conveying in each of his passages.

A. Group 1: Read James 3:1-12

I. The Importance of the Tongue

It is a true expression of what is inside man: “For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

No one can control it. It is evil and uncontrollable, full of deadly poison.

We use it to give thanks to our Lord and Father, and also to curse our fellow men, created in the likeness of God.

On the Day of Judgment, men will render account for every careless word they utter.

The measure you give will be the measure you get.

Family troubles and disputes among tribes in rural societies, and international wars, all result from formal declaration of the people in office. (Give examples from the Holy Bible and from the life history of the Saints).

Lesson Outline:

I. Examples of the sins of the tongue

The sin of judging others.

The sin of cursing, insulting people and the impolite words.

The sin of despising others and bad jokes.

The sin of talkativeness and empty words, which are not for building.

The sin of tale bearing calumny, slander, backbiting and envy.

The sin of hypocrisy, simulation, insincerity, partiality and false praise.

II. How Can We Cure The Sins Of The Tongue

Repentance and seeking grace - renewal. Everything has become new. Out of it comes fresh water, not salty water.

Growth in grace through prayers and studying the Bible and practicing of Sacraments. We change our shape through renewing our mind.

Circumspection in conduct and in talk and keeping away from rashness and asking for the help of God when we talk.

Being fully convinced that the sins of the tongue are dangerous and by examining oneself one can keep away from such sins.

Confess these sins to your father of confession and study them with him so that he may help you overcome them

Do not imitate the children of the world but be distinguished from them, as you are the children of God.

B. Group 2: Read James 3:13-18

The True Wisdom vs Earthly Wisdom

"Who is wise and understanding among you?" Wisdom is the knowledge we need to live in this life and to interact with our circumstances and with those around us. James compares the two basic sources for wisdom--from God or from the world around us.

St James focuses on how to live as Christians in the midst of continuing trials in a twisted and perverse world. The Christians he is writing to are struggling and their struggles have led them to be tempted to even question God's presence, care, and activity in their lives. How are they (and we) to handle the pressures of devastating health or financial problems, loneliness, manipulative relationships, or the daily frustrations that pile up and so easily lead their (our) gaze away from the presence of their (our) heavenly Father? To know how to cope is to be wise.

True wisdom exists in wisdom from God, or "from above". To the one who is wise and understanding, James says, "By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." What is a good life? Is it one free of trial? No, it is a life that is lived out of the meekness of wisdom. So, first of all James is saying that wisdom is meek. What does he mean by this? If we look back to the first chapter James encourages his readers that if they are ever lacking wisdom to ask God, "who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given to him."(1:5) God is the true source of wisdom and is always willing to give it to us when we ask. In fact, the beginning of wisdom for James, is to be wise about the character of our good God and so to be willing to receive from Him.

This is why there is a meekness to wisdom. We are not wise on our own. We are God's children--dependent on our heavenly Father to give us life, love, peace, joy, and wisdom to live. We are to allow this generous, giving God to give to us. This is the wise thing to do--to recognize that we are children who receive our life from our Father. James touches on this point later in the first chapter when he encourages his readers to "put away all filthiness and rank growth of

wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."(1:21).

True wisdom is not just good advice, good ideas or ideals, or knowing which side of a debate is the right side. Wisdom is real when it is in motion. What are his works? Not even just acts of charity but, all of what goes into how he lives--how he deals with his family, friends, co-workers, how he handles his finances and spends his time, how he approaches the ordinary tasks of the day. To live in the meekness of wisdom is to go about our lives in a self-forgetful manner We are receiving moment by moment our life from God. We do not look to those around us or to our present circumstances (be they currently good, okay, or horrible) to tell us who we really are, to give us a sense of worth, or our life and livelihood. To be wise is to see that our present circumstances do not tell the story of our real worth or limit our real ability to receive full life from God.

And, it is so very difficult not to compare our lives with others and to use those comparisons either to puff ourselves up or tear ourselves down.

James now turns to these dangers: "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." When we are jealous or selfishly ambitious, we are not trusting in God's ability to give us life in the midst of our trials, and to lead us, through these very trials to become "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."(1:4) Our jealousy and ambitious plans for ourselves do not reflect the real truth about who we are and where real life is to be found. Every day, the temptation to be jealous of someone else comes up. We can be jealous of another's house, wealth, looks, friends, personality, happy life etc.. And it is so easy to maneuver myself in ways to make me look good, wise, humble, attractive in others' eyes.

James is aware of this. He knows that his readers are constantly bombarded by the temptation to compare themselves and so be jealous and selfish. He knows that when we are struggling with trials, this temptation is increased. So the first thing he is saying to his readers here is if you have these feelings in your heart, "do not boast and be false to the truth." No wisdom, especially the wisdom of meekness, can come out of a jealous and ambitious heart. This will put a wedge between us and God and between us and others, especially those nearest and dearest to us. These motivations are grounds for the charge of foolishness not confidence, much less pride and boasting.

The second way James seeks to encourage his readers who are wrestling with these temptations of jealousy and selfishness is to state clearly where this kind of "wisdom" comes from and where it leads. "This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish." The wisdom of the world which comes by way of comparison with others is really "anti-wisdom" as it leads to nothing but destruction and death. Yet, it is regarded as sophisticated, advanced, and mature. James is clear, however, that there is nothing good that can come out of our trying to justify our jealousies. This kind of thinking, or "wisdom" is from the world. It is not coming from our "Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."(1:17) James encourages his readers to turn away from all thinking that is hindering their receiving wisdom from their always good, loving heavenly Father.

"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." These are the fruits of worldly wisdom. And we have all seen and experienced the truth of this statement in our lives. There can be no good result when we are motivated to protect, advance, focus on ourselves at the expense of others. There is no security or peace in an environment where everyone is primarily concerned for their own interests. It is hard to find rest here! Being jealous of others, or selfishly ambitious is "a big deal" James says. Don't be fooled, but be wise. When we are preoccupied with these things we are, at that time, not enjoying, resting in, soaking in, our wonderful Father from whom "every good endowment and every perfect gift"(1:17) comes.

Now that James has exposed the true poison of worldly wisdom, he turns his readers attention again to the wisdom God gives. You notice he uses the same phrase "from above" here that he uses in the verse I partly just quoted: "...every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." This wisdom is part of the good and perfect gifts our Fathers wants to give us. God's wisdom is pure. God's wisdom is not double-minded. He gives us all one thing--Himself. As He enables us more and more to grow in wisdom, more and more we are filled with His one real life. This perfection He is working out in us is a perfection where there is no longer any double-mindedness in us either.

Wisdom from above is peaceable. When we know and live in the truth that we receive our lives and identities from God, then we have nothing to prove, or manipulate for here. We can be in His peace and so be peaceable. God's wisdom is gentle, not violent. God's wisdom is open to reason, not threatened. And, the wisdom from above is "full of mercy and good fruits."

This wisdom is from God because this is God. James is describing the wisdom that God has first towards us! This is who He is: pure (not double-minded), peaceable (Christ is our peace), gentle ("Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."Mt.11:28-29), open to reason ("Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord"Isa.1:18), and good fruits ("Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures."1:18--not to mention that He is the Creator, and all the good fruits of this world are His), without uncertainty and insincerity ("the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change"1:17). How wonderful God is! He is wise in all these ways towards us, and His implanted word in us, that we are to receive with meekness, is at work to share His very heart with us.

C. Group 3: Read James 4:1-10

Adultery and Pride

"What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you?". James answers his question with a rhetorical question, "Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?" The wars or conflicts between us are due to our passions that are at conflict. James can be referring to have conflicting interests or concerns between us and others around us. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is due to a conflicting passion for the same land. But, he is also referring to the conflict within ourselves. We have warring passions within ourselves. The desire for success, security, well-being, wealth, possessions, good relationships, etc. can all battle within us for

supremacy especially if the fear/anxiety factor is high. Our desire for both intimacy and independence from others can lead us to send mixed messages because we are mixed ourselves as to what exactly we want from this or that relationship.

Our passions or desires tempt us to believe we need to possess, obtain, or control in order to have peace. But these lead instead to destruction and discontent. "You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war." As we have noted before, James is writing to people who find themselves in a variety of trials due to being forced from their homelands because of persecution. Obviously, when we are in difficult circumstances, our desires for peace, well-being, good relationships, success, etc. are not being met by our immediate circumstances. We desire, covet, or envy and cannot have or obtain. So our solution is to kill, to destroy, or to fight others.

I think we can expand James' statement about killing beyond actually taking someone else's life. Our envy of others can lead us to kill our relationship with them, to gossip about them to others in an effort to "kill" their reputation, or simply to "kill" our feelings towards them because we are so unhappy that they have it better than we do. It is impossible to be peaceful and content when envy and jealousy are at work in us.

"You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." The reason they do not have, James says, is not because they have failed in their efforts to obtain or possess things on their own, but because they either have not asked or have asked only to have their passions satisfied. This seems to mean then that first of all God intends for us to receive what we need by asking Him. He is our Father and the One from whom "every good endowment and every perfect gift" comes from (1:17). He can be thoroughly trusted to know what we need, even more than we know. He is "the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Does He see us in our struggles, does He care? Yes, James has already assured them that this God "brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures."(1:18) The greater glory God has for us is that we receive from His hand His loving, transforming work in our lives. We cannot easily receive from God what He desires to give us when we are busy attempting to obtain or fulfill our own passions. How can we receive His peace, love, and even joy in the midst of our daily lives when we are focusing on pursuing getting from others what we are convinced we need to be secure or to escape our troubles?

Secondly, James is telling his readers that God is not to be viewed as merely a means to their own ends. God will not give to us when we are only going "to spend it on (our) passions." God's desires for us His children are so much richer, deeper, greater than what we have in mind in our more immediate concerns. He intends nothing less than we be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"(1:4) and to "receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him."(1:12)

James now sums up the point he has been making in the last three verses. "Unfaithful creatures! 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." James is not saying here that we should not care for others in the world or reach out to them, obviously. The friendship of the

world that he speaks of here he has already defined as having passions and desires that you seek to obtain by manipulative and destructive means motivated out of envy and jealousy and distrust in God. The world is that realm where we live without confidence in a heavenly Father and so attempt to gain power, authority, success, or respect through our own ungoverned abilities used against or in competition with others. Such persons count only on themselves, believing it is up to them to get themselves ahead of others. This is why James calls his readers "unfaithful creatures." They are living as if they have been abandoned by their heavenly Father, as if He isn't there, isn't good and able to transform them and love them in the midst of their lives here. This warning is the same as Jesus' words about the impossibility of serving two masters.(Mt. 6) If we are counting on ourselves, then we cannot be counting on God and therefore are unable to receive what He is ready to give us. We misrepresent our generous heavenly Father to ourselves and others when we let our jealousy and greed get the better of us.

James follows this with a rhetorical question. "Or do you suppose it is in vain that the scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit which he made to dwell in us'?" Do you think, he asks, that it is just idle talk when the Scripture says that God yearns jealously over us? In other words, God is not neutral about us and what we do. God created us, with our best in mind, and He is passionate about seeing that His good will is done. He hates our destructive tendencies because He loves us, wholly and completely. He hates to see the twisting and destruction of His good creation and one part or person turning against another. He will not stand idly by, content for us to do "whatever" with our lives when He knows that He has so much better in mind for us. He is for giving us life and will oppose our attempts to pursue what in the end only brings death to us and our relationships. God is jealous over us, ready to protect us and resist those forces that would come between us and Him.

Counting on God again involves turning aside from your sinful distrust and drawing close to God. James tells his readers to "resist the devil and he will flee from you." This is a wonderful statement. When we are struggling with anxiety, fear, or guilt about our lives we listen easily to the devil's voice about ourselves and our situations. But James is saying this is not a hopeless circumstance at all. If we resist the devil, he will flee. We do not need to listen to his accusations and lies endlessly. And, as we turn from the devil we can draw near to God. He is always ready to draw near to us and will not leave us alone. We can know His presence and His comfort. We can receive again His grace. We can count on Him to never be far away, but always at hand, ready to draw close to us when we turn to Him.

James continues to deal with submitting to God in the next few sentences. "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection." God wants to enable us to see the truth not only of Him and the wonderful life He offers us but also the truth of sin and its destructive, twisting consequences. Sin leads to nothing good. There is not another, equally good life out there for us to have apart from God. God is life, all life, good, abundant, full life. When we attempt to get our own way, there is always a destructive cost. We have hurt others and ourselves in our attempts to control and possess. Repentance is agreeing with God about the grievous nature of our sin and its consequences. We need to see the folly and impossibility of continuing to purposely live in two minds. We cannot receive from God when we are out to take care of ourselves on our own. We are very reluctant in general to consider the nastier motivations

and actions in our lives. But James is encouraging his readers to do this very thing. Not in order to beat themselves up with it, but to gain a true perspective of the emptiness of a life without our Father in heaven. There is a good Godly grief that can lead us to thanksgiving and praise for what God is doing to make us His children who are complete and lack nothing in Him.

Instead of exalting ourselves, maneuvering and positioning ourselves to look better before others, James encourages us finally to humble ourselves before God. And the most amazing and awesome result will come of this--"and he will exalt you." God desires not to keep us from exaltation, but to be the one who exalts us! And isn't it more glorious, more wondrous to be exalted by God Himself than to have to spend my time and effort trying to exalt myself? or trying to somehow get others to do it to me? How much more secure, satisfying, peaceful, and life giving to receive from God all He desires to give us, ultimately to receive His very self, than to try and give myself out of my meager resources life and peace and security.