

***Where Do You Get Your Values?***  
**A Sermon on James 3:13-4:10**  
**Proper 20**  
**September 23, 2018**

**Introduction**

I have a mixed reaction to today's text from James. I love what he has to say about wisdom from above and contrasting it with wisdom from below. Wisdom for James is about the virtues that come to us from God. He contrasts those virtues with those that come from the world. I struggle, though, with his negative attitude toward the world. It almost sounds like tribalism to me, especially in today's social and political culture.

James raises fundamental issues that we still struggle with about where we get our values.

**First Move: Wisdom from Above**

James is known as a letter about works, but he focuses more today on wisdom than works. It is not so much works or deeds that he is concerned with as the integration of thought, beliefs and action.

He asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it from the way he lives. Are his deeds based on gentleness?"

We expect the same thing today from our faith leaders. They are not in a position to make moral exhortations unless they practice what they preach. We want leaders who have integrity.

Commentators are not sure what is the context in which James is writing, whether he is addressing pastoral problems in a specific community or whether he is making statements that apply generally to all followers of Christ.

Wisdom for James is about virtues. Where do you get your virtues from? Gentleness comes from God. Gentle people are content with what they have. They see life as a gift from God. They are not envious of other people's possessions. Envy is a virtue from below. People who are envious and self-seeking see life as a competition for scarce resources. People in the ancient world thought that the economic pie didn't expand. For me to get more, someone else has to get less. I have to take from someone else. Life is about competition not grace. Competition results in fights and quarrels not gentleness.

James lists the virtues that come from above. The first is purity. That means purity from the world, single-minded devotion to God. The other virtues are being peaceful, yielding, obedient, full of mercy and good fruits, nonjudgmental, without hypocrisy.

People who embody these virtues will be righteous, which means being in right relationship with God. The ones who make peace will know peace. It sounds a lot like the Beatitudes.

If your wisdom comes from below, you will not know peace. Your life will be marked by quarrels and disputes. Where does this unrest come from? From your desire for pleasures. You are not content with what you have. You want more. You will never be satisfied.

James uses hyperbole. “You desire and you do not have, so you murder.” The commentators doubt that the members in James’ community were killing each other. They may have been seeking status instead of possessions. They saw status as a limited good. For me to get more status, you have to get less. I can elevate myself only by putting you down.

People who are filled with envy pray for the wrong things. If they pray for more status, they are praying wickedly. God will reject their prayers.

James calls his listeners adultresses. He is scolding his audience. This was typical of the diatribe, a Greek style of rhetoric. Paul uses it, too. Adultress means unfaithful one. James is drawing on the Old Testament background that describes the covenant as a marriage between God the husband and Israel the wife. Israel’s chief sin is idolatry, being unfaithful to the covenant. James would say they are worshiping mammon instead of God.

They are friends with the world instead of friends with God. In the ancient world, friends were thought of as sharing all things with each other. That included sharing the same outlook on reality. Friends share the same ideology. A friend of the world is an enemy of God.

James’ outlook on reality is apocalyptic dualism. Life is a struggle between the forces of good and evil. He sees it as no contest. If you submit to God, the devil will flee. The devil is no match for God.

James concludes today’s text with a call for conversion. There are 11 imperatives in the last four verses. James sees conversion as the work of a lifetime. He would reject the idea of once saved, always saved. The wisdom from below is always reaching out to us. It is tempting. It is in the water. We always have to be on guard against it.

James reassures us that if we draw near to God, God will draw near to us. We need to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. Hands are symbolic of our deeds and actions and the heart is the seat of our will. “Lament and mourn and weep.” Again, it sounds like the Beatitudes. Don’t worry about status in the eyes of the world. If you accept your humble status, God will lift you up.

## **Second Move: Rejecting the World?**

James brings front and center a problem that runs through much of the New Testament. Do we have to reject the world to be a Christian? Do we have to reject American culture? Western culture? The Enlightenment?

Many of the early followers of Christ thought so. The desert fathers fled to the desert. They thought that after Rome adopted Christianity, the faith was being degraded. When we read books on mysticism on Wednesday nights, some of you struggled with it because you believed that monks and nuns who practice mysticism were advocating that we withdraw from the world.

Our context today is different from the first century. The earliest followers of Christ were a tiny minority. They were part of a larger group of Jews that were oppressed by the Romans. They had no power or status.

American culture today is an Anglo Protestant culture. The settlers and founders of the American colonies were largely English Protestants. The American political culture is founded on English political beliefs and institutions. American social values were based on Protestantism. To the extent that America had civic religion, it was an Anglo Protestant religion.

That civic religion is breaking down today. Recognizing that America was founded as an Anglo Protestant culture certainly doesn’t mean that only English Protestants qualify as Americans today. We do recognize, though, that many of the values that American culture embraces are Protestant values.

Wisdom from above encourages us to be peaceful, yielding, obedient, full of mercy and good fruits, nonjudgmental, without hypocrisy. Americans generally embrace those values. Whether we practice them is another thing.

Americans also embrace values that James would call wisdom from below. Proponents of free-market capitalism believe that competition is a good thing. Envy and the desire for status is part of our consumer culture. James would say these values are demonic.

Most Christians today don’t share the apocalyptic worldview of many of the writers of the New Testament. We are not an oppressed minority that puts all our hopes on the second coming of Jesus to put things right.

We are still counter-cultural, but we don't reject the culture. As Walter Wink says, "The Powers are good, the Powers are fallen, the Powers must be redeemed."

Too many progressives seem to share this apocalyptic worldview. America is on the verge of fascism. Climate change threatens the extinction of the human species.

They have a cynical view of America. The powers have won. America is a corrupt capitalistic empire. It is founded on sexism and racism. They give the impression that America is irredeemable.

Political dysfunction is real. I don't want to minimize it. We talk in jest about moving to Canada or moving to Norway. Yes, Canada and Norway do many things that America could emulate. Yet America for all its faults is still the most ethnically diverse country on the planet. Canada and Norway have their problems, too.

We can lament and mourn and weep about America. But we can't reject it. America is home. We would be in exile if we moved somewhere else.

### **Third Move: Discerning God Above and Below**

There is a balance. We take our values from God. We need prophets like James to remind us of the centrality of faith. We also need to look at the world with the eyes of love.

That means having faith with our eyes wide open. We need to recognize that the Bible itself has some issues. It can be tribal and patriarchal.

In our Wednesday Bible Study on Genesis, we talked this week about the story in Genesis 9 where Noah gets drunk. His son Ham finds him and uncovers his nakedness, whatever that means. Noah curses not Ham, but Canaan, the son of Ham. Why Canaan we don't know. Noah says that the descendants of Canaan will forever serve the descendants of Noah's other two sons. The main purpose of this text is to justify the slaughter of the indigenous people when Israel invaded Canaan. This text was used to justify slavery before the Civil War. Africans were considered descendants of Canaan who were destined to serve as slaves.

The Bible is not all good and the culture is not all bad. Americans have sacred political texts: the Declaration of Independence ["all men are created equal"], the Preamble to the Constitution ["we the people to form a more perfect union"], the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and MLK's *I Have a Dream* speech. We are still struggling to realize these political ideals.

These ideals are not rejected as wisdom from below. Christians look at the political through the lens of Biblical wisdom. These ideals are consistent with the belief that all people are children of God, blessed with unique gifts. The community,

the society benefits by creating a supportive environment that encourages the development of these gifts.

The breakdown of civil religion has left a vacuum. It is harder to agree on shared values. Progressives especially tend to think of themselves as part of identity groups instead of as part of the larger culture. They act as if a white male doesn't have anything to say to women or ethnic minorities. He can't speak to their lived experience.

We have a larger identity as Christians. Paul would say, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus."

We can and should listen to people who have long been oppressed and invisible. James says we should be yielding, tolerant, respectful of their perspective. They may reject Christianity because of the way that they have been treated by Christians. Surveys show that nearly half of LGBT folks have given up on church. More of them are unchurched in America than any other demographic group.

Christians can help redeem the culture by modeling the wisdom from above. No one will listen to us if they think we are shaking our finger and preaching to them. We model the wisdom from above by being good stewards of the gifts God has given us, by working in a community garden and going green at the church, by visiting the prisoner on death row, by teaching children at Caminante in the Dominican Republic. We model the wisdom from above by engaging the people that we meet and listening to them instead of arguing with them and insisting that our beliefs are superior to theirs.

## **Conclusion**

Christians have a shared set of values. They come from above. They ground us and give us a lens through which to look at the world.

If we come down off our city on a hill, we will see that the world shares many of those values. We also will see that some of the values that are lifted up by the Bible are demonic. God is above and below. The demonic is above and below.

Our faith journey is a continuing call to conversion. It is a continuing call for discernment, to hear God's still, small voice in unlikely places. Draw near to God, wherever you find God, and God will draw near to you.