

James 4A

- James' letter moves forward today into a discussion of wisdom
 - And as we begin, let's be clear how James moves from his earlier discussion of self-control over our tongue to a discussion of wisdom
 - The transition is really quite simple
 - First, remember that James is a letter about showing our faith through works in the face of tests or trials
 - And then remember that James 3 begins with a discussion of gaining control over ungodly speech
 - And now look at v.113

James 3:13 Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

- James moves his focus to those in the Church who try to show their "wisdom" and spiritual maturity simply with impressive words
 - Talking the talk but not walking the walk
 - Demonstrating wisdom through impressive oratory was the common style for both Greek and Jewish "wise" men
 - They equated wisdom with the ability to pontificate on weighty matters for hours on end
 - Or to engage in rhetorical arguments and debate with great skill
 - Or twist the meaning of words and turn them to their advantage

Like the story of an old miser who had no friends except his doctor, his pastor and his lawyer. Just before he died he asked these men to gather around him at his bedside. "I have always heard that you can't take it with you. But I want to disprove that theory," he said. "I have \$90,000 under my mattress, and when I die, just before they throw the dirt on me at my burial, I want you each to toss in an envelope with \$30,000 into my grave."

The three attended the funeral and each threw his envelope in the grave. On the way back from the cemetery, the pastor said, "I must confess. I needed \$10,000 for my new church, so I only threw in \$20,000."

The doctor then said, "I must confess too. I needed \$20,000 for a new hospital I was opening up, so I only threw in \$10,000." The lawyer looked at them both and shook his head. He then said, "Gentlemen, I'm surprised, shocked, and ashamed of you. I don't see how you could dare to go against that man's final wish. I'll have you know I threw in my personal check for the full amount!"

- So James asks the church who among you is wise and understanding?
 - Remember how James began the chapter?
 - He said we shouldn't press ourselves into a teaching role
 - Because then we risk a harsh judgment if our tongue convicts us in the course of leading and teaching wrongly
 - A teacher's role is ultimately one of conveying godly wisdom through words, and then backing up those words through godly living
 - And we must be able to live up to both standards
 - What we say must be godly and how we live it out must be equally godly
 - The Greek words for wise and understanding are important to understanding James' gist here
 - The word for wise means to have moral insight, or to discern issues of moral conduct
 - To know right from wrong and make judgments about what God considers proper
 - Understanding means having an expertise in something, like an intellectual
 - So to reword the opening of v.13, James is asking, "You think you can be a teacher or leader and speak for what God says concerning right and wrong? You think you're an expert in righteousness and godliness?"
 - And then to this question, James provides the challenge
 - James says, then show your wisdom and understanding through your good behavior in deeds done in humility
- Did you see the two parts to James' command?

- First, you don't practice wisdom and understanding through words alone
 - You can't just talk the talk...you must walk the walk
 - It's the same theme again: wisdom (like faith) isn't a concept, it's a way of life and it requires action
 - The Jewish Christians were still trapped in the Pharisaical pattern of giving others the lectures on holiness but without practicing it themselves

[Matt. 23:1](#) Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples,
[Matt. 23:2](#) saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses;
[Matt. 23:3](#) therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.

- So James says talking about matters of righteousness and godliness isn't the same as being godly or righteous
 - If we think we're wise in these matters but we can't bring ourselves to actually live righteousness in good deeds and behaviors, then we're fooling ourselves
 - Just like the Pharisees did
- Then secondly, James' commandment requires that we perform these deeds in gentleness of wisdom
 - The term in Greek means humility with a sense of submitting to God, Who is the source of all godly wisdom
 - Here again, true godly wisdom lived out is never prideful or arrogant or self-serving or rude or critical
 - It is gentle and loving and humble, reflecting the fact that our godliness was not a product of ourselves
 - We didn't figure anything out or create anything ourselves
 - We arrived at our station in life by God's grace
 - We are saved by God's grace and sanctified by His grace

- And in obedience we submit to His Spirit and demonstrate wisdom through submission to His will
- This opening verse sets the positive example for wisdom, and James uses the rest of the chapter to explore the opposite problem

James 3:14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

James 3:15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

James 3:16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

James 3:17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

James 3:18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

- Apparently, some leadership in the early Jewish church had been seeking for teaching or leadership positions out of selfish ambition
 - Of course, this kind of thing never happens in the church today (irony)
 - And when people seek for leadership or teaching positions out of selfish ambition, they inevitably become competitors in a race for recognition
 - And this leads to bitter jealousies and allegiances and various kinds of evil
 - James alludes to exactly this kind of rancor and disunity
 - He says in v.14 they are acting and speaking arrogantly
 - Lying against the truth
 - Arrogance is the inevitable result of selfish ambition and jealousies
 - We can easily imagine various men and perhaps even women seeking for positions in the church leadership
 - Biblical leadership always includes the expectation that leaders are also teachers of God's word (Titus 1:9; 1 Timothy 3:2)

- So these ambitious people began to compete with one another for who was the most wise in their knowledge of Scripture
 - They engaged in rhetorical debates, probably concerning the Law or prophecies concerning Jesus
 - Remember they didn't have any New Testament Scripture yet
- Then as one might gain an advantage over another, bitter jealousies developed
 - Men harbored anger and hatred against one another
 - Factions and camps resulted, one against another, each supporting their own leadership candidate or teacher
- As James says, this resulted in disorder within the body, and led to every evil thing
 - And the source for this degeneration within the church began with ungodly speech, driven by selfish ambition and arrogance
 - And it leads eventually to the disintegration of the Body
- James points out that this kind of wisdom is not from above
 - He uses the word wisdom in an ironic sense, because clearly it's not wise thinking
 - It's a kind of thinking that has a demonic source
 - James isn't suggesting that we are supposed to blame Satan directly for all these behaviors
 - It's not "The Devil made me do it"
 - But this kind of discord and evil traces back to the sin of Satan in the Throne Room and flows through the sin of Adam in the Garden to us today
 - We are acting in a way that finds its origins in the sin of Satan's pride
 - So when we say we want to serve God through a teaching role and then seek that role out of selfish ambition and arrogance, we aren't acting in a godly way

- We're actually acting in a satanic way, in that we are acting in sin
- And we lie against the truth
 - James says "the truth" here, which refers to the Gospel itself
- How do we "lie" against the Gospel when we act this way?
 - It's because we may be speaking the truth of the Gospel with our mouths
 - But by our sinful arrogance and selfishness, we tear down the Gospel by our actions
 - We are talking the talk, but we're not walking the walk
 - And unbelievers who watch us aren't dumb
 - They hear our words and then watch our sinful actions and they make the obvious conclusion
 - They may fail to believe our message because our actions declare it to be a lie
- James says true godly wisdom comes from above and yields a different set of behaviors
 - First it is pure – uncontaminated by fleshly, sinful desires and ambitions
 - If we feel a calling to teach God's people and lead in that capacity, we can know it is a godly calling by testing our ambitions
 - Are we as excited to teach a class of three as we are a class of three hundred?
 - Are we fulfilled by understanding God's truth accurately and sharing it with one person or do we need a large crowd?
 - Do we feel jealousy when another teacher finds something in Scripture we didn't find ourselves? Are we ever tempted to claim another's teaching as our own?
 - Can we change our mind about what we believe when God brings us a better interpretation through another teacher? Do we have a teachable heart even as we strive to teach others?

- Godly wisdom from above will always come with a purity of spirit that removes our personal ambition and makes God's glory and His word the focus entirely
 - Following from our pure motive, James says in v.17 that we will speak in a peaceable, gentle, reasonable way
 - Our speech as we teach should not be pushy, arrogant, entrenched, defensive, angry or confrontational
- Rather it will be full of mercy and good fruits
 - A teacher who speaks with the wisdom from above speaks from a perspective of God's mercy and grace
 - And the fruit of his teaching will be the ultimate measure of where his wisdom originates
 - Look first at the life of a teacher, to see if his wisdom has led to a godly life in his own walk
 - Is the teacher the kind of man he calls others to be based on Scripture?
 - Is his home life a godly peaceful home? Are his children respectful and obedient?
- The Bible gives us these tests because they tell us whether a man's teaching is rooted in wisdom given from above or a false wisdom that originates from a selfish fleshly source
 - I've met many people who aspire to teach the Bible and want their time in the spotlight
 - And in many cases they have a strong knowledge of Scripture
 - But they aren't operating in the Spirit and they display a kind of prideful, ambitiousness that speaks louder than their words
 - And it's reflected in their personal life and personality
 - And then James says look at the fruit of a teacher's ministry as a whole

- When they teach, are lives changed, men and women brought to faith, families and marriages restored, hearts strengthened to serve the Lord?
- Or does the teacher bring discord, factions, disputes, or ambivalence?
- Finally, James says a teacher operating with wisdom from above will remain unwavering in the presentation of the truth
 - Unwavering refers to teaching without prejudice or partiality
 - The teacher doesn't waver in his presentation of the truth simply because his audience is different and may not like what Scripture says in some sense
 - Unwavering is different than being unteachable
 - I can be unwavering and yet remain teachable so long as my changing views are informed from Scripture and not an external viewpoint or trend or fad
 - And so long as my motive remains speaking truth and not pleasing my audience or my own pride
 - It takes a strong mature Christian to admit they have been wrong in understanding areas of Scripture they previously felt was settled fact
 - It also requires a strong mature teacher to present the honest truth in the face of a hostile audience
 - Especially if that teacher looks to that audience for their financial support as pastor, for example
 - A teacher can't seek to be approved by the world or the carnal members of his audience, otherwise he will begin to waiver
- This idea bridges James into the first part of Chapter 4, where James raises a concern over how our faith is tested by our temptation to seek the world's acceptance

[James 4:1](#) What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?

[James 4:2](#) You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.

[James 4:3](#) You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

- The members of the church were quarreling, and James asks why? What's the source of this conflict?
 - It isn't from God and it isn't a proper or natural product of faith
 - The source, James says, is our flesh, or more specifically our fleshly desire for worldly pleasures
 - The source for the quarreling is their sinful flesh
 - I find this principle to be 100% true in my own experience
 - As I have been invited into different groups or churches from time to time, and I am exposed to church quarrels
 - I can always trace the discord to fleshly sinful desires to gain something that the world values
 - James doesn't name the specific worldly pleasures these believers were seeking after
 - Instead, he describes a general pattern of worsening behavior
- First, James says we lust
 - The word lust means sinful cravings
 - It might be a craving for attention or fame
 - Or for wealth
 - Or for power or control
 - We already learned how a Jewish teacher or rabbi would likely receive all these things as a result of holding a teaching position
 - So the problems began when people lusted for the earthly, worldly rewards that attached to these roles
 - Rather than seeking the heavenly rewards that God alone appoints to someone who desires to serve Him
 - And this lust then leads to "murder"

- In extreme cases, this is literally true, but that's not likely to be James' meaning here
 - He's speaking of murder in the same way Jesus did when he said if you harbor hatred in your heart, you have committed a sin equivalent to murder (Matthew 5:21-22)
 - The lustful desire leads to a sinful thought against others who stand in the way of us obtaining what we want
 - This is exactly the kind of quarreling James alluded to back in Chapter 3, and he repeats it in v.2
- Then James says they do not have these things they want because they do not ask
 - In the context of James' teaching overall, it's clear what they wanted
 - At least in part, they wanted to be in a teaching or leadership role or they had some other ambition or desire that had developed from a lust
 - And James says they hadn't asked, meaning they hadn't prayed to God and asked Him to grant them this thing
 - In Greek, the verb tense is a continuous action of not asking
 - They are continually not asking God, but rather they are always taking matters into their own hands
 - So a desire or lust begins a series of downward steps into sinful thoughts and actions...all done in an effort to gain something in their own power rather than asking God
 - But even when some do resort to prayer, they ask and don't receive because they ask with wrong motives
 - The Greek word for "wrong motives" means "in evil"
 - And their motive is to spend what they receive on pleasures
 - This phrase is the same phrase used to describe the Prodigal son's behavior when he wasted his fortune on debauchery

- James isn't speaking simply of spending in the sense of spending money, but more generally of wasting God's provision on satisfying our flesh
 - Who could expect God to honor such a request if He knows we are only going to use His gift to satisfy our evil desires?
- James isn't teaching on how to pray in such a way to get what we want
 - I say this because many come to these verses of James, quote them out of context, and then use them to make some point about how we are to pray if we are to receive what we want
 - While there is a mini lesson to be found here on the issue of prayer, it is only the one James himself is offering
 - That is, when we ask for something with an evil desire or motive, expect God to say no
 - That's all we can conclude about prayer from these verses
 - We can't take that truth and turn it backwards in an attempt to create a second principle
 - Specifically, we can't say that when we ask with sincere motives, we are guaranteed that God will give us what we want
 - It doesn't work that way
 - We still might not get what we ask for even if we ask with perfect motives
 - False teachers try to use this verse to explain why we don't get what we want when we pray (i.e., "You must not have asked with enough faith or the right motives, etc.")
- Instead of moving into a treatise on prayer, James is interested in addressing the larger problem in the church – seeking after worldly desires

[James 4:4](#) You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

[James 4:5](#) Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"?

- James draws his lesson from the Old Testament principle that God is a jealous God
 - And we are either friends with God or we are friends with the world
 - We can't seek after what the world values while at the same time leading a life that pleases the Lord
 - They are mutually incompatible
 - In fact they are so incompatible, if we try to have a good relationship with the world, we are cheating on our relationship with God
 - We are adulterers
 - This is the principle of the Old Testament as it described Israel's disobedience to God's commandments
 - Israel was an adulteress to God
 - And now James says individual believers repeat this mistake as they "cheat" on God in pursuing worldly lusts
 - James says it powerfully in v.4: whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God
- How sad it is that James' counsel to the first century church is so relevant today
 - How many churches are in turmoil because people are repeating these same errors
 - Seeking to display their godly wisdom through speech rather than through actions
 - Relying on an earthly source for their thinking and displaying a life of sin built upon the world's wisdom
 - Giving in to their fleshly lusts and seeking after worldly pleasures, even to the point of asking God for opportunities or blessing simply to feed their fleshly desires
 - Quarreling with one another, hating one another
 - And through all of this, lying against the truth
 - I so hope that James' letter will cause each of us to reflect on our own motives and behaviors so that we might present a better witness