

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“What’s Comforting Here”

James 3:13—4:10

9/23/18b

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

4 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”?

⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:

“God resists the proud,
But gives grace to the humble.”

⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

- James is an epistle containing quite a large amount of rebuke. We heard it in our text. God’s servant James calls his readers out concerning their “bitter envy and self-seeking” which they have in their hearts (3:14). He points to the prevalence of fights among them: “You lust, you murder, you fight and war” (4:1-2), James charges. He minces no words: “Adulterers and adulteresses!” (4:4)

James calls them. And remember, James was written to Christians! And it is good to remember that—and comforting.

- There’s comfort in knowing that Christians have always been found to have much sin remaining in their lives (because it means that we with our own bitter envy, self-seeking, lust, and fighting are not different or worse than Christians before us).
- But James’s message to Christians is not, “Sin’s no big deal.” No, James teaches his readers to take sin seriously.
 - We should be clear on the origin of sin. The impulses to sin derive not from God but from the devil and our fallen flesh (3:15). God does not tempt us, prompt us, or lead us to sin, no. Our enemy the devil is the culprit, who seizes on the weakness of our flesh which is corrupted by original sin. For his readers then and now, James wishes the wickedness of sin to be clearly recognized.
 - We should also be clear on the consequences of sin here and now: Envy and self-seeking do not have happy outcomes; they lead to “confusion and every evil thing” (3:16). Wars and fights arise from our lusts and covetousness—our idolatry in short. We seek security in the wrong god! We seek pleasure in the wrong places. Many examples could be cited of how this all plays out in our homes, where we work and learn, and in our church. With false worship and misplaced faith inevitably comes fighting between people.
 - And James furthermore wants to show that we need an undivided devotion to God: “Do you not know...?” (4:4) How many of us are right now trying to ride the fence, sharing with the world our heart’s devotion that is due only to the one true God? How many of us, in pursuing our wants and desires, bother to pray? How many of us pray rightly?
- James points us to God alone as the remedy. “But He gives more grace” (4:6).

- James does not make the mistake of teaching the Christians that it is on them to resolve their problem, to heal their sickness. How can one prone to sin hope to overcome sin? “We cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition” (*LSB* p. 203). If left to ourselves, we are doomed—*doomed*. The Law humbles!
 - Only God, to whom we must turn, can help. For God is He who “gives more grace”. God gives grace that is always greater than our sin, so that the penitent sinner can find enduring comfort in the promise of the Gospel.
 - Instructed by James (4:7) the Christian submits to God—we confess that God’s judgment about our sin is true, we close our mouths in acknowledgement of our guilt. When God thus brings us to note and fear His well-deserved anger against our sin, *it is then that God’s grace flows and overflows to us. God “lifts [the humble] up” (see v. 10)—and not just a few feet, but all the way to heaven. This happens on account of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross as our Savior (yes, as the entire world’s Savior, the entire human race’s Savior) we are lifted up with the joy of forgiveness and eternal life when we believe in Him.* From here a new life follows. From this faith which believes the Gospel, true wisdom and understanding are born (3:13). And “the fruit of righteousness” is sown (3:18).
- CONCLUSION/APPLICATION

You know, it’s comforting to know that in our struggle with sin we’re not alone, this is nothing strange or new. James’s readers way back when, they struggled with sin in big ways.

But it’s far more comforting still for us to know the other truth going on here. James’s readers by faith in Jesus Christ also experienced the lifting up which James writes about, whereby God through the power of the Gospel lifted every believer up into the joy of His forgiveness, His grace.

James’s readers who were prone to bitter envy, self-seeking, lust, murder, failure to pray, wrong-minded praying, loving the world rather than God...all these sins...James’s readers were kept by the Holy Spirit in repentant faith. As they struggled with ongoing sin in their lives, they were at the same time greatly comforted by the forgiveness that God promised them in the Gospel, for Christ’s sake. They believed God’s Word and were daily consoled by the God who “gives more grace”. They were daily lifted up to know that in Christ their sins were forgiven.

I mean, James himself knew all this very well, personally! James, the writer of the epistle, is believed to have been the brother of our Lord. And do you recall that there was a time when the Lord’s family was not on His page, not with Him? John 7:4-5 talks about this. Jesus’ brothers, which would include James, said to Him: “No one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” And John adds: “For not even his brothers believed in him” (v.5).

Look at that. James was once...an unbeliever! But by the grace of God James was brought to saving faith.

Just like us!

And James, with his readers, *just like us*, experienced the happiness that comes when “the wisdom that is from above” (3:17) descends upon us and fills the hearts and minds of God’s children. This wisdom, God’s wisdom, is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy”. Whereas the “earthly” wisdom causes confusion and every evil thing (v.16), the heavenly wisdom from God results in better things—the fruit of righteousness...peace...and James, James’s readers, and Christians like us enjoy these things.

There is comfort—God’s Gospel comfort for you, in Christ!

And thanks be to God for such comfort that He shares with us this day.

In Jesus’ name! Amen