7-21-24

James 4:1-10 (1)

At the beginning of chapter 3, James admonishes the people of the church that they must be very careful with their tongues. They must tame it because it is a wild thing that is restless evil. It is a tool of satan. He transitions into a discussion of wisdom and the difference between worldly wisdom and the wisdom that comes from above.

These two wisdoms are very important with regard to the tongue. Earthly wisdom will use the tongue with all its destructive power for selfish motives. Wisdom from above is what is required to tame the tongue. And with the wisdom from above, the tongue can then be used for godly purposes; to glorify God and to increase the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

The last two verses of chapter 3 speak of the godly use of the tongue when it is controlled by the wisdom from above. It is pure and peaceable; this is the goal of any Christian congregation. If the Holy Spirit bestows wisdom on the people and the people are receptive to it, then a congregation can have a peaceful existence in brotherly love for one another. In this atmosphere, worship flows and is acceptable to God. Pray for God’s grace upon this congregation, so that we may produce the fruit of righteousness sown in peace.

Apparently the churches James was writing to did not have this concept well in hand as he begins chapter 4 with: *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?* The churches were not experiencing the peace that ought to be within a Christian congregation. It is also important to note that if these kinds of quarrels and infighting are going on, a church body will not grow. It will not grow in numbers and, more importantly, the people will not grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Here is something solid for us to do as this church congregation. Pray for wisdom; ask God for the wisdom that comes from above for He will happily give it to us. Love each other. This is a love that comes from decision. It is obedience to a commandment of Christ: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* (John 13:34) Notice that this commandment goes further than “*love your neighbor as yourself*”.

Much of our ability to have a peaceful congregation is rooted in forgiveness and holding others in higher regard than ourselves. In a church family, it is so important to follow what Paul tells us in Philippians 2:4, “*do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*” All of these things are actions that we can personally take to plant the seed in peace that will produce righteousness. All of these things are against our human-nature. That is why we need the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that is from above.

James asks the churches a question “*What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?*” Then he goes ahead and answers it for them. The problem is the pleasures, the desires, the wants, that the people have. There is a negative connotation here. These are selfish wants and desires. These are desires that folks are trying to get by worldly wisdom. These are wants stubbornly held onto for one’s own benefit or because they simply want things their way. These conflicts are easily avoided if we will only step back for a moment, ask for wisdom from above, give serious consideration to the other person’s idea, and honestly consider whether the ultimate outcome really makes any difference.

There are times for conflict. If a wolf makes its way among the flock and starts leading them astray, it must be driven out. If heresy takes root, it must be dug out entirely; better yet, yanked out before it takes root. Any teachings that stray from the Bible must not be accepted. Any groups that deny God’s word must not be allowed into fellowship. There are really very few hills worth dying on; but so often it is our fallen nature to make one up, and desperately wound a body of Christ.

That our pleasures wage war in our members has two levels: the members of our own bodies and the members of the body of the church. If we want something to the point that it can be called “lust”, then that has become an evil desire; even idolatry. That desire will wage war on our soul. It will stunt the growth of our spirit. And Christians are not immune to this. We must always be on our guard, wearing the full armor of God, so that we may resist the snares of the devil. And so that we do not give in to the sinful desires of the flesh.

Often these desires are for something we don’t have and that someone else does. It may be possessions or it may be position. This leads to envy and envy is a very destructive force. It is destructive to the person controlled by it; but it will also infect a church. This is where war is waged among the members of a congregation. It will bring about quarrels and infighting; factions; and eventually a split or the destruction of the church. All easily stopped, if we individually and corporately seek the wisdom given by God and apply it.

In verse 2, James delves into lust and envy; and of course, lust leads to envy. These are people who desperately want something and in turn, they develop a hatred for someone else who has what they want. Worldly wisdom will work to remove someone who has what we want so that we can move into their place. The wisdom from above will be glad for the one who has and will be content with our own God given gifts. James doesn’t go into what he is specifically thinking of here, but a good guess might be the office of teacher. James has already warned against desiring the office of teacher for any but the purest of reasons. Simply desiring the status that comes with the position is not good.

James makes a statement here that ought to get our attention and that is that the lust and envy lead to murder. How do we take that word “murder”? Actually, a very good case can be made for actual homicide. Considering the times James wrote in, the honor culture, the Gentile areas that the churches were located, and an attitude of getting rid of problems by killing someone, we may very well be looking at literal murder.

Another possibility is to look at it through the lens of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In our day and age and in this culture, I think this would apply more to us than outright murder. In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus teaches: *“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”*

Jesus is looking at an anger that attacks another person. The name calling indicates a degrading of the person rather than the offensive action they have committed. This is not correcting a brother in love. The other thing here is an escalation. Anger, if left unchecked, will eventually lead to actual murder. That is the natural progression of fallen mankind and it leads to the consequences Jesus mentions. Hopefully, a Christian will deal with anger long before it gets to this point. A Christian’s belief in Jesus will probably keep them from breaking the sixth commandment.

The problem that so often takes place in churches is that an individual will allow the lust, envy, and anger to grow. It will lead to them causing problems for one person or group in the church. It will lead to them starting a faction. Ultimately, it is satan working his plan to destroy a church body. As much as we would like to believe that this doesn’t happen in Christian congregations, it does. Unchecked envy and unloving attitudes toward others will break up a church; it will also mess up individual lives.

James continues: he has told them the source of their infighting is that they don’t have what they want; now he tells them the two-fold reason they don’t have what they want. First, they don’t ask. They don’t get down on their knees and ask for God’s guidance. We all get ideas for how things ought to be at church. We all get ideas on what we would like to do for the church. The first thing we ought to do is run our ideas by God to see what He thinks. This is where we ask Him for wisdom and then earnestly seek His answer.

The other part of wisdom from above is a willingness to listen to input from other Christians. God will dispense wisdom through His people. Proverbs 25:22, “*Without consultation, plans are frustrated, But with many counselors they succeed.*” This is where the different members of the church body work together with their different gifts to bring glory to God and edify the saints. To seek counsel and run your ideas past someone requires humility. Pride is also a factor in causing lustful envy.

The second part of the two-fold reason that they don’t have what they want is because they ask but with wrong motives. When we ask God for something, we must seriously look at the motivation that is in our hearts. When we look for our motivation, we must keep in mind that the Bible tells us our hearts are desperately sick and that we can’t understand them. That’s a difficult quandary; that’s why we need to seek the wisdom from above.

The people that James is writing to ask for things that will fulfill their own lusts. As he goes on to point out, they have become very worldly and hope to use God to obtain things in this life. And this is the verse that should put a stake in the heart of what is called the prosperity gospel.

The prosperity gospel picks verses out of the Bible in isolation, then claims that we can have health and wealth and happiness. It claims that we can name whatever we want and claim it as ours and it will come to pass, based on God’s promises. One example is John 14:14 where Jesus says, “*If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.*” All by itself, that sounds like a blank check for anything our evil heart desires.

As our verse 3 here in James points out, everything must be taken in the context of the whole Bible. God’s promises are for His glory and for our good when we are His. Embodied in that is that when we are His, our desire is for Him and His will. As His children, when we ask for something, it will be in accordance with His plan.

Allow me a moment to reflect on our particular church congregation for a moment. This church has been in existence for well over 100 years. Give God the glory for that; Jesus said that He would build His church. This church has experienced some rough times, including some splits. One was necessary due to a failure of leadership to maintain sound doctrine, a couple were because wolves got in, and once because someone insisted on their own way. This last example is closest to what James is talking about and is the case that came closest to closing the church doors.

The fact that this church is still in existence is a testimony to the power of Christ; again, He will build His church. However, as is obvious from the seven churches listed in the book of Revelation, none of which exist now, the Lord will remove the candlestick of a church that doesn’t follow Him.

I delve into these things now because I think that this church is doing fairly well: We seem to be stable, people are coming through the doors, folks are growing in their walk with Jesus. So, this is no time to relax. This is a time when we might let down our guard; we can’t do that because satan never stops his attacks.

Pray for the church. Ask God’s wisdom for the leadership and all the people. Watch out for wolves without forgetting your first love. Choose to love your brothers and sisters in Christ; even if they annoy you. If you annoy someone, stop it. If you notice the least bit of envy in your heart, confess it to Christ and repent. Be humble; and watch your tongue.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we are so susceptible to the alluring call of the world; the pull of the desires of our flesh are strong and always at war with the spirit You have given us; satan temps us with things that are not ours and we have no business wanting. We would like to think that these things only affect us outside of the church; but they are here too.

And in Your church, giving in to these temptations and lusts hurts Your body; Your beloved bride. Jesus, You are working to perfect Your bride; that we may be presented spotless before You. Give us discernment Lord, that when these worldly desires overtake us, we would turn to You in confession and repentance. May Your Holy Spirit illuminate our wrong desires and bring us into the light of Christ; for His light dispels the darkness.

Blessed Jesus, thank You for salvation. Thank You for this church body. We lift up prayers for it today. Please do not remove our candlestick, but nourish us with wisdom from above; give us courage to follow You; shape us into the living stones that can be an acceptable temple for our God.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen