

Wisdom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 June 2024

Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

- [0 : 00] If you have your Bible and want to follow along, go with me to James chapter 3. James chapter 3.
- By now you can probably read through this letter and see the underlying problem that James is addressing. And it becomes even clearer in this passage.
- James is writing to Christians who are not singularly devoted to God. Now he does assume they are Christians.
- You may remember from the first chapter when he says, God gave us birth by the word of truth. And he calls them brothers throughout this letter.
- But he also confronts them with their lack of integrity. They are woefully double-minded in some very significant ways. Now some Bible commentators have observed that James sees pride as the underlying issue.
- [1 : 04] And there's a sense in which pride is always the underlying issue. But I believe it's even more accurate to say that James is dealing with a variety of problems that result from split personalities, if you will.
- In fact, as I read this passage, I want you to notice four ways these early Christians were divided. And I don't mean divided among themselves, though we did see that in chapter 2 when James dealt with the matter of favoritism.
- I mean they are divided within themselves. Their allegiance is torn between competing things. They have divided hearts. So let me give you those four ways that they're divided, and you'll likely see these divisions as I read the text.
- First, they are divided between heavenly and earthly wisdom. They are divided between true wisdom that comes from above and false wisdom that does not come from above.
- Second, they are divided between God and the world. They claim to have a friendship with God, but they are embracing the world as their friend.
- [2 : 22] And James says this amounts to spiritual adultery. Third, they are divided between themselves and their fellow Christians. And this is where we clearly see pride rear its ugly head.
- And fourth and final, they are divided between themselves and God's law. In other words, they want to determine for themselves what is right. They want to act as judges rather than obey God's law and submit to Him as judge.
- And I think you'll see these divisions as I read. This is James chapter 3, starting with verse 13. Who among you is wise in understanding?
- By His good conduct He should show that His works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth.
- Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder in every evil practice.

[3 : 39] But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from your passions that wage war within you? You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain.

You fight and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

You adulterous people. Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God.

Or do you think it's without reason that the Scripture says, the spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely, but he gives greater grace.

[4 : 40] Therefore, he says, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep.

Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. Don't criticize one another, brothers.

Anyone who defames or judges a fellow believer defames and judges the law. If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.

But who are you to judge your neighbor? Whenever I study the Bible, I always have three questions in the back of my mind. Who wrote this?

[5 : 45] To whom are they writing? And why did they write this? But the answer to that last question in particular is not always obvious. And James is a good example of that.

I would love to be a fly on the wall and see what is happening among these early Jewish Christians. Now there are some things we know. We can say with reasonable certainty that they were suffering to some degree.

I don't know whether persecution against them was physically violent at this time, but the world was certainly hostile toward them. Consider it a great joy, my brothers, when you experience various trials.

Many of these people are described as having humble circumstances in chapter 1. And in chapter 2, James says, Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court?

Don't they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you? Don't they? And yet, they were also, we know, experiencing internal strife.

[6 : 49] Maybe there was some confusion about why they were suffering and what to do about it. But people in the church, churches I should say, were readily listening to the word of God, but many of them evidently were not obeying it.

they were showing partiality, showing favoritism to the rich, and neglecting the poor. There were people who claimed to have faith, but showed little evidence of it.

Based on the start of chapter 3, you have men possibly fighting for prominent teaching positions. At the very least, we see everyone wanting to talk and no one wanting to listen.

And whatever they were saying was more destructive than helpful. So on the one hand, I am curious, as I read this letter, I would like to be a fly on the wall and see exactly what was going on in these churches.

I'd love more details. But on the other hand, I think, I can relate to everything James writes in this letter. I know what it's like to show favoritism.

- [8 : 01] I know what it's like to have a destructive tongue. I know what it's like to be proud and divisive. I know what it's like to hear the word, to say amen to it, and then not do it.
- I know what it's like to have a divided heart. In short, God didn't inspire James to write more specific details about their circumstances because we don't need them.
- He did not intend for us to peer back into the daily affairs of brothers and sisters in Christ who lived 2,000 years ago and say, man, look at them.
- Look how many problems they had. Look at what they're doing. That's terrible. No, I believe the Lord intends for us to examine ourselves and say, man, look at me.
- I have a divided heart. I'm fractured. My allegiance is torn. I have competing devotions in my life. Lord, make me whole.
- [9 : 08] But of course, we prefer to look at others, you know, and examine their problems. That's easier. That's far more pleasant than examining ourselves, which is why the subject of pride is so central to James' epistle.
- Listen to what David Gibson writes in his book, *Radically Whole*. What do you hate? Broccoli? Being cold or being hot?
- Working nights? Snow? Wind? Heights? Mushrooms? The last day of camp? The end of the holidays? Mushy peas? Tax returns? Choosing the wrong cue in the supermarket?
- What do you hate? Take it up a notch. Your car left damaged in the supermarket parking lot with no culprit in sight. Rising energy costs in property and school taxes?
- The meager value of your pension? Getting old? Still working at 65? What do you hate? Sexual abuse?
- [10 : 15] Child abuse? Racism? Abortion? Discrimination? Daily unfairness and gross injustice? Death? The good dying young from cancer?
- And the wicked living long into old age? Spread out across the spectrum, our hates range from bad to worse, and yet not one of them comes close to the thing that God hates most.
- Pride. We know that God detests sin and evil, but God's hatred of pride is everywhere in the Bible. That hatred for pride is pure, it is holy, and it burns with white-hot intensity.
- There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him. Proverbs 6, 16. Number one on the list is haughty eyes.
- What are haughty eyes? Well, they are proud or arrogant eyes. It's a proud look. Literally, the phrase refers to eyes lifted up, but they're not lifted up toward heaven in the sense that someone is looking to God sincerely.
- [11 : 26] Today, we might refer to someone with their nose in the air as a way to describe a proud or arrogant person. But more to the point, God hates our pride.
- It is detestable to Him. Stephen Charnock once said, pride is self-contending with God for preeminence. Jonathan Edwards wrote, pride is a person having too high an opinion of himself.
- Pride is the first sin that ever entered into the universe and the last sin that is rooted out. Pride is the worst sin. It is the most secret of all sins. There is no other matter in which the heart is more deceitful and unsearchable.
- Alas, how much pride the best have in their hearts. Pride is God's most stubborn enemy. There is no sin so much like the devil is pride. It is a secret and subtle sin and appears in a great many shapes which are undetected and unsuspected.
- So, it isn't terribly surprising to see pride lurking beneath the surface when we consider our double-mindedness. Now, there is no room for pride in the Shema.

[12 : 42] Loving the Lord, our God, with all of our hearts requires humility. As James expresses here, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you in a very real, in a very practical sense. Humility is the cure for a fractured heart.

So, James presents us with four divisions and he's asking, which side do you land on? Is your wisdom from above or not?

Are you a friend of God or a friend of the world? Now, we may try to be both but ultimately, we will land on one side or the other. As Jesus said, no one can serve two masters since either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

He cannot serve two masters. For example, a man cannot say he loves his wife if he's having an affair.

[13 : 50] He can't claim loyalty to his wife. He may say it. And he may act as though he loves his wife in some ways but the evidence is he does not love his wife.

It actually proves that he loves, it does not prove that he loves his wife and his mistress. It proves that he does not love his wife.

And when it comes to a married man, that's all that matters. Does he love his wife? And when it comes to God's people in the church, all that matters is do we love the Lord our God with all our hearts?

So the first potential division within us is heavenly versus earthly wisdom. Now notice the comparison James makes. Verse 17, The wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense.

Then verse 14, But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

[15 : 11] Now it's worth noting here that James defines wisdom, at least credible wisdom, true wisdom, in terms of actions. He says, Who among you is wise in understanding?

By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom. This is similar to what he says about faith in chapter 2.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Show me your faith without works and I will show you my faith by my works.

Like faith, true wisdom bears fruit. Specifically, verse 18, It bears the fruit of righteousness sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

Now, think about what was evidently going on among these early Christians, at least as far as we know. There's a divide between the rich and the poor.

[16 : 13] The poor are being neglected and ignored. men who believe themselves to be wise, perhaps wiser than others, are possibly competing with one another to be teachers.

No one wants to listen to anyone else. There's a degree of carnality among them. They say they love the Lord. They say they have faith.

They say they love His Word, but they're not obeying His Word. They're not doing the good works that Christians are called to do. Instead, they're all looking out for themselves.

They're self-absorbed. They're proud. And as a result, there's this bitterness and envy among them. And when you have a group of people who are proud and self-absorbed, only thinking about themselves, what is the most natural consequence of that as it pertains to the entire group?

Well, inevitably, you're left with a divided group. You're left with disorder. The group becomes severely fractured as everybody's just concerned with themselves.

[17 : 24] In 1662, Thomas Brooks and other ministers faced what became known as the Great Ejection in England. And many of them had an opportunity to preach farewell sermons and many of them have been recorded for us.

And when Thomas Brooks preached his message, he said, discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder.

But for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous. You see, those Puritan ministers weren't forced out of the church by outside parties.

they were essentially forced out by people in the church who also considered themselves Christians. We expect this kind of treatment of God's people from the outside world, but not from within the church.

Why? It's because this kind of treatment grows out of a so-called wisdom that James says is earthly and unspiritual and ultimately of the devil.

[18 : 37] It's demonic. The Great Ejection is a good example of that. I'm sure that those on the Anglican side of the divide felt that they were doing God's work just as the Pharisees once did when they crucified Christ.

I'm sure they felt there was wisdom in excluding the Puritans, but as Spurgeon once said, Satan greatly approves of our railing at each other, but God does not.

Jesus said, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God. Later, in the same sermon, he said, You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your father in heaven. For he causes his son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?

[19 : 50] Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect. Be perfect. Be perfect. Be whole, he says. How? By loving both your neighbors and your enemies.

By loving people the way God loves them. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind. Jesus said, this is the greatest and single most important command.

And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets depend on these two commands.

David Gibson writes, we show that our hearts are wholly committed to God by being the kind of people who, because of the gospel and through the gospel, try to do everything we can to live at peace with all.

So someone who has true wisdom, that is, wisdom from God, will not be motivated by selfish ambition.

[21 : 00] He or she will not be envious. He or she will not be a contentious person. True, godly, heavenly wisdom reveals itself through gentleness and mercy and peacefulness.

Now the second potential division within us is between God and the world. And it's here we see James use some of the strongest language yet.

Now here's what Gibson says regarding the first part of chapter 4. Division is present in almost every line. Believers are divided from each other in fights and quarrels.

Believers are in turmoil in their inner beings with passions at war within themselves. Sinful desires cannot be realized which in turn leads to a further escalation of conflict.

Verse 2. Here are people divided between having and asking either not asking God at all or asking Him for the wrong things. And in it all this behavior is in stark contrast to Abraham in chapter 2 who was called a friend of God precisely because his faith was alive and active as shown in his faithful works.

[22 : 19] Here however believers are not friends with God but friends with the world even as they profess allegiance to God. Christians who live like this saying one thing to God but embracing behaviors that belong to His enemies and do not resemble Him are adulterers.

as James digs down a bit deeper into the problem he's seen yes there is selfishness yes there is disunity yes there is pride but the heart of the matter is this verse 4 you adulterous people don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?

So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God or do you think it's without reason that the scripture says the spirit He made to dwell in us envies intensely? Listen James says whatever you think you are doing you are in reality choosing the world over God.

Notice the progression of verses 1 through 5 1st James says you're in conflict with one another what is the source of wars and fights among you?

Second he says you're in conflict with one another because you're in conflict with yourselves within yourselves don't they come from your passions that wage war within you?

[23 : 55] And third he says here's what's really happening you're in conflict conflict with God your friendship your close intimacy with the world is hostility toward God you're at war with God now you likely remember what the apostle John said about friendship with the world he also used pretty strong language do not love the world or the things in the world if anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in him for everything in the world the lust of the flesh the lust of the eyes and the pride in one's possessions is not from the father but is from the world and the world with its lust is passing away but the one who does the will of God remains forever you see there's a reason

James borrows language from the old testament here when he says you adulterous people I mean that paints a vivid picture doesn't it if anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in him again can the man who cheats on his wife say he loves his wife no it's absurd you don't love your wife your unfaithfulness shows you actually hate your wife what other conclusion could we come to and when we think about we think about this in these terms we're made to realize what a heartbreaking situation this is when Judah in the Old Testament essentially befriended the world and became unfaithful to God God said through Ezekiel you adulterous wife who received strangers instead of her husband now when we hear statements like that especially coming from

God Almighty we no doubt detect righteous anger and that was certainly present but do we sense the heart break well all we have to do is imagine how we'd feel if our own spouses were unfaithful to us it would be devastating in Romans 5 Paul said God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us we were unfaithful utterly undeserving of God's love yet he chose to love us so deeply that he sacrificed his son not only to save us but also to reconcile us to himself to bring us into this covenantal intimacy with himself and what do we find ourselves doing committing spiritual adultery with the world that's heartbreaking now to bolster his point

James says something in verse 5 that is a little confusing the csb words it this way the scripture says the spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely the esv words it a little differently it reads the scripture says he yearns jealously over the spirit that he made to dwell in us so there's a certain amount of confusion over how best to translate this but there's also the matter of the actual quotation this is not a quotation found anywhere in the Old Testament now I believe what James is doing here is citing a general principle taught in the Old Testament which everyone would have known rather than actually quoting a specific verse and I believe the esv probably has the better translation the scripture says he that is god yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us that god is a jealous god is explicitly taught in the

Old Testament do not make an idol for yourself whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or the earth below or the waters under the earth do not bow down to worship them do not serve them for I the lord your god am a jealous god god you know among some people god is decried as vengeful they say he's a god of wrath and anger but to them I say look a little closer at least twice he says I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather that the wicked person should turn from his way and live he wants nothing more than to shower his people with riches untold he wants to give and to give and to give he wants to bless us and all he's asking is that we be faithful psalm 84 11 says for the lord god is a sun and shield the lord grants favor and honor he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity just be faithful just be singularly devoted to him as you would your spouse that's it in short that's all he's asking for and yet even after we have shown our unfaithfulness verse six god gives greater or more grace as paul says in romans five where sin multiplied grace multiplied even more so much for the always vengeful angry god that some people imagine but we'll come back to this in just a moment let's consider the third potential division within us which is a division between ourselves and our fellow

[30 : 25] Christians this is something we've already dealt with we've seen it woven throughout this letter especially here in chapters three and four but you'll notice that James doesn't merely address the superficial side of the conflict among them he doesn't merely talk about the fact that there is conflict among them instead he gets to the heart of the matter which is the heart in chapter three he says for where there is envy and selfish ambition there is disorder then at the start of chapter four he says what is the source of wars and fights among you don't they come from your passions that wage war within you and then we see him provide a few somewhat hyperbolic examples of that you desire and do not have you murder and covet because you cannot obtain and so on you see before the conflict becomes external Christian against Christian there is internal conflict that is conflict within the individual

Christian and the conflict is a division between selfishness and selflessness while the Christian should be most concerned with his neighbor his flesh unsurprisingly wants to prioritize himself he exalts himself and he debases everyone else and while James has already written about the dangers of the tongue here in chapter 4 he adds this is verse 11 don't criticize one another brothers anyone who defames or judges a fellow believer defames and judges the law so now we have an even clearer picture of what was happening I mean this is a pretty ugly situation just imagine if James were writing this letter to us to our own church and said these very things now you can see why many commentators believe this epistle is really really about our pride there's a lot of pride in the hearts of these people and it's spilling over into conflict among them spilling over into nasty words said to one another and about one another but I love how

James once again throws this seemingly insignificant word brothers right into the middle of this yes pride is a real problem here but James is also alluding to their double mindedness in general brothers he says you are brothers in Christ you are those very sinners whom God loves so much that he sent his son to die for you while you were still his enemies so what are you doing criticizing and defaming one another is this is this what God intended for you when he saved you did he call you to hate one another the very people he loves don't you see the hypocrisy in what you're doing don't you see your double mindedness brothers yes pride is a major issue here it usually is but

James is also dealing with the absurdity of it all as he said earlier my brothers these things should not be this way we've seen it in every chapter it's as though James is asking do you not see how you are contradicting yourselves do you not see how divided your hearts have become in one breath you vow allegiance to God and you say you love his people and in the next breath you're disobeying God and you're speaking evil about his people my brothers these things should not be this way well lastly the fourth potential division within us is between us and God's law anyone who defames or judges a fellow believer defames and judges the law if you judge the law you are not a doer of the law but a judge there is one law giver and judge who is able to save and to destroy but who are you to judge your neighbor again

Jesus said love the Lord your God with all of your heart with all of your soul and with all of your mind this is the greatest and most important command the second is like it love your neighbor as yourself all the law and the prophets depend on these two commands so if we fail to love one another we are failing to keep the law in a massive way we're breaking no less than six of the ten commandments in a very real sense as James said previously if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the scriptures love your neighbor as yourself you are doing well if not well you are not a doer of the law but a judge of the law you are asserting your will over and above God's law exalting yourself to the position of supreme judge you are attempting to usurp

[36 : 13] God himself it's no wonder James encourages humility here quoting Proverbs 3 34 he says God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble then he says verse 10 humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you and in between those two calls to be humble he writes therefore submit to God resist the devil and he will flee from you draw near to God and he will draw near to you cleanse your hands sinners and purify your hearts you double minded be miserable and mourn and weep let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom if I may paraphrase James says humbly submit to God and to his wisdom and to his law stop listening to the devil who only wants to deceive you as he did

Eve back in the garden don't believe the lie that says you will be like God kill the pride that so easily rises up within you instead draw near to God in humility and repentance cleanse your hands sinners and purify your hearts you double minded you love the Lord but not with your whole heart and that's the problem and this is evident through how you speak and how you are treating one another and so on grieve over your sin don't treat it as some light thing sin is something that should make us miserable it's something that we should mourn and weep over but here's the good news God gives greater grace his grace is greater than all our sins God resists the proud yes but he also gives grace to the humble therefore

James says submit to God resist the devil and he will flee from you draw near to God and he will draw near to you humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you there's a part of us that wants to think and behave like the Pharisee who went into the temple to pray we want to think of ourselves as God pleasing religious people look at me I'm a Christian I have faith I'm wise we would never say it out loud necessarily but look how righteous I am but James says I am looking at you but I'm not seeing a righteous person I'm seeing religion that is useless I'm seeing someone who has deceived himself I'm seeing pride I'm seeing a divided heart I'm seeing double mindedness I'm seeing a desperate need for repentance well in addition to the

Pharisee Jesus said there was also a tax collector who went into the temple to pray but the tax collector standing far off he would not even raise his eyes to heaven but he kept striking his breast saying God have mercy on me a sinner and Jesus said I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but everyone who humbles himself will ultimately be exalted you see there is a way to mend our divided hearts what did Paul say what a wretched man I am who will rescue me from this body of death and how did he answer himself well I guess I'm stuck with it I may as well accept the fact that my heart is divided and always will be no that's not what he said he said thanks be to

God through our Lord Jesus Christ you know we sometimes sing the hymn that goes marvelous grace of our loving Lord grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured there where the blood of the lamb was spilled sin and despair like the sea waves cold threaten the soul with infinite loss grace that is greater yes grace untold points to the refuge the mighty cross marvelous infinite matchless grace freely bestowed on all who believe all who are longing to see his face grace will you this grace grace grace that will pardon and cleanse within grace grace God's grace grace that is greater than all our sin grace the antidote to our double mindedness is simply this

[41 : 43] God's grace not doing more doing something else trying harder but ultimately we will find our rescue in God we will find the cure for our divided hearts in God in his grace draw near to God and he will draw near to you let's pray heavenly father we are so very thankful this day and every day for the grace that is greater than all of our sins we're thankful to you and to your mercy to your loving kindness that does not leave us to ourselves but ultimately draws us to you through your son Jesus Christ and we thank you that as we face this ongoing conflict within ourselves the flesh and its passions waging war against the spirit and what we know is right and good that you are our help that all that you require of us is turning to you in faith in repentance we know that you are able to do what is impossible with us and that is mend our divided hearts sanctify us

Lord conform us to the image of your son increasingly as we go along we want nothing more than to be loyally devoted wholeheartedly loving you in all that we do help us to this end in Christ's name I pray amen do okay thank you and what is remember you