

Faith Matters More
September 19, 2021

James 3:13-4:8 (The Message)

13-16 Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

17-18 Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

4 1-2 Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it.

2-3 You wouldn't think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you'd be asking for what you have no right to. You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way.

4-6 You're cheating on God. If all you want is your own way, flirting with the world every chance you get, you end up enemies of God and God's way. And do you suppose God doesn't care? The proverb has it that "God's a fiercely jealous lover." And what She gives in love is far better than anything else you'll find. It's common knowledge that "God goes against the willful proud; God gives grace to the willing humble."

7-10 So let God work Her will in you. Yell a loud *no* to the Devil and watch him make himself scarce. Say a quiet *yes* to God and She'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before [God]; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.

Mark 9:30-37 (The Message)

³⁰⁻³² Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive." They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

³⁴ The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

³⁵ He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

³⁶⁻³⁷ He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."

In the preface to his translation of the New Testament, written in 1522, Martin Luther famously refers to the Letter of James—as a "straw-letter," or an "Epistle of Straw," as it is more often called. What he meant by this comment has been the subject of scholarly conjecture and debate for centuries and will probably remain so for some time to come. Curiously, the remark is missing from later editions of the Luther Bible, so perhaps Luther had second thoughts about his initial assessment of the letter.

But no matter how you look at it, the Letter of James is indeed a bit of an oddity in the New Testament canon. One commentary notes, for instance, that Jesus is mentioned only twice in the entire letter and then rather fleetingly. Little in the letter is specifically Christian, and much of the text is given over to advice and exhortation, not unlike that found in the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Scriptures—the Old Testament—or perhaps even the New Age literature of our own day. Thus, the letter has remained more or less an anomaly and on the back shelf of scripture study for centuries.

Luther was likely most uncomfortable by the letter's seeming emphasis on human wisdom and common sense—doing the right thing, we might call it—works, in other words, as opposed to faith. In James, it almost seems sometimes as if salvation could indeed be won by our own

efforts and action without Jesus or the Cross, which is tellingly not mentioned even once in the entire letter.

Luther's misgivings may have been justified.

Yet the truth is that most Christians of any age – in spite of what scripture tells them and us about the importance and centrality of faith – remain firm believers in works. We are all “Jamesians,” to coin a phrase. Deep down, most of us believe in salvation by works. We readily judge others by their deeds. Ask most any Christian today how they plan to get to heaven, and they will readily tell you that it is by trying to lead a good life and helping others. By works, in other words. Few will first cite their faith in the loving mercy of God and in Christ's redemptive death on the cross.

Meanwhile, we all want to get ahead in the world – perhaps not unlike the disciples in the gospel reading from today.

Asked by Jesus what they were arguing about along the way, they are at first silent but then sheepishly admit that they were arguing who among them was to be the greatest – who would achieve the most. There are probably few better examples in scripture of the allure of works and their presumed rewards over faith and its illusive promise than this telling admission from the closest followers of our Lord. No wonder “they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him,” when Jesus spoke of his impending death.

Perhaps the disciples just did not want to hear about it. Likely in their effort to become “the greatest” they were more comfortable matching good deed for good deed with their fellow disciples – as if the spiritual life were a sport or competition – rather than in thinking about the depth of their faith in our Lord, much less in his Cross, about which at this point they admittedly had only an inkling.

Anyway – they may have thought – how would you even measure and quantify faith? Surely, it is easier to count good works and keep a running tab. Perhaps it would be better for them, as some in our society today seem to advocate, to become totally self-reliant and ruggedly individualistic Apostles – with a capital “A” – than childlike and humble servants of all, concerned only for the needs of those less fortunate.

Still, as the medieval theologians remind us, faith builds on nature.

You must start somewhere. And at some level, we all begin with works. For most of us, including the disciples, this means somehow taming our own base instincts for self-defeating and self-destructive behavior. Where, in other words, do “conflicts and disputes” come from, James asks. Precisely from the “cravings” that are at war within each of us. That which comes from heaven, on the other hand, is in James’ words “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Human wisdom left to itself, James concludes, is too often “boastful and false to the truth” – seeking, not unlike the disciples, self-aggrandizement and recognition – to be the greatest.

He may not have been a great theologian like Paul – or Luther for that matter – but James has a common-sense grasp of the dynamics of the human heart. Works or no works, he appreciates that we must first “resist the devil ... and draw near to God.” We must *do* something. It is only then, he seems to tell us, that God will ultimately “draw near” in turn and approach us with the gift of grace and redemption.

Christ draws near us in his death and resurrection.

Our gospel account reminds us of this reality in our Lord’s own words to his sometimes-clueless disciples. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him,” he tells them and us, “and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” For Christians today, rising with Christ still means dying with him to self and “selfish ambition,” as James calls it.

It means finally putting all of our faith in the only “works” that matter: Christ’s own death and resurrection.

Amen