

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Humility That Comes from Wisdom

James 3:13-4:10

Now and then in his letter, James launches into some preaching. At the beginning of today's text, he asks the congregation a rhetorical question. "Who among you considers yourself wise and full of understanding?" He doesn't mean, "Have you mastered the Bible from cover to cover?" He doesn't mean, "Are you pursuing an online degree in theology?" He doesn't mean, "Have you studied the essential writings of the foremost Greek philosophers?" No, James is less interested in their education and more interested in their ethics. For him, wisdom isn't primarily about books. It's about behavior.

If you truly have wisdom and understanding, it will show up in the way you live your life. That's the essential point James wants to make as today's Scripture opens. A lot of what he sees happening in the congregation indicates that many people aren't as wise as they think. Or better yet, that they possess wisdom, but it's the wrong kind of wisdom. According to James, there are two options. There's the "wisdom that comes from heaven" (3:17). This heavenly wisdom produces traits such as purity, peacemaking, gentleness, mercy, fairness, and sincerity. Or there's earthly wisdom, which produces conduct such as envy, selfish ambition, strife, and division. This earthly wisdom is "unspiritual, of the devil," says James (3:15).

This isn't actually the first time that James has confronted the congregation about the ways it has adopted the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom of God. In the previous chapter, James criticized those in the church who show partiality to the wealthy. They love to hang around with those who show up on Sunday in fancy clothes, all the while neglecting those who are poor and whose appearance is shabby. Doesn't this just show that you're still hanging onto worldly views of power and importance rather than fully embracing God's point of view? Look at how you're acting. Your self-seeking pursuit of prestige and prominence shows that you are indeed wise, but your wisdom comes from below rather than from above.

When James talks about wisdom, he means more than just the possession of knowledge or a studious grasp of ideas. Most of all, he means a particular perception of reality, an understanding of the deepest truth about God and God's relationship with us, and the entire creation. This understanding of reality is ultimately a gift of God, a gift that has to be pursued in a spirit of humility. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (3:13).

The term translated as "humility" can also be rendered as "gentleness" or "meekness." It has to do with recognizing God's presence in the world and in our lives, acknowledging our dependence upon him, and yielding to his will for us. Humility helps us remember who we are and where we are within God's world and God's purposes. This particular virtue is crucial to a good and godly life, primarily because it's the antidote to our desire to govern ourselves and to live self-sufficient lives, independent from our Creator.

Many Christians are currently in the midst of observing Lent, a season which began on Ash Wednesday, when worshipers had ashes applied to their foreheads with the words,

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Though we're not as sure about the background of the Greek term, the Latin word for "humility" comes from the root word *humus*, from which we get the word *human*, as in God created humans out of the humus, the dirt and dust of the ground. So in order to understand ourselves, it's essential that we know that we are made, not self-made. We live our lives within the creative power of God and under the sovereign love of God. That's the basis for the virtue of humility.

Some of you may be familiar with the term "humblebragging." It's a way to disguise a brag with some humility, or maybe with a complaint. Examples include: "It's so annoying! I've lost so much weight that none of my clothes fit me anymore." "Don't you just hate it when you go somewhere and they can't break a \$100 bill for you." "Why do I always get asked to work on the most important assignment?" One columnist even notes how some humblebragging has become more direct and explicit. He cites a Tweet from the president of the European Central Bank: "I was humbled to be awarded an honorary degree by the London School of Economics earlier this week. Thank you so much for this prestigious honor!" No wonder the columnist concluded, "Humility is the new pride."¹

Maybe there are some humblebraggers in the congregation that James is addressing. They feel like they can have the best of both worlds. A strong sense of pride and self-promotion, concealed by a thin layer of humility. A lot of wisdom from below disguised by just a little wisdom from above. But James pulls the two apart in order to show folks in the congregation that they still have a long way to go when it comes to embodying humility and practicing the wisdom that comes from God.

James focuses on the virtue of humility because he's deeply upset and concerned about what the vice of envy is doing to their life together. "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (3:16). By tackling jealousy, James is trying to get at the root of the disruption and disunity that the church is experiencing. He knows that in order to reap a "harvest of righteousness" (3:18), the members of the congregation first have to sow the seeds of peace, rather than the kind of discord that's being planted through envy.

Editor Joseph Epstein wrote, "Of the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all." And research has backed up that claim. Psychologists have found that envy is tied to decreasing satisfaction with life, depression, and perhaps even physical illness. And these days, there's another illness in play, an emotional sickness that one therapist has called "comparisonitis." Comparisonitis is essentially a compulsion to compare our lives and our accomplishments to someone else's, particularly because of the presence and influence of social media. With the rise of technology, now we can not only compare ourselves to our neighbor, a coworker, a classmate, a family member, or someone at church. We can also see how our life stacks up against people across the world.

"Look at so-and-so's vacation photos. They must make a lot of money if they can travel to places like that." "Look at so-and-so's picture of their new waistline. That gym membership is certainly paying off." "Look at so-and-so's post about finally landing their dream job. They must have had all the right connections." "Look at so-and-so's certificate from the school awards ceremony. Another quarter of straight A's." "Hmm, I suddenly feel like my life pales in comparison. Makes me desperately want all they they've got, and more." As one author has summarized it, "Because we carry this unrealistic reality around with us in our phones 24 hours a day, and can access it at any time, the emotional force of envy grows exponentially."²

In today's text, James points the finger at those who keep checking their social media accounts during worship, worried that they might be falling behind someone else's lifestyle.

Granted, envy can have its nuances. Some contend that there's such a thing as benign envy, a kind of admiration that inspires you to work harder, dream bigger, and reach new levels of achievement. But James doesn't seem to be into subtleties. He's more focused on how malignant envy can be, especially within the community of disciples. Coupled with unrestrained passions and desire, envy generates fighting, quarreling, competition, and conflict. According to the logic of envy, resources are limited, so I need to acquire more, even if that means you have less. Being, after all, is a matter of having. A person's worth and value are a matter of what they've achieved and attained. Throw in the power of arrogance, and we can understand why James warns against trying to live by both the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world at the same time. It doesn't work.

No wonder James starts quoting Scripture. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (4:6). Because James knows God's word, he knows that God looks with favor upon the lowly, those who are less valued in the wisdom of the world. Maybe he had them in mind earlier in his letter when he said, "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (2:5). They're often further down the socioeconomic ladder. They often feel like the deck is stacked against them in this present world. Rather than being driven by arrogance and envy, they're receptive to God's gifts and reliant upon his power to lift them up.

"Submit yourselves, then, to God," says James (4:7a). Show that you're wise by following the path of the humble. Humility doesn't mean thinking of yourself as worthless, refusing to respond to mistreatment, or ignoring injustices done against you. Humility means following the downward way of gratitude for God's gifts and reliance upon his grace, such that you're more fully cleansed of envy, arrogance, and the drive to become greater in this world by acquiring what others have. I like the way that Joan Chittister puts it when she writes, "Humility is the admission of God's gifts to me and the acknowledgement that I have been given them for others. Humility is the total continuing surrender to God's power in my life and in the lives of those around me."³

Note how she emphasizes the *continuing* surrender of ourselves to the enabling grace of God. Conversion to the way of Christ is more than just an initial commitment. It's also a daily obedience to the way of the cross which our Lord followed in order to redeem us. As you and I reflect upon our own lives here today, we may not think of ourselves as people who are swollen with a sense of self-importance, or as people who are aggressively trying to climb the social ladder, steadily advancing according to the world's definitions of success. But that doesn't mean that we're free from the temptations of envy, arrogance, or competitiveness with others, including our brothers and sisters in the church. Every day, we live out our lives in the zone of conflict between the wisdom from above and the wisdom from below. This means we never stop needing the cleansing, purifying work of God's Spirit in our lives, forming us into the humility of Christ himself.

One person has summarized humility as "a spirit of lowliness which enables God to bring the blessing of advancement."⁴ This doesn't mean advancement according to earthly wisdom but advancement according to heavenly wisdom. Advancement in the qualities of God's kingdom. Advancement in the virtues of Christlike living. The kind of advancement we see in Jesus himself, who took the downward way of the cross and was raised up, exalted by God, to share in his glory. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:10).

¹ David Brooks, "Truly Humbled to Be the Author of This Article." *The Atlantic* (July 3, 2022).

² Hayley Doyle, "Do You Have Comparisonitis? How To Beat Envy on Social Media." *The Ethicalist*. February 18, 2024. <https://theethicalist.com/do-you-have-comparisonitis-how-to-beat-envy/> (February 29, 2024).

³ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) 65.

⁴ "Humility." *New Bible Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Ed. J. D. Douglas et al. (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982) 500.