

James 3:13-4:10

1. In 3:1-12 James bases a caution for those considering teaching on the dangers of the tongue. In 3:13-18 he broadens this out to describe true wisdom and in 4:1-10 gives advice on achieving it. Who is he writing this to— individuals? The community? Is he tackling a pre-existing problem of corrupt leaders, or warning against a few bad apples? Is he calling individuals or a whole church to repent?
2. Every quality in the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-11) is also found or echoed in this passage:

“Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are **those who mourn**, for they will be comforted. **[4:8: “grieve, mourn and wail”]**

“Blessed are the **meek**, for they will inherit the earth. **[3:13: The wise show their wisdom in deeds of humility; 4:10: “humble yourselves before God”]**

“Blessed are those who **hunger and thirst for righteousness**, for they will be filled. **[In contrast with the double-minded “disorder” of 3:16]**

“Blessed are the **merciful**, for they will receive mercy. **[3:17: Heavenly wisdom is full of mercy]**

“Blessed are the **pure** in heart, for they will see God. **[3:17: Wisdom is first of all pure]**

“Blessed are the **peacemakers**, for they will be called children of God. **[3:17: Wisdom loves peace; peacemakers who sow peace reap righteousness]**

“Blessed are those who are **persecuted** for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **[4:4: Enmity with the world == friendship with God]**

These two passages are very different in form: beatitudes are God’s blessing on virtue and is found throughout the OT; James 3:13-4:10 is teaching on wisdom and a call to reform in order to heal the community. The difference in form is a tremendous benefit to us, since it shows us how James reads the beatitudes, which in turn illuminate James’ teaching.

- a. How can each of these inform our interpretation of the other? E.g. who does James tell us are “those who mourn” in the Sermon on the Mount? When James tells us not to be double-minded, is he calling us to “hunger and thirst for righteousness”?
 - b. Are the qualities extolled in the beatitudes things we pursue by individual piety, or in community?
3. James contrasts the ethos of wisdom and understanding with a demonic (3:15), earthly wisdom. Where the former is characterized by purity and peace, the latter leads to disorder and conflict. Blomberg and Kamell write,

This chaos ruins both the credibility of the church in the eyes of the world and the ability of the church to minister effectively to its own congregation.

On the other hand, Watchman Nee writes of the witness of peace and purity,

The Lord does not set us here first of all to preach, or to do any work for Him. The first thing for which He sets us here is to create hunger in others. No true work will ever begin without a sense of need being

created. We cannot inject that into others; we cannot drive people to be hungry. That hunger is to be created, and that hunger can be created only through those who carry the impressions of God.

(Cf. Matt 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12; 2 Cor 2:15-17.) Have you ever seen, or been part of, a single-minded community characterized by peace and purity? Is Nee right that this is just what's needed to create a hunger in unbelievers?

4. There is a curious parallel between the "harvest" of wisdom (3:18) and the "fruit" of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23): Both are lists of virtues, both are related to spiritual growth, and both accompanied by antithetical lists of vices characterized by envy and competition. And just as Jesus promises that God will give the Spirit (Lk 11:13) and "good things" (Mt 7:11) to those who ask, James says God will give wisdom to all who ask (1:5).

The Spirit is clearly not identical with heavenly wisdom (e.g. we can pray for wisdom, 1:5, but we are perpetually indwelt by the Spirit, who is, of course, a divine person), so how *are* they related? And if the fruit of the Spirit are produced by abiding in Christ (John 15) and showing self-sacrificial love (Gal 5:12-13) in obedience (John 15:10), how in James 3:13-4:10 does one develop the characteristics of heavenly wisdom and righteousness? How does it relate to the themes of jealousy, envy and desire running through this passage?¹

5. This passage contains several connections to Genesis: Genesis tells of Satan's (James 3:15; 4:7) lie leading to human sin (3:16), which turns God's ordered creation into disordered chaos (3:16). The first sins were Adam and Eve's desire (4:1) to be like God, and Cain's envy (3:14, 16), which led to Cain's murder (4:2). All of these are alluded to in this passage, but James takes this to deeper when he refers to earthly wisdom as "unspiritual" using *psychikos*, the adjectival form of "soul/life", the word used in the LXX when it speaks of God's breath bringing life to Adam.

Why is *psychikos*, "soulish", translated "unspiritual" in 3:15? In Greek it refers to mortal life, and in this context as in 1 Cor 15:44-46, it represents the "natural", in contrast to the spiritual (*pneumatikos*). Comparison to Paul's description of the resurrection body in 1 Cor 15 may cast new light on James' picture. Paul describes the new birth of creation as beginning with Jesus' resurrection, flowing next to our Spirit-empowered natures as believers, and coming last of all to our physical bodies and the rest of creation. For Paul we *must* end with a wholly new body because all of creation is being renewed and God's renewal will not be stopped. And even now as the Spirit transforms our thinking, we, who are *pneumatikos* (spiritual), are able to think thoughts which are nonsense beyond the reach of *psychikos* (natural) humans (1 Cor 2:14-3:4).

It is precisely this difference in thinking that James is teaching, the difference between earthly and heavenly wisdom, and comparison with Paul shows why it is anathema to James for someone to claim to be Christian but talk like the *psychikos*: because when you try to put a foot in both camp it's like you are trying to have a body which is both the resurrection body and the old, fallen, decaying body. You are trying to think like both a fallen person and a renewed Christian, and that is inherently unstable (James 1:8), like a wave tossed by the winds, as crazy as a spring producing both fresh and salt water (James 3:11).

According to Paul, the old body was physical, perishable, dishonorable, mortal, and weak. The new will be spiritual, imperishable, glorious, immortal, and powerful (1 Cor 15:42-53). The old body is patterned after Adam and comes from the dust, the new patterned after Jesus and comes from heaven. Is there anything in this contrast which can help us better grasp the earthly and heavenly wisdom in James?

¹ We may be tempted to jump right to 4:7-10 and start reciting the weekly confessional litany. But we should not forget two things in this passage: First, no liturgy will fix our *desires* (4:1). Second, a litany may not repair a *friendship*, and if our friendship with God, bruised and wounded by our adultery (4:4), is broken, then our efforts to live a pure and peaceful life will be too.

Heavenly wisdom*

- **“Wise and understanding”** (3:13): Jewish wisdom often focused on speech (see e.g. Prov), tying 3:1-12 to 13-18
- Exhibited by **deeds** of a **“good life”** (3:13) (also “full of good fruit”, 3:17): “life” in 3:13 is *anastrophe*, or “way of life” so this refers to a cultural ethos
- Deeds done in **“humility of wisdom”** (3:13), **“full of mercy”** (3:17): humility (or meekness, *prautes*; see Mt 5:5), denigrated in Roman culture, referred to “a healthy understanding of our own unworthiness before God and a corresponding humility and lack of pride in our dealings with our fellow men” (Blomberg & Kamell). “Mercy” is *eleos*, which is often used to translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is faithful loving-kindness
- **“Pure”** (3:17): Gk *agne*, sincere. As the leading virtue in the list of 3:17, probably the others are meant to follow in this vein. “Purity means both that one is ‘free of the moral and spiritual defects that are the marks of the double-minded,’ and that one is ‘unstained from the world’ (cf. 1:27)” (B&K).
- **“Peace-loving”** (3:17): wisdom that produces peace in the church. Used by the LXX to translate Heb. *shalom*. Not the same as *homonoia* (“harmony”), which represented an absence of conflict. In Jewish culture *shalom* was a central concept (e.g. Num 25:12, the covenant was a “covenant of peace”; Ps 34:14, it was intimately tied to the character of God; Is 9:16, the Messiah is the “prince of peace”). *Shalom* represented wholeness and completeness in community.
- **“Considerate”**: gentle (cf. Phil 4:5; 1 Tim 3:3) and non-combative. “The kind of person who though wronged and possessing the ‘right’ not to bend, nevertheless forgoes his right” (B&K)
- **“Submissive”**: willing to learn and be corrected
- **“Impartial”**: a heart set on following God; *adiakritos*, is cognate with “partial” in 2:4 and its antithesis, “wavering” in 1:6; not discriminating or showing prejudice
- **“Sincere”**: no falseness or play-acting; without uncertainty or hypocrisy

By contrast, earthly wisdom is demonic, bitter (like the “bitter” water of 3:11), envious/jealous, earthly (*epigeios*, “earth-bound”), unspiritual (*psychikos*; see below), disordered, and characterized by selfish ambition (3:14-16). “Disordered” (3:16) is *akatastasia*, which has the same root as “unstable” in 1:8 and “uncontrollable” in 3:8. “Envy” in 3:16 is *zelos*, a flexible word which can range from the positive qualities of enthusiasm (zeal) and ardent concern to jealousy and envy, spanning the gap between David to Saul, and Jesus to the Jewish leaders of Acts.

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Fun fact: James calls earthly wisdom demonic (3:16). “...folk Judaism believed that people were continually surrounded by hordes of demons.” [BBC]

Fun quote: “for God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.” (From the deuterocanonical 2nd-c. BC book *Wisdom*, 2:23-24)

* See Nystrom; Blomberg & Kamell; IVP *New Bible Commentary*.

Leader's Intro:

This passage is important. What at first appears to be a simple virtue/vice list, with exhortations to holy living, are much deeper. The handout expounding the vice list helps to flesh it out, and the parallels with the beatitudes also help bring it to life a little. But a good discussion ought to also include some understanding of what practical advice James is giving on how to achieve this. It ought also to recognize that whereas James previously addressed the individual, these virtues belong in community. Where the individual was called to be single-minded (1:8), now the community must seek shalom/wholeness. As you read this, always ask both how the passage makes sense for the individual and how it makes sense for the community. If we are to live James' heavenly wisdom we can't just as individuals find peace and maturity; we have to somehow develop a community which has both peace and purity.

Easily neglected, it's worth asking why this passage appears here, right after the warnings about the tongue and about being a teacher. Carson sees this as further advice on how to control the tongue. (Not sure if I'd go that far.)

Finally, don't leave this passage without (a) asking why envy leading to death is James' example (see question 5); (b) thinking about how the desires of our hearts drive our behavior and can prevent us from living heavenly wisdom and the life of the Spirit. For James this is what it all comes down to: we are double-minded because we don't simply trust God for what we need, and we desire things we ought not to. These drive us to envy and jealousy, to conflict, and directly away from the "good life" of heavenly wisdom.

I have left them out of the questions listed above, but these questions would be good to start with:

1. How, in one or two words, would you summarize heavenly wisdom? How about earthly wisdom?
2. A tension often occurs in any group between purity and peace. Some churches will permit members to live double-minded lives for the sake of a superficial peace, while others will seek purity in ways which impair wholeness and peace. Which end of the spectrum, if either, does your church tend to slip toward?

Extra questions and observations:

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Notes

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I. Background

a. ...

II. Words and Phrases

a. ...

III. Themes

a. ...

IV. Observations

a. ...

V. Questions

a. ...

VI. To do

a. ...