

“Humility”
James 3:13-4:3, 6-10
September 16, 2012
CCUMC
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Song: Humble Thyself In the Sight of the Lord

Reading of James 3:13-4:3, 6-10

I. Wisdom From Below

(pull out real estate brochure for Aspen). For those of you who might be in the housing market, I'll share with you a few listings that are available. Here's one little cottage available (read out details from listings of a couple of mega-mansions)

Of course these homeowners don't *need* 10,000 square feet of living space. The uber wealthy don't build these homes out of need for shelter. In a culture like ours that values having, these houses show who has the most. These houses exist because of an ethics of scarcity that teaches if you have more, you are more. This ethic teaches that if you have more stuff, you have more worth. If you have wealth you have importance. If you can acquire the biggest and the best, do it. At the topmost of the ladder of success in American culture sits a 20 million dollar mansion in Aspen.

This ethic, this culture, these mega-mansions set their foundations upon the vice of envy. Envy whispers to us so that we've got to have what someone else has. Envy seduces with promises that the next acquisition will bring satisfaction—even while teaching us to never feel satisfied with what we have. Envy teaches that there isn't enough for everybody, resources are scarce--and so we have to compete. The greatest Greek philosophers knew the vice of envy well--Socrates said that envy is an ulcer of the soul. Aristotle said that envy gnaws at us, creating a “certain sorrow” when someone has something that we do not.

Plutarch associated envy with hatred, tyranny, malice, ambition, and arrogance.¹ Envy leads to a “whose house is the biggest” competition in Aspen.

The author of our text today calls envy “bitter.” He associated envy with “wisdom from below.” This wisdom from down under, isn’t really wise at all. The writer of James calls it “earthly, unspiritual, devilish.” James points out that envious cravings cause arguments, cause disputes. He can see in his mind’s eye from two young children fighting over a toy they both want (or two siblings fighting) to nations battling over a patch of land they both want. When James says, “you want something and do not have it, so you commit murder” he’s not overexaggerating. In our own playgrounds, scuffles over a brand name jacket or shoe lead to murder. Our own nation’s desire to be the greatest, to acquire what others have—whether it be land or oilfields—leads to many wars, battles, and deaths. James understands the devilish power of envy.

He sees the tendrils of envy still holding onto his audience of new Christians. James knows that once you become a Christian, you’re not perfect right away. James understands conversion to Christ as an ongoing process. Ambivalence between good and evil continues to exist in Christians. He knows that the “wisdom from below” sinks into human beings. Envy wraps its tendrils around us, and it’s not easy to abandon. It’s not easy to be holy all at once. James knows the power of human cravings for what other people have. He knows these cravings lead to conflict not only on the battlefield, but also in Christian communities themselves.

James understands, too, that our cravings aren’t just for material things. We want someone else’s achievements—their resume, their job, their position. We want someone else’s kind of marriage, or friends, or well-behaved children. We crave someone else’s sports

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, “James” *NIBC* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998), 211.

ability, or their weight loss, or their beautiful garden. We desire someone's pain-free body (or just the body of our own youth), or gorgeous hair, or just any hair on our head at all. We crave, we desire what other people have. . . and the envy eats at us, gnaws at us, causes an ulcer on our soul. James knows how all these disordered desires for pleasures that will never satisfy us keep us trapped, keep us apart from God, keep us mired in the earthiness of envy.

Wisdom From Above

Thankfully, James doesn't leave his readers or us stuck down in the wisdom from below. James urges his audience to turn all eyes above, to look to the wisdom from God. To those who acknowledge their need, who recognize they are still captivated at times by the snaky tendrils of envy, God is ready to draw near. God is ready to pour down grace upon those humble enough to ask for it. James says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." James offers that our sickness of envy, and the strife that comes out of it, can be healed by turning to God with our whole hearts.

The question then becomes, 'how do we do that?' How do we live by the wisdom of God above instead of by the forces of envy below? How do we practice humility?

Humility really is the opposing force of envy. Right away, let's dismiss any notions of humility as equivalent to being a doormat. (hunch shoulders) "I'm so humble, I just let other people walk right over me. I don't accept any compliments. I'm not smart or gifted in any way." Being a doormat has NOTHING to do with humility. If envy is a disordered desire for what others have, then humility means desire ordered rightly to God. Humility means that we feel no lack in who we are; we feel no lack because we are filled with the love of God. Humility means we have a whole heart for God, not a heart set upon selfish ambition or envy of others. The practice of humility means we are content. Filled with God,

we are content with what we have, with our homes, with our lives lived according to God. As humble people, we don't look at others with whom we compete for scarce goods. As humble people, we don't compare ourselves to others and find ourselves lacking. As humble people, we don't crave what our neighbor has for ourselves. Humble people are content with who they are in God. (exhale)

In fact, James believes people who practice humility become friends with God. In chapter two, which we read last week, James wrote that Abraham was a friend of God. By this James means that Abraham saw things in the same way that God did. James' pulls his understanding of friendship from the Greek moral teachers with whom he was familiar; Aristotle, for example, taught that friends have the same outlook on the world. The philosopher understood friends as necessary for life. Friends are similar in virtues. Friends wish good upon one another for each other's sake. They are not competitive, they are not envious, they do not covet what the other has. Friends share a desire for the other's life to be good.² The author of James pulls from Greek moral philosophy on virtue and friendship to teach humility, while staying rooted in the imagery of the Old Testament.

So to be a friend with God, then, means that the Christian holds the same virtues as God. James lists them as "peaceable, gentle, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." To be a friend of God means you share the desire for good. To be a friend with God means that you share in God's wisdom. James promises us that when Christians truly renounce envy and live into humility, God will indeed raise us up to life with God.

In our church history, one saint in particular stands out as one who practiced humility and became a friend of God. His biography was written by the great spiritual

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2nd Edition translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 121.

theologian Bonaventure in the 13th century. Bonaventure describes the saint as having an early life of ease and comfort from his father's merchant business. The Lord came to him in visions, and gradually the young man began to have compassion for the poor. He gave his clothes away to beggars and gave much time to prayer. Much to the anger of his father, he renounced wealth and his former way of life, and before the bishop of the town stripped off all his wealthy clothing, accepting only a poor cheap cloak of a farmer to clothe his nakedness. From thenceforth on, Francis of Assisi would lead a pauper's life, immersing himself in the wealth of God's love.³

He would go on to found the Franciscian Order, a monastic order dedicated to ideals of poverty and humility. Men and women alike, sick of lives full of the envy and strife of the world, abandoned all to follow in his footsteps; the order of women was called the Poor Clares, named after their leader.⁴ According to Bonaventure Francis wanted the friars of his order to be called Minor, and the superiors servants, "in order that his followers might learn that they had come to the school of the humble Christ to learn humility. Jesus Christ, the teacher of humility, instructed his disciples in true humility by saying: "Whoever wishes to become great among you, let him be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you will be your slave." ⁵(Matt 20:26-27) Francis said he was content to own only a simple brown tunic tied with a rough cord, but from that simple cloth he radiated out incredible love of God. This holy man shared his deep friendship with God and remarkable spirit of humility; he was remarkably content with God alone. Bonaventure writes, "he was poor and lowly, but the Most High God looked upon him with such kindness that God not only lifted him up from the dust of a worldly life, but made him a practitioner of Gospel

³ Bonaventure, "The Life of St. Francis" trans and ed. by Ewert Cousins *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 193-194.

⁴ Ibid, 211.

⁵ Ibid, 233.

perfection and set him up as a light for believers so that he might prepare for the Lord a way of light and peace into the hearts of his faithful.”⁶

St. Francis, a paragon of virtue, shares with us goodwill, encouraging us to leave behind the poverty of envy, of comparison, of competition, and embrace the wealth of being content with God. What a challenge! What a gift! May God help us to so become friends with God! Amen.

(transition to prayer)

⁶ Ibid, 179.