

RUF Large Group Bible Study
Rev. Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
Oct. 20, 2004
James 3:13-4:3²

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. 4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James' point in his letter is to call us to not merely profess our faith, but to possess it.³ He wants us to incorporate a wholeness in our lives. That what we say we believe and how we live our lives fit together with coherence. So we're examining ourselves, looking at the Word of God, with the Holy Spirit so we can better see where we should repent and conform to the image of Christ.

This passage has been more difficult than most, because I haven't been sure where the thought ends. The chapter break leads us to think that 3:13-18 is a unit. But as I've looked more closely, I believe that the thought extends past that. But how far? Since it is a letter and meant to be read in one sitting and not broken up at all like we're forced to do, it doesn't really matter. But I think James wants us to put the thoughts from 3:13 to 4:10 together, and I'll follow that here. We may return to 4:6-12 next time.

We're going to look at three things in this passage: What we are to do, How we are to do it and of course Why we are to do it.

What we are to do

This passage is filled with to-do lists. Just look.

Let him show his works. (3:13) Do not boast and be false to the truth. (14) Submit yourselves to God. (4:7) Resist the devil. (7) Draw near to God. (8) Cleanse your hands. (8) Purify your hearts. (8) Be wretched and mourn and weep. (9) Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. (9) Humble yourselves. (10)

It's difficult not to move directly into why and how we are to do these things, but we'll hold off for a bit. As we put all of this together, we see that James is consistent with his theme of true religion being shown by our works, by our lives. Many people will tell you that it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you live a good life. But how is it possible to live a good life apart from beliefs? *Why* do you do the things you do?

And if we're so good, then why do things so often go so wrong? Why all the jealousy, selfish ambition, strife, disorder, vile practice, even murder, fights and quarrels? It doesn't have to be that way, does it?

Just think of a new member on a team – he comes in and gets everyone all mad and agitated. People call him a cancer on the team; they don't like him. He didn't have to be that way did he? Did you? A small group project can go terribly wrong with this sort of person. A trip to Europe. An intramural basketball team.

It goes wrong because we believe wrongly. Our hearts are filled with selfish ambition. We treat life as a zero sum game where there has to be a winner and a loser. Think of how different it is in a class of twenty if you know the professor will give five As, ten Bs, ten Cs and five Ds. You are competing against each other. This is life in my house too much of

¹ © Doug Serven, 2004 You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 500 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Doug Serven.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2004, website: www.ouruf.org.

² Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller's sermons on James found at www.redeemer.com; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter's Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985.

³ A phrase from Tim Keller

the time. There is competition for the last sip of water in the bottle, who gets the most applesauce at dinner, who got to pick the last movie for movie night. This sort of living isn't peaceful.

But we all act this way, not just seven-year-olds. Instead, we are called to wisdom and peace. And the Bible says that all true wisdom comes from God. (3:15,17)

What is wisdom? Wisdom is right living. Wisdom is seeing and understanding relationships between things.

In basketball, there are only so many things a person can do. But seniors are better than freshmen. Veterans are better than rookies. Larry Bird is better than Allen Iverson. Why? Larry Bird could see the relationships, could anticipate the nuances of the game, and he tried to make everyone else around him better. He's in the NBA Hall of Fame because of his sweet shot, his gutty performances, and because of his wisdom.

In music, there are only so many notes to use. We all have the same notes. But Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, Bach, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and the Beatles saw relationships between the notes that you and I don't see. They put things together to make peace and not discord. They saw what could bring out beauty and not every vile practice.

That's what we're after. Seeing relationships between things in life. We're after gaining wisdom. Wisdom isn't the accumulation of facts. In his commentary, Moo writes; "For James assesses these people's claim to wisdom not in theological terms – how much doctrine do they know, how many Greek verbs can they parse – but in practical terms."⁴ Motyer puts it this way: "Wisdom begins with knowing God...Our fear, then, is a proper reverence for one who has made himself known and whom we therefore know for ourselves. But the Bible nowhere places much value on knowledge that remains merely cerebral or creedal. Nothing is known until it also reshapes life. For this reason, the way of wisdom is the way of obedience. 'Knowledge', at its deepest level, is living out a deep personal relationship."⁵

Do you remember the first time you played Trivial Pursuit? The game came out in 1982, and I probably played it shortly thereafter. I can remember one time when I was up in Michigan and my aunts and uncles were playing. I knew one out of every ten answers, but my uncle was a whiz on practically every category.⁶ It's great to know facts and win at Trivial Pursuit, but we all know smart people who are stupid in life. People who ace their SATs but cannot make good decisions. Who get straight As but bomb out in love. Who can parse Greek verbs and discuss critical Biblical scholarship but don't understand the Scriptures. There's something more than knowledge that we're after, though knowledge is important and to be sought after. There's wisdom.

It's the wise person you want to talk to when you're in trouble. The wise person can guide you and help you figure out what you're not seeing and understanding. The wise person is usually older and more experienced than you are. The wise person is to be sought after and listened to. "The person characterized by wisdom from heaven will be stable, trustworthy, transparent – the kind of person consistently displaying the virtues of wisdom and on whom one can rely for advice and counsel."⁷ This person seeks wisdom from above, and not other kinds of wisdom. James is strong about where ungodly wisdom comes from. It's earthbound, meaning contained to a closed system. It's unspiritual and even demonic. Yikes. I don't think we often think of our worldly wisdom as demonic. But it's influenced by things that God doesn't endorse. James is saying that our desires and passions, when not controlled by the wisdom that comes from above, will destroy us and all those around us. Do you believe that?

The text seems to indicate that the other things we are to do flow out of this one of wisdom. We are to show our works in "*the meekness of wisdom*."⁸ "Humility or 'meekness' was not usually prized by the Greeks. They thought it signaled a servility unworthy of a strong and confident person. But a different picture emerges in the NT. Jesus himself claimed to be 'meek' and blessed those who were meek. This Christian meekness, or humility, comes from understanding our position as sinful creatures in relationship to the glorious and majestic God. It recognizes how unable we are in and of ourselves to achieve spiritual fulfillment or to chart our own course in the world. And this humility before God should then translate into humility toward others."⁹

The wise person is "open to reason." "The word means, literally, 'easily persuaded.'" What is meant is not a weak, credulous gullibility, but a willing deference to others when unalterable theological or moral principles are not involved."¹⁰

Charley Babbitt found out that his father died and left his fortune to someone he didn't know – his brother, Raymond. Raymond, Charley discovers is autistic but is able to calculate complicated mathematical problems in his head with great speed and accuracy. Their father has left his fortune to Raymond who doesn't even understand what money is for. Charley is enraged by what has happened and by his father keeping Raymond's existence from him for his entire life. He kidnaps Raymond from his residential home, and the two begin a long road trip that will lead them to an understanding of each other.

⁴ Moo, p. 169

⁵ Motyer, p. 130

⁶ And we're talking about the original version here, not 90s or Music or Disney or some "lesser" version.

⁷ Moo, p. 177

⁸ "*Meekness* is a word which requires the context of relationships for its full meaning to emerge." Motyer, p. 131

⁹ Moo, p. 170

¹⁰ Moo, p. 176

Who is the smart one in the story? The story is a compelling one because neither is wise in the movie. Charley, of course, thinks he is but he has a lot to learn from Raymond. Raymond knows a ton of facts, but has difficulty engaging with the real world. His redeeming quality however, is one that leads us into the how to do it section.

How we are to do it

As John MacArthur puts it, "It's hard to find a self-professed fool."¹¹ That is what Raymond had that Charley didn't. Charley Babbitt thought his life was all together, but he had a lot to learn in the end from his brother. He had to be humbled.

We learn wisdom through humility and through submission.

James writes, "*Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.*" Remember that earlier, in James 1, James tied the getting of wisdom with trials of various kinds. These trials were the testing of our faith that produces steadfastness and thus brings us to completeness in Christ.

So trials produce wisdom? How so? Think of people you know who have had everything go right and well for them. No real problems or troubles in life. Do you think that they're wise? Do you think Paris Hilton is wise? Why not? She's had everything she's ever wanted. She's never struggled a day in her life for anything important. What about a person who is so smart he doesn't study. Is he wise? What about the athlete who is so talented he doesn't have to work hard to win? Was Marcus Dupree¹² wise?

The wise athlete is the one who has been in difficult situations in order to make himself better. Fourth-quarter comebacks. More time in the weight room and running springs. Sleepless nights in the film room studying the opponent. Getting up time and again when knocked down.

The same is true for all of us in all of life. We become wise when we encounter trials, when our laughter turns to mourning we see new relationships that wouldn't have become clear if everything were rosy. I wish this weren't so, but it seems that it is. James says, "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*"

Another part of humility is thankfulness. Remember that James wrote to us: "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.*" You are wise when you realize that *everything* you have comes from God. Everything. You may say, "But I worked for what I've got." True in one sense. But where did you get what you had to work with? Where did your intelligence come from? Where did your physical-ness come from? Did you pick your family and its resources? Sure you got your MBA, but if you'd have been born in Tibet eight hundred years ago I'd bet you wouldn't have an MBA.¹³ Do you deserve to *not* be a twelve year old girl sold into prostitution in Malaysia? Does she deserve that that happened to her? Do you see that everything you have that is good has been given to you from God and that that fact should make you thankful, humble and wise?

This thankful wisdom means that we are not to always seek the easy road. There certainly is something to hard work and perseverance. I think we'd all agree to that. But there's something too to not getting what we want. We learn about life, we gain wisdom through some rejection, some humiliation even, through sorrow, through tough times. These experiences purify us; they don't destroy us.¹⁴

As we pursue this narrow path then, the hard way, we submit ourselves to God. James says, "*Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.*"

You can only learn the relationships between things when you see that you don't know the relationships between things. You have to be a learner first. My daughter, Ruth, loves science but isn't so fond of math. I'm trying to explain to her that science *is* math. She thinks I'm crazy. So until she submits herself to me and my wisdom, she'll be stuck in her agnosticism.

James glances over the Scriptures in this passage. What he says about them isn't connected to this point, but the fact that he appeals to the Scripture is. We submit ourselves to the Bible to gain wisdom. It isn't a book of facts. It is to be studied for sure, but you can know everything about the Bible and not know the God of the Bible. That has been proven over and over again. We should take a posture of submission toward the Bible. Maybe, just maybe, God might be right and you might be wrong. Maybe Paul was an apostle and prophet and you aren't. Maybe God's way of doing things might work out for the best. Maybe science *is* math.

¹¹ MacArthur, p. 168

¹² Former Sooner running back. From espn.com: At 6-foot-2, 225 pounds, Dupree was the prototypical running back, a dazzling combination of strength and power and speed -- in high school. He carved up defenses for 5,284 yards at Philadelphia (Miss.) High School from 1978-81, then gained 955 yards as a freshman for Barry Switzer at the University of Oklahoma. He was the Fiesta Bowl MVP after running for 239 yards -- despite missing nearly half of the game with a sore hamstring. All of this inspired novelist Willie Morris to write a book, "The Courtship of Marcus Dupree", which came out in 1983, the same year he transferred to Southern Mississippi after a rift with Switzer. He never played a down for the Golden Eagles. In March, 1984 he signed a \$6 million, five-year contract. While only the \$1.1 million signing bonus was guaranteed, it was more money than the 19-year-old had ever seen -- or imagined. He managed a modest 681 yards and nine touchdowns for the New Orleans Breakers as a 19-year-old rookie while his teammate Buford Jordan ran for 1,276 yards.

¹³ Illustration from Keller

¹⁴ Aron Ralston said as much after his self-amputation experience.

This is how we learn. Apprenticeship. In order to become a woodworker, we apprentice ourselves to a master woodcarver. At first we may just be sweeping the floors, but we still submit to his leadership. To be a doctor, we take our turns as interns, following around our mentors to learn what to do and what not to do. We are not capable in and of ourselves, but we must have leaders to guide us and teach us. We submit ourselves to God. We follow him. We listen to him. We ask him questions.

James says, “*Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.*”

Now let’s look at *Why we are to do it.*

What might it mean for God to exalt us? The key for us in understanding why we are to pursue wisdom and thus pursue God is found there, and in a few other places in the text.

James writes something interesting in 4:4. *You adulterous people!* Really, he writes, *Adulteresses!*¹⁵ He’s obviously not talking about physical adultery because he calls everyone adulteresses, even the men. What is he saying?

He’s saying that “*friendship with the world is enmity with God*”. He’s saying that “*whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*” He yearns jealously over us. He’s saying that if we draw near to God he will draw near to us.

He’s saying that one of the controlling images of our relationship to God, one that shows us what we are to do and why we are to do it, is marriage. Covenantal marriage. Faithfulness and unfaithfulness.¹⁶

He tells us that we are adulteresses. That we not only have had and do have other lovers in our lives, but we do things with them that we should only do with God. That we show these other lovers affection that is reserved for God alone, and that that is terrible.

James is saying that if you understand the lover and friend you have, you won’t want any other lover or friend. If you remember the lover and dancer who has called to you to the floor, you won’t want to dance with anyone else.

He’s saying that wisdom is what – facts about God? No, wisdom is a relationship with God. Let’s look at that.

It’s a Loving Choice

Why do you become a Christian? The same reason that you get married – because you fall in love. You fall in love with someone. What a strange and hard-to-explain concept. And yet you all know what I’m talking about, either by experience yourself or you’ve seen it happen. And when you fall in love with someone what do you do then? You give yourself. You’re not entering into a business partnership. You’re giving yourself, your whole self. Chris and Anna are getting married next week (!). They’re in love. Why else would Anna move from England, giving up her family and heritage to come to Oklahoma of all places?! Why else would Chris... well, we all know he’s getting the better end of the deal. Chris and Anna are doing things because they love each other and want to give each other their whole lives.

Think of love songs for a second, or poems that Chris and Anna may be emailing back and forth to each other – they use cosmic, over the top language, don’t they? Longer than there’s been fish in the ocean... Longer than there’ve been stars up in the heavens, I’ve been in love with you. That’s not true. Why do we say that? Because we don’t have any other words to express the depth and soulness of our love. That’s the way we talk when we’re in love. It’s really, really big.

Sexual love is a picture of our greater love. We want someone to actually be able to say to us what we say in cosmic terms, without exaggeration. And someone really can say that in Christianity.

Ephesians 1:3-6 ³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,* ⁴ *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love* ⁵ *he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,* ⁶ *to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*

We all want to be able to have someone say that about us, and the Bible says that someone can. Jesus Christ actually did love us before the fishes were in the ocean and the stars in the heavens.

Those who truly understand Christianity see that this faith is a relationship, it’s a marriage, it’s a statement of love for another.

It’s an Expression of Vulnerability and Commitment

Let’s assume you are in love or have been in love.

Why do you do what you do when you’re deeply in love with someone? You do things to make the other person happy? You try to figure out what she likes so you can do that thing and not something else? You figure out what he’s interested in so you can talk about that and not something else. You try to please the other person in a good way.

You don’t please someone out of fear, but you also don’t just do whatever you want. So it is with God. We try to figure out what he likes so we can please him. And, lucky for us, he tells us.

¹⁵ [μολυαλίδες](#)

¹⁶ Thoughts that follow come from a sermon on this passage by Rev. Tim Keller.

The law of God is an expression of his passions. He hates lying and gets excited about the truth. Truth is his passion. Faithfulness is something he cares about. So, just like with your human lover, you want to find out your beloved's passion and fulfill that. We become vulnerable because we seek the other person's good and to be well thought of in the other person's eyes.

Why should you obey God? Because if you don't, you break his heart. Think of Hosea. This whole book is to show us what God feels like. Hosea, do you know what it's like now to love someone who doesn't love you back – that's what I feel like. The Lord is showing us in that whole book of the Bible what he feels like when we are unfaithful to him, when we sleep with other lovers.

When you fall in love, you don't want to be independent any more. You want commitment. Sure it was nice for awhile to be free to do whatever you wanted, but when you're in love you don't want that. You want union.

Some people never want to and won't allow themselves to fall in love because they don't want to lose their independence. That's probably because they've had poor models of love or else lovers who've abused them and used them. This, however, is a lover whom *you've* abused. He's been vulnerable to you first. He should be the one who should say, I don't want to have anything to do with you. Yet, he's said he loves you. That is powerful.

It's Possible to Have Passionate Intimacy

The Bible doesn't shy away from using sexual imagery to picture our relationship with God. God is not afraid to use the sexual metaphor.

Ezekiel 16:7 I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.

8 *“When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.*

God is saying that he took his church to be his bride and they were unified after the covenant was made. There must be no passion without covenant and no covenant without passion. This is how we're supposed to be, and how we're supposed to be with God. You are not to give yourself to another in passion without commitment. Think about what that means for your kissing and touching and sex lives. And, if you are committed in marriage, unified by the covenant, you are to be ravished with your wife's breasts – *“I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples”* (Song of Solomon 7:8) – you are to be utterly taken because *“His arms are rods of gold, set with jewels. His body is polished ivory¹⁷, bedecked with sapphires.”* (Song of Solomon 5:14) When we understand this, we are better able to understand our relationship with God and with each other.

What kind of passionate intimacy do you want with your lover? Do you pursue communion with God? Do you pray? Not praying is like not talking. If you have a boyfriend, how would you feel about talking five minutes a day? Or irregularly for a year? You need to sit down and talk.

Do you read the Bible? Is reading your Bible merely information exchange? Filling each other in like trading day-timers and schedules? The Bible is a letter to you, communicating your lover's heart.

If you put yourself into the arms of your true lover and husband, you will be bold and strong and humble. But if you put yourself into the arms of the world, sin will be born. That's what James is telling us in James 3:13-4:4.

Are you an adulteress? Of course you are. But who is that you're sleeping with? You may not know, you may have too many lovers to figure out which is which.

What do you worry about tremendously? Is it your appearance? Your grades? Your future? Your singleness or married status? Your GMAT? Your acceptance into law school? How others think of you? Maybe it's ministry? Perhaps not a boyfriend, but just always knowing that someone likes you and stringing him along.

I'll bet that many of you would say that you aren't struggling with these things. You know that you shouldn't be. But you're lying. You're lying to yourself, deceiving yourself so you can love it all the more underneath the covers.

Here's how you know that you're sleeping with that thing. *You have to have it.* You're addicted to it. You're love sick. You're giving yourself to it, and since you are it's bearing into the world anxiety and bitterness and anger. If you don't think you are, then ask others what they think. Sometimes you're the worst person to evaluate yourself. Haven't you had a friend who was in love with someone and it was obvious to everyone but him? That person may be you.

But if you look to Jesus, and you see all he's done for you, if you look and see him as a ravishing lover, then you will stop giving your affection to other lovers. Solomon 6:3 says, *“I am my beloved's and he is mine.”* And it sounds nice in the Latin too: *“Ego dilecto meo et dilectus meus.”*

I think James is tapping into this metaphor when he says, *“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.”*

Jeremiah 9:23-24 says, *“Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, 24 but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and*

¹⁷ Ahem. Yep, that's what it means.

knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

James has written a whole passage, maybe even whole book about this Jeremiah verse.

It's not for no reason that the Bible says that Adam knew Eve. He didn't know merely know facts and information about her. He didn't just talk to her and get to know her likes and dislikes. He didn't only make observations about her physical make up and his compatibility with her. He *knew* her. That is true intimacy, the fullest extend, capable only in a covenant of commitment as described in Genesis 2 – For this reason a man shall leave his family and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.

Do you want to know God? You should pursue humility and teachability. You should be grateful for all God's good gifts to you, even the trials he brings your way. You should submit yourself to God through the means of grace. You should think about marriage. You should think about adultery. You should resist the devil and draw near to God. He promises to give more and more and more grace. That is a good promise.