

## Just a Misunderstanding

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, September 20, 2009)

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a <sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. <sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

<sup>1</sup>Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? <sup>2</sup>You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

<sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37 <sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, **“The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”** <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, **“What were you arguing about on the way?”** <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, **“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”** <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>**“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”**

Misunderstandings can cause a lot of problems, but sometimes it just causes confusion. Have you ever been in a situation where the person talking to you was talking about one thing, and you were understanding a completely different subject? There is a scene in the play, “Fiddler on the Roof” that is a good illustration of this kind of misunderstanding. Tevye has a new milk cow, but he is afraid he doesn’t have enough feed for all his cows, so he is thinking of selling it. He also has four daughters. Lazar, the butcher, wants to marry one of the daughters, so he asks Tevye to meet him at the tavern to discuss “some serious business.” Tevye thinks he wants to buy his cow. By the time Tevye gets to the tavern, his mind is made up – he will not sell his cow. But he thinks, **“Maybe I can get a free drink out of the old butcher.”** You have to listen carefully to catch all the funny things in this conversation. The Butcher starts out with small talk, **“How goes it with you, Tevye?”** Tevye answers, **“How should it go?”** The Butcher says, **“You’re right”** Tevye says, **“And you?”** The butcher says, **“The same.”** Tevye answers, **“Sorry to hear that.”** Now the butcher thinks he better get down to business, But he starts out rather timidly, **“I suppose you know why I wanted to see you.”** The audience knows they are not talking about the same thing. Tevye is thinking the butcher wants to buy the cow but the butcher actually wants to marry his daughter. So Tevye has made up his mind about the cow and answers, **“Yes, I know what you want, but there is no use talking about it.”** That offends the butcher, so he asks, **“Why not?”** Tevye answers, **“Why yes? Why should I get rid of her?”** The butcher, **“Well, you have a few more without her.”** Tevye, **“I see! Today you want one. Tomorrow you might want two! The butcher is surprised, “Two, what would I do with two? Tevye says, “The same as you do with one.” You see how the conversation is going nowhere? So the butcher tries to change direction. “Tevye, this is very important to me.” Tevye answers, “Why is this so important to you?” The butcher answers, “Because I am lonesome?” This is incredulous to Tevye, “Lonesome? You want to buy my milk cow because you are lonesome?” And now finally, amidst laughter all around, they see how they started with a misunderstanding, and as a result the conversation was ridiculous from both sides. Sometimes life is just like that. It just doesn’t seem to make much sense. And sometimes, when things seem to be going along well, along comes some kind of misunderstanding, people get hurt, conflict erupts, and if there is no effort to come to an understanding of one another, before you know it, things are in a mess. What causes this? Is it just misunderstanding? Or is it misplaced emphasis, priorities, and values?**

James wrote his letter to real churches of his time. The letter went to real people, in real situations, having some very real problems. What might some of those problems have been? We can be pretty certain that there was a

dispute going on. Some people must have thought they had a corner on God's wisdom, and they were not too anxious to listen to one another. Take notice that in verse 14 James cautions the readers not to have, "bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts." Then in verse 16 he repeats the same caution, "Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder..." There must have been some turmoil in the churches receiving the letter from James. James writes some rather strong words to them, where he writes about, "disorder and wickedness of every kind..." We don't get the full picture of the problems in the churches, but they are serious. In chapter 4 James writes about conflicts and disputes, cravings that bring people to war with one another, leading even to murder. And then he goes back to telling the readers that if "you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflict." There must have been some serious problems in some of the churches.

So what was wrong with the folks in the churches that received this letter from James? Were they bad people? Or did they just not understand what the priorities should be for those who follow Christ? I suspect the latter is the case. That is why James opens this section by talking about wisdom. Apparently some felt they knew what was best for the church, and rather than listen to other perspectives, they became boastful, false to the truth, as he writes, which resulted in all this disorder in the church.

Misunderstanding, pride that prevents you from hearing others, envy and ambition that leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind. I could give you illustration upon illustration that shows how selfish ambition will end up in chaos. I could talk about our yearning for material things. I could talk about corporate and political leaders compromising themselves for power. I could even talk about our own personal yearning for more money and more money. But the disciples, in our lesson for this morning, can serve as another illustration. They didn't understand Jesus when he predicted his death, so they disputed things in terms they could understand. Who is greatest? Try to picture what is happening here. Jesus has just told them, again, that he would be betrayed and killed, and three days later rise again. Scripture tells us that they did not understand what he was saying. What do you think is in this teaching that they can't understand? Betrayal – surely they knew what betrayal meant. If anything, they probably didn't want to talk about that. Who would betray Jesus? Death – yes, they knew what death was. In those days, executions were done publicly. In many parts of the Roman Empire, execution was a daily event – or at least weekly, and was always carried out along a public thoroughfare. Furthermore, Jesus was their leader. The Romans were always eager to execute leaders of any group that might be subverting Roman authority. But when Jesus said he would rise again on the third day, what did that mean? That may be where the disciples had difficulty understanding. If he rises again, what will he be like? Will he still be our leader, or will he be distant, you know, like up I heaven? OK, assume he dies, is executed, and then in only 3 days goes up to heaven. Let's be practical – who will be the leader of this group? Isn't it possible that the disciples just couldn't understand the resurrection, so they focused their discussion on what they could understand: "Who will be our new leader, who among us is the greatest?"

So that is where Jesus does his children's sermon. A little object lesson, disciples. Do you want to be a leader? Than be a servant. Do you want to be great? Than identify with the least. Does a child understand? Is a child greater than the scholar? Well, there is trust, and sincerity, and yes, even wisdom. Welcome the child, the one who was the "least" in the culture of that day, and as you welcome the child, you welcome me, and as you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me.

Is ambition wrong then? Not at all – if your ambition is for something good. Look at the list in James of the things that are to be desired. These are the things that real wisdom, wisdom from above, brings. Such wisdom is pure - it does not mix with evil. It is peaceable. Wisdom from above does not cause disorder, which James attacks at the beginning of this lesson. It is gentle, respectful of the feelings of others, never wanting to hurt. Wisdom from above is willing to yield, not insisting on its own way, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13. Full of mercy, especially to those who are in the wrong, so as not to cut them off, but to win them back to the truth and into the fellowship of the body of Christ. Producing good fruits – not just words, but deeds and relationships and attitudes. Without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. If you truly yearn for such wisdom, and are granted this wisdom from above, then you will indeed reap a harvest of righteousness, not of your own accord, or as a result of your strength, but as a gift from God. This is not a gift from God that you can simply sit back and wait for it to fall in your lap. Get out and seek this gift from God. If you actively search for God and his gifts, he will hear your prayers, and will give his gifts to you. Perhaps it can be best summed up in the words James wrote:

**Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.  
Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.**