

INTRODUCTION

"In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."

Martin Luther, Preface to Saint James and Saint Jude - 1554

"NOTHING OF THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL ABOUT IT."

Martin Luther is my biggest non-biblical theological hero of all. But he is dead wrong on this. If we aren't careful, it's easy to believe that the book of James is nothing but a collection of sayings and commands. It is often even called (and we have called it!) "The Proverbs of the New Testament."

It is easy to get trapped into highlighting all the "to dos" in James, thinking that by doing them, we're going to advance in our Christianity and earn more "heaven points" (or something like that. Mostly, that we will be "more righteous" than "other Christians", because, you know, this is a contest.)

This tendency to only see the "to dos" in James, I think, is what Luther was reacting to. But I'm not sure how he missed something that has become so clear to so many: James is firmly rooted in a Gospel that is explicitly present in his writing. But it can be missed, if all you are expecting is to find commands to obey.

I hope to show you that, while James is very concerned with the things we do, he is absolutely rooted in the promises of God in the Gospel.

SPEAKING EVIL

James 3:1

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

- This is a verse for me as preacher, but also for anyone who teaches in any context! This warning, combined with Christ's statement that it would be better to tie a millstone around your neck and throw yourself in the ocean than lead any astray ought to give any of us pause. This is a weighty charge.

James 3:2

2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

- So there it is. If you want to pursue spiritual and personal perfection, this is the primary point of attack: controlling your tongue. (Stay tuned for a spoiler on how that is going to work out for you...)
- James then goes in to a series of wonderful and graphic imagery to talk about the disproportionate power and destructive potential of our tongues (our words...)

James 3:3-6

3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

- Think about the destructiveness our words have. What a mess. The ability to set the entire course of our life on fire!

"One single wrong word, and every single word we've ever spoken crumbles into so much hypocrisy in the eyes and ears of those who listen to us." - Sinclair Ferguson

James 3:7-8a

7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue.

- We've got a big problem. Verse 2 says that if we would attain perfection, we need to bridle our tongue. Verse 8 says that no human being can.
- James was aware of one human who did. His brother, Jesus.
- So, the tongue is untamable. It gets worse.

James 3:8b-10

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

- Think of all of the 10 commandments, and how easily the tongue can breach every single one of them, and we hardly have to move a single muscle.
- My brothers, “these things ought not to be so.” So what can we do?

We need to be transformed

James 3:11-12

11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

- James’s imagery here is pointing to the fact that our very nature is the problem. And he hints at something he’s getting to: transformation in our very nature is needed.
- But before he gets there, he brings up a second fundamental problem.

LACKING WISDOM

James 3:13-16

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.

- The meekness of wisdom - **meek**: strength under control. One who has true wisdom has no reason to be jealous and selfish.
- Earthly, unspiritual, demonic. “The world, the flesh, the devil.” - “The three enemies of the soul.” The “anti-trinity”. This is “the wisdom of the world” and many of us are tempted by it. It’s sayings and truisms are baked in to our culture. They sound wise, they may even sound spiritual.
 - “God helps those who help themselves.”
 - “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”
 - “Judge not.” (More of a command that goes with the log in your own eye. It means beware hypocrisy, not “it’s all good.”)
 - “When God closes a door, he opens a window.”

- “You have to put your needs first.”
- This is also a helpful clue about the wisdom we receive when we ask for it according to chapter 1. If it fuels or leads to jealousy and selfish ambition, it is not the wisdom from above. The wisdom from above soothes jealousy and removes the selfishness from ambition.

The Wisdom From Above

James 3:17-18

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.

QUARRELING AND FIGHTING

James 4:1-5

4 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”?

- Adulterous! Whoa, settle down there, James! Judge not!
- There’s obviously a whole sermon in here about the nature of conflict, but lets focus on verse three for a minute. James heard his Lord, Savior, and brother’s teaching: “ask whatever you will, in my name, and it will be given to you.” and gives a helpful clarification on one of the reasons why these prayers sometimes aren’t answered.
- Our desires are out of order.
- What do we want more, the gift, or the giver?
- This what he means here by God “yearning jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.” He desires more that we be desirous of him, connected to him, attentive to him, than anything else!
- But we are like children arguing over a toy. As a parent we could easily just buy duplicates (and frankly, we do, sometimes, depending on the situation... you have to pick your battles.) But we’d much rather our children learn to share and play nicely together. So it is with God.

THREE PROBLEMS

1. We speak evil.
2. We lack wisdom
3. We quarrel and fight

And the problems are worse than we think!

1. The tongue: set on fire by hell! (3:6)
2. Our "earthly wisdom" is "unspiritual" and "demonic"! (3:15)
3. Our jealousy and envy and covetousness are *spiritual adultery, and enmity with God.* (4:4)

- We are "double minded sinners!" - James 4:8
- We have a big problem! What are we supposed to do!?
- Then James enters with clearest Gospel. My absolute two favorite words in the entire Bible. And all the apostles and writers in the new testament (and some in the old!) use it as well. The only solution that is possible in our terrible circumstances:

"BUT GOD"

James 4:6-10

6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

- This is really, really good news, for the humble.
- Notice how he is summarizing the three problems here: Pride.
 - God opposes you when you let your tongue loose with its blazing fire
 - God opposes you when you claim to be wise and are only full of worldly wisdom
 - God opposes you when because of desire for worldly things you quarrel and fight
 - But he also holds out his hand with the solution:

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.

THREE PROMISES

There are three remarkable promises in the conclusion here.

1. VICTORY in the spiritual battle
2. CLOSENESS to God
3. EXALTATION

APPLICATION

So James give the application here for us today:

1. Resist the devil!
2. Draw near to God
3. Humble yourself
4. Believe God's promises