



Session 6 – James 3:13 - 4:10

SELF-CENTREDNESS SPOILS OUR RELATIONSHIPS

James's theme in this passage is clear: he refers to bitter envy, selfish ambition and desires. All of them are attitudes which arise from focussing on ourselves and what we want.

Self-centredness spoils our relationships with others (3:10 - 4:3)

James contrasts two sorts of wisdom.

True wisdom – a Godly way of thinking. James has a strongly Jewish background and, in the OT which he knows so well, wisdom is a very important idea, most noticeably in the Book of Proverbs – eg “The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov 2:6).

True wisdom comes from heaven – from God. Those who have it do not boast about it; they are humble (a word often translated as *meek* or *gentle*) and they demonstrate it by their actions rather than by clever words.

In v.17, James gives us a list of qualities that will be seen in people who have this Godly wisdom; in some ways it resembles Paul's list of fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22f). These qualities are all selfless rather than self-centred. James stresses the way in which a wise person will be a peace lover – committed to making peace and being at peace with others.

False wisdom – a worldly way of thinking. This is the opposite of true wisdom.

- Its origin is not heavenly but of the devil.

- The qualities it produces are self-centred ones – bitter envy and selfish ambition, together with disorder and evil practices.

False wisdom affects our relationships with others (4:1-2a). The self-centredness which James is writing about can have very serious consequences, such as fighting and quarrelling. See the stories of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) and Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) for examples of how selfish desire can lead even to murder.

It seems that even the Christians to whom James is writing display a lot of this false wisdom. Their focus is on their desires (v.1) and pleasures (v.3) (both words translate the Greek word *hedonai* from which we get the English word *hedonism*) and they covet what others have. Their self-centredness means that they are always seeking self-gratification and that they are always arguing – trying to get their own way.

False wisdom affects our prayers (4:2a-3). So strong is the self-centredness in James's readers that it is evident even in their prayers. Often it is seen in their lack of prayer: because they focus on themselves, they think that they can achieve what they want in their own strength – without help from anyone else, even God. And when they do pray, they pray selfishly for their own wealth and pleasure: not “your will be done” but “my desires be satisfied.” Not surprisingly, these prayers are not answered.

Self-centredness spoils our relationship with God (4:4-10)

Our unfaithfulness. In OT, when the people of Israel worship idols instead of God, this is often described as adultery (see eg Jer 3:20 and the book of Hosea). James uses the same language in v.4. When God's people desert God's way of living and go the world's way instead – choosing false wisdom instead of true wisdom – they are being unfaithful to God. Our worldly, self-centred way of living spoils our relationship with God.

Scholars disagree about the right way to translate v.5, but most agree that it is saying something about God being jealous when he sees his people being unfaithful to him. Again this is a picture which appears in OT – see eg Exod 20:5, Deut 4:23f, Josh 24:19f. This is not sinful jealousy, but jealousy like that of a man who finds his wife in bed with another man and

who burns with indignation; we would think it ridiculous if he just shrugged his shoulders and said it didn't really matter. Similarly, God is rightly angry when we turn our backs on him and go off with the world and its self-centred attitudes.

James calls his readers to repent. Repentance involves a 180 degree turn – a turn *from* evil (*resist the devil* – v.7) and *to* God (*come near to God* – v.8), and it should be truly heartfelt (v.9).

God's grace. In spite of our self-centredness and unfaithfulness, God is willing to forgive – his grace is even greater than his righteous anger (v.6). Throughout NT, the word *grace* refers to the love and forgiveness which God bestows on us, not because we have earned it or deserved it, but simply because he chooses to give it to us as a free gift. That grace is available to anyone who is humble enough to admit that they need it.

That theme of humility comes again in v.10. Humbling ourselves means acknowledging our inability to help ourselves – admitting to God that we desperately need him to forgive us and to help us to change (like the tax collector in the parable in Luke 18:9-14). “He will lift you up” in v.10 translates the same word as “exalt” in Luke 18:14 – see also Mat 23:12, Luke 14:11, 1Pet 5:6. When we humbly come near to God, we will be knocking at an open door – he will graciously come near to us. Remember the parable of the prodigal son – in particular, the repentance of the son and the response of the father (Luke 15:18-20).

If we recognise our self-centredness and the way it spoils our relationships with God and with others, and if we seek his forgiveness and help, then we will experience his bountiful grace.

For homegroups

- In what ways do you encounter self-centredness in the world around us? Can you give examples of the bad results of self-centredness?
- In what ways are you guilty of self-centredness yourself?
- Read either the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) or the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). In what ways is self-centredness evident? What are its results?
- In 3:13, James is writing about humility towards other people. How can our deeds show this humility? Does Jesus' example in John 13 help?
- In 4:6 and 4:10, James is writing about humility towards God. How, in practice, do we do express that to him?
- Look at the list of qualities associated with Godly wisdom in 3:17. Which of them seem to you to be the most important?
- In 3:18, James is echoing Jesus' words in Mat 5:9. Can you describe an occasion when you have tried to act as a peacemaker?
- How can the church (or the individual Christian) have a positive influence against a culture of self-centred pleasure-seeking?
- Compare 4:3 with Mat 7:7. How do you explain the apparent contradiction?
- What images come to mind when you hear the word "submit" (4:7)? Does submitting to God suggest a positive or a negative image?
- "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (4:7). What might that mean in practice?
- How would you respond to someone who says that 4:9 encourages Christians to be miserable people?
- What can we learn from 4:1-10 about our prayer life?
- "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (4:8). What picture of God does this suggest to you?