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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

James 3:13-4:17

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Humility

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning also to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome to all of our guests this morning. We are glad that you are here with us.

Let us pray: God of unlimited grace and hope, we look to you for strength and mercy as we seek your way. Fill us with your Holy Spirit this morning as we pay close attention to your leading in us and among us. Open our ears and our eyes to your leading and inspiration. Give us hearts of flesh, open to your molding and shaping. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The letter of James, short and concise, yet filled with deep wisdom and hope for followers of Jesus, has been our companion for the last three weeks. In our first week in James, we explored 4 interconnected themes that form the foundation of the rest of the letter. Because our God, the God revealed in the Messiah Jesus, is gracious and generous, we can stand firm in the midst of the trials and temptations that come along in our lives, knowing that each instance, each step, each choice to stand in God's gracious wisdom and power will form endurance or patience in us. Because each of us is on our own journeys of faith, of becoming more like Jesus, we do not compare our suffering or testing as though standing in our faith is a contest or competition. We ask God for wisdom as we walk together.

In our second week, we looked at the rest of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2, finding a single theme holding all of these verses together: wholeness. Following Jesus or being saved by Jesus or being born again requires all that we are, our bodies and minds, our spirit and actions,

our beliefs and convictions, our words and hopes, our entire or whole lives. Jesus is lord of all of who we are and what we do from the mundane to the miraculous. True or authentic faith will transform all of who we are, changing not only our thoughts and motivations but also our actions and words because faith without consistent action is really no faith at all.

Last week, Jada and I attempted to describe for you all those things that we had found encouraging, uplifting, or challenging in our experiences at CPMC annual assembly and MCUSA national convention. In the third chapter of James, the author reminds us that our ability to speak, our tongue has the potential to both uplift and destroy, so we must be careful and intentional about how we use the great power of our words. James reminds us that our words, our capacity to speak will also be transformed by the power of the Spirit. Controlling our words, speaking encouragement and life into others requires the same discipline, the same attention, the same wisdom as aligning our whole selves under Jesus's authority and example.

This morning, we dig into the end of James chapter 3 and most of the fourth chapter. Over the last few years, I have had the privilege of participating in several friends' weddings. As a groomsman, I rent the particular tuxedo or suit that the groom has selected, and I get to try it on usually not too long before the wedding. At each of these rental stores when I have tried on my tux, one of the assistants usually suggests that I look at myself in the full 3-way mirror. Our collection of verses this morning is like this 3-way mirror. These verses give us the ability, in one instance, to see reflections of several sides or angles of a particular idea: humility.

Our **first mirror**, maybe on the left-hand side, reflects the **deep wisdom** that undergirds and sustains our sense of humility. As we read from 3:13-4:3, we are reminded of the first chapter when James tells us that if we are lacking this wisdom, we ask God for it. We have discussed this deep wisdom before in our Lenten series earlier this year. We looked at the deep

wisdom of the ten commandments, which we hear echoes of in these verses. The seeds of the wisdom of this world are filled with bitter envy and selfish ambition, which grow into disorder, wickedness, conflicts, and disputes. James talks about these envious, selfish, and even covetous motivations as cravings within us, needs that long to be fulfilled but can only be so fulfilled by hurting our neighbor, by murder even, an echo of the 6th commandment.

True humility born of deep wisdom does not covet someone else's things, nor does it engage in disputes to get whatever it desires or whatever brings it pleasure. God's deep wisdom helps us realize that we are not the center of the universe, that our needs are not the only one's worthy of being fulfilled, that our way is not the only way or even the best way, and that our hope is not found in what we think that we can secure or guarantee for ourselves through our own power. God's wisdom helps us see our broken and misguided ambitions and motivations, redirecting our attention and intention toward the good of our neighbor and creation. The humility that comes from deep wisdom results in character, marked by integrity and purity, peace and gentleness, submission and mercy, all good fruits mentioned by Paul in his letters and implied by Jesus in his ministry, too. When we look at the reflection of what humility looks like in this mirror, we find contentment, formed by the generosity of God and lived out by those who harvest righteousness from the seeds of peace that they have planted. Rather than destroying others' lives by taking advantage of them or stealing from them, humble people realize that God continues to provide what is needed, but not necessarily what is wanted or desired.

Out of contentment, we come to our second chunk of scripture: James 4:4-10. We look in the **center mirror**, finding that humility is a choice laid before us every day. We can either be friends with the world, being shaped and formed by the world's wisdom: violence, coveting, pride, envy, dispute, and conflict, or we can choose relationship with God, the law of love and

freedom. Our answer is revealed then in our actions, actions that reveal the true humility that marks us as God's friends. James's strong introduction to this part of the passage with the word adulterers helps us realize what is at stake: the very grace of God. To pursue our own way, conquering our neighbors, taking their things through disputes, fighting with them to get what we want, creating conflict and cutting others down so that we can succeed reveal the idols that we truly desire: these are all ways of becoming enemies of God, ways of stomping on the very grace that God offers to us in Jesus, turning away from the love that could fulfill us if we could only receive it and rest in it.

True humility realizes that grace is an undeserved gift that draws out the best in us, who we are meant to be. God's grace draws out of us submission to each other and to God, resisting the devil or temptation, drawing near to God, and cleansing both our hands and our hearts. Especially in America, we want it both ways; we live a double-minded reality. We want to have all that our hearts desire, all the things that offer us fulfillment, even those positions of authority and power that we see as prestigious or honorable, but James reminds us that we cannot. We must lament and mourn and weep and embrace the dejection that lays in front of us because we cannot have it both ways. The way of Jesus, the way of the cross does not allow for both. True humility realizes that the choice has already been made, that we cannot achieve fulfillment on our own, that we cannot make peace by violence; we cannot find contentment in envy, coveting, or stealing; we cannot fulfill our deepest desires in by fulfilling our pleasures.

Finally, we find in the **third mirror** the one to our right, the side of humility that is realized when we are pointing the finger at our neighbor. James calls it speaking evil of another. When we point a single finger at our neighbor, it doesn't take long to realize that we have four other fingers pointing back at us. By telling us what not to do, James is helping us to see our own

arrogance. In verses 11 through 17 of chapter 4, James is specifically referring to the arrogance of judgment and the arrogance of knowing. In judgment, we point the finger, blind to the four fingers pointed back at us and convinced that we are seeing the world as it is. James rightly gives us another echo of the *Shema*, the Jewish daily prayer, in verse 12. Remember that the *Shema* says, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” James reminds his audience that there truly is only one judge and lawgiver as much as we wish that we were the final authority. Our arrogance is revealed when we think that we can step into God’s place as judge. We humbly live in the royal law that James has already reminded us of, that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The grace that we receive from God is the same grace that we extend to our neighbor and hopefully receive from our neighbor, though we cannot guarantee it.

The arrogance of knowing might be our greatest fault in America. In verses 13-17, James puts business people in their place by telling them that their plans for future business dealings across the empire are no guarantee because no one knows what will happen tomorrow. In the tradition of Ecclesiastes, each of us is mere fog, vapor, or mist in the morning that disappears as the sun comes to its full height. We might make plans or think that we know something will or will not happen, but as we found out with COVID, so much is beyond our control. We humbly look to God in our plans, asking for wisdom to respond to the unexpected or the tragic. True humility realizes that all we have is this moment to choose to do right, which is why James ends our passage with, “Anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.” Tomorrow is not a guarantee to make the choice again, so we humbly receive the grace of the present moment and act with the deep wisdom that God has given us.

When you look into the 3-way mirror of your life, do you see these sides of humility shining forth through your thoughts, your motivations, your words, and your actions? When you

become aware of your lack of wisdom, do you ask God for insight, for the deep wisdom that reminds us of our real place in this universe? How has the choice between the world's wisdom and God's wisdom bore out in your life? Is your tendency to be jealous or envious of what other's have, leading you to criticize or steal or dispute? Finally, where have you seen the arrogance of judgment or knowing rearing their ugly heads in your heart and life? In the Spirit's power, we humbly walk in God's grace, asking for God's wisdom, living in Jesus' faithfulness.

Let us pray: God of grace and mercy, we ask you for your wisdom, though it may not come easily to us and though it may battle with the desires within us. Fill us with your love and hope as we take each day, each moment, each decision at a time, seeking your guidance and blessing. Open our eyes and ears to your will and way in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.