

Class discussion: James 3:13—18

- **Text outline**

Question: Who among you is wise and understanding?

Answer: Let him *show* (wisdom) by good behavior *deeds* in the gentleness of wisdom. (see 2:18-20 for this theme in the book)

Test: *But* if you have bitter jealousy, selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and lie against the truth.

Diagnosis: This wisdom is not from above, but earthly, natural, demonic.

Prognosis: For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

Evidence: But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

- **Important theological ideas**

What is wisdom?

Sophia. A practical, learned excellence in the art of living; an insight into the true nature of things. It is *cultivated* like a seed becoming fruit (3:18).

“from above,” God’s wisdom, is rooted in the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7 an attitude of the heart), in obedient action (Deut. 4:5,6 exercising the will); in acknowledging him (Prov. 3:6,7 intellectual mind set).

“from below,” earthly (*epigeios*, the source) natural (*psychikos*, characteristics are unspiritual, doesn’t take the supernatural into account), demonic (*diamoniodes*, evil, opposing God, the promise of wisdom without God, Gen. 3:5,6).

- **Teaching outline**

Introduction: Capture the *significance* of the passage—why your listeners should care. A story, illustration, something that connects people with the heart of the text.

Antitheses:

What the wisdom from below is about.

where it is from: the way of the world

what it looks like: all about the self

bitterness

jealousy

arrogance and lies

selfish ambition

Strange fruit of the world's wisdom: *chaos, every evil thing*

What's your prognosis?

Thesis:

What is this "wisdom from above"?

where it is from

fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7 an attitude of the heart)

obedient action (Deut. 4:5,6 exercising the will)

acknowledging him (Prov. 3:6,7 intellectual mind set).

what it looks like

unexpected, unfathomable grace (1 Cor. 2:6-9)

humble deeds

pure, peaceful, gentle, reasonable, merciful, fruitful, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

Conclusion: James presents us with the choice between two irreconcilable ways.

Wisdom freely given (Jas. 1:5). God is gracious and generous: Just ask Him!

Issues In Hermeneutics: Interpreting Ethical Teaching

Ethical teaching is within a context. Moral instruction comes to a particular people, at a particular time and place, often for a particular purpose.

Our question: How do you arrive at transcultural moral principles from teaching that originates within a specific cultural and theological context?

Cultural context relates to moral teaching

- *Accommodating* morality to existing social conditions. For instance, Jesus' teaching on divorce (Matthew 19:7-9; also Mal. 2:16) includes a comment on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, explaining *why* Moses allowed for divorce under certain circumstances.
- Laws as *president* to be applied by analogy, not prescription.

Theological context relates to moral teaching

- Principles of living for the people of God: "A kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6); "In Christ" (Galatians 3:28), who possess God's resources to act (Colossians 3:12ff).
- The center and focus of biblical ethical teaching is to God's covenant people (note 1 Cor. 5:12,13). This does *not* mean that there are no moral truths relating to all people in all places at all times. The Bible *presumes* a moral order discernable by all peoples for which they are accountable before God (Rom. 1:18-21) and evidenced by rather uniform moral codes across all cultures throughout history (see for example C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 95—121).

Three Hermeneutical Principles for Identifying Universal Moral Truths

1. **Basis and Substance:** God's essential character. Ex. 34:6-8; Matt. 5:48; Jas. 1:17; Mal. 3:6

Transcendence of God in relation to ancient near east polytheism/animism.

The world of society, nature and the gods interpenetrate in such a way that the *status quo* is the focus of attention. The aim of the gods is to preserve the established order, and the whole cultic and social life of man is primarily aimed at integration with the world. In Egyptian wisdom literature, for example, the contrast repeatedly made is

between the 'passionate man' and the 'silent man.' The latter is the successful man because he is always calm and never a disturber of the established order.... It is small wonder, therefore, that all polytheisms tend to be religions of the *status quo*, and that none of them has ever produced a thoroughgoing social revolution based upon a high concept of social justice. Revolution of any sort is abhorrent to the inmost nature of such natural religion.

G.E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*

Relational dynamic in biblical ethical teaching. Moral teaching in scripture connects a personal God to His people.

To the prophet, God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. *Pathos* is not an idea of goodness, but a living care; not an immutable example, but a dynamic relationship between God and man... Having an idea of friendship is not the same as having a friend or living with a friend, and the story of a friendship cannot be fully told by what one friend thinks of the being and attributes of the other friend.

It is because God is the source of justice that His pathos is ethical; and it is because God is absolutely personal—devoid of anything impersonal—that this ethos is full of pathos. Pathos, then, is not an attitude taken arbitrarily. Its inner law is the moral law; ethos is inherent in pathos. God is concerned about the world, and shares in its fate. Indeed, this is the essence of God's moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved in the history of man.

Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, 288, 289, 290

The ethical priorities of scripture also differ substantially from the legal codes of the ancient near east:

The difference between God's value system and that of contemporary humanly formulated law codes [is that the latter] made property matters a capital offense but were more lenient in regard to the violation of human life.

Terrance Tiessen, "Toward a hermeneutic for discerning universal moral absolutes," *J.E.T.S.* 1993:194.

Universal Principle: Love, the substance of biblical ethics and the heart of godliness. Deut. 10:14,15; Is. 43:4; Hos. 11:1.... Gal. 5:22; 1 John 4:7,8; Matt. 22:36-40.

Father/child relationship. "...forgive as your father in heaven..."

Husband/wife. "love your wife as Christ loved the church..."

"One another" imperatives for Christian community are rooted in the reality that we are "members of one another" (Rom. 12:5).

2. Unity of scripture: Intertextual dynamic.

Trajectory. Is there "redemptive movement" within the moral teaching of scripture?

Aspects of the biblical text were not written to establish a utopian society with complete justice and equity, they were written within a cultural framework with limited moves toward an ultimate ethic.

William Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*

Redemptive movement and slavery:

| cultural context | early movement | New Testament teaching | trajectory |
|----------------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| No rest for slaves | Sabbath rest for all slaves (Ex. 23:12) | | |
| No release of slaves | Sabbath year release for Hebrew slaves (Lev. 25:39-43; Jer. 34:8-22) | Gain your freedom if you can (1 Cor. 7:21); | Freedom, not slavery, is God's intent |
| | | Slaves instructed to be subject to their masters (Tit. 2:9,10; 1 Tim. 6:1) | |
| No release of slaves | Provisions given to slaves upon release | Receive the slave now as | Slavery distorts God's |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| | (Deut. 15:12-18) | a brother (Philem. 16) | design for people; subject |
| | | which is proper (Philem. 8) | to strong rebuke |
| “slave nature” | Less value of a slave’s life in a | | |
| Aristotle’s <i>Politics</i> | capital case (Ex. 21:28-32) | | |
| Slaves are property | Slaves as property (Ex. 21:21) | All one in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; Philemon 8ff; 1 Cor. 12:13) | God’s new community is equal: New humanity |

For a valuable study of the redemptive movement in scripture relating to women and marriage, see Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*. See also Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*.

Hierarchy. In a broken and chaotic world, ethical principles will conflict. What are the principles that take precedence over others? What are the “weightier provisions of the Law”? “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Ethical priorities are also weighed in light of the evangelistic imperative (1 Cor. 6:5-7; 9:19-23).

3. Teleios, nature and ethics: God’s design.

Nature and “human nature.” God created humans to bear his image (Gen. 1:26). So there is an objective meaning for “person” and a *design (teleios)* for human behavior.

Nature is not blind to purpose, but reflects the personal Creator who will redeem it (Romans 8:19ff). All things are created to operate within the framework of their nature. Humans, with free will and living in a fallen state, have the capacity to defy God’s design, but not without the natural consequence of these decisions.

Some reflections on a difficult topic: homosexuality

- Is there a discernable trajectory in scripture?

The teaching of scripture, both Old Testament and New, is uniformly negative about homosexuality (see Leviticus 18-20; Romans 1:26,27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). In light of the permissive view of homosexuality in the Roman world, New Testament teaching stands outside the cultural mainstream.

In 1 Cor. 6, Paul is describing a whole set of moral failures common to the Corinthians. In that context, he includes, *malaokois* (*tr.* effeminate) and *arsenokoitai* (*tr.* homosexuals). There is some legitimate disagreement on the particulars of these two Greek words. Are *malaokois* male prostitutes as some commentators suggest? That is certainly possible. But the word means, “soft.” “Effeminate” is a pretty good translation of the word and indeed the technical term for a male prostitute is not *malaokois*. Most commentators, based on wider use of the term in historical context, view the *malaokois* as the passive partner in a homosexual encounter. *Arsenokoitai* is a compound of two words: “male” and “intercourse.” *Koitai* (coitus) is slang and vulgar in historic usage. “Homosexual” is a very literal translation of this word. Both in the context of 1 Corinthians 6 (and 1 Timothy 1:10) and in the meaning of the term itself, *arsenokoitai* is certainly a homosexual sin and most probably referring to the active counterpart of *malaokois*, the passive partner in homosexual activity (see Gordon Fee’s excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians, pp. 244ff.). So homosexual behavior is being identified and Paul is calling on the churches to flee such conduct.

- Argument from nature—Rom. 1: 26,27

What do we mean by “natural”?

The point of Romans 1 and 2 is to show that people with and without the Law are without excuse before God—that the witness of nature and the testimony of Mosaic Law both reveal human guilt. So it is within that context that Paul describes human sin known apart from the Law.

The logic of Paul’s argument is that fallen people, who did not “acknowledge God” or “give thanks to him,” were “given over” or began to be driven by “the lusts of their hearts to impurity” and “degrading passions.” In this context, Paul brings in the “natural” and “unnatural” categories as expressions of human corruption from God’s design for sexual relations. The point here has nothing to do with cultic practices in pagan temples as some have argued—it has to do with what is *natural* and *unnatural* relative to God’s design and intent in creation. And it should also be noted that the list of things that evidence human depravity do not end with sexual sins, but Paul goes on to identify all kinds of inward attitudes and outward injustices as well.

“Natural” in today’s usage seems to be something like the common expression, “what comes to you naturally”—that is, what seems normal for you; something that has always been there, that it is just a part of your view of yourself and the way you feel. But that’s really *not* the way the ancient world in general or the Bible in particular understood “nature” or “natural.” Nature included the idea of *normative design*—the nature of things being the result of intentionality or purpose. Greeks called it “form,” a teleological or design principle in nature itself. Similarly, the Bible views nature as the product of God’s creativity and personhood, culminating in the apex of creation: humanity in his image. This concept of nature includes standards or norms—*the “oughts” of nature*. The issue is not *what comes naturally to you* in the post-Freudian sense, but *what is the appropriate purpose of something* in God’s design. That there is a normative purpose for sex is clear in Genesis 1, 2—sexual complementarity as a reflection of God’s image, two becoming one flesh, family and the blessing of children. That the normative purpose for sex was broken in the fall is clear in Romans 1. Regardless of how “natural” the gay impulse or orientation feels, it is not “natural” in the biblical sense.

This is a sensitive and difficult subject today. The sentiments below are worth consideration:

Within a pluralistic society, such as we experience today, Christians should actually defend the rights and freedoms of homosexuals to live out their beliefs. We should not legally impose our sexual ethic on others. Furthermore, the emerging biological and environmental research suggests that for some individuals the degree of non-volitional disposition toward homoerotic behavior is quite strong. For others it is simply a matter of personal choice, not clouded by volitional issues. Even within a negative assessment we must recognize a sliding scale of culpability, as a Christian ethic does in other areas where non-volitional factors influence a particular behavior.

William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*