

## Our Jealousy, God's Jealousy, and His Grace

### *James 3:13-4:6*

Today is Mother's Day, so I began the week reading in Luke's gospel from the end of chapter 7 through the end of chapter 8 because so many of the women we read about on Easter Sunday in Luke's resurrection story were first introduced in chapters 7 and 8 of Luke's gospel. I actually thought about making a Mother's Day sermon of these chapters, because this whole section in Luke seemed designed to show us what for those days was the prominent and unusual role that women played in Jesus' entourage.

But in the end, I decided to stay with James, because, where we are in his letter, James is addressing the sort of issues that were in play in Jesus' entourage anyway. Let me explain what I mean. In Luke's gospel, in chapters 7 and 8 and in Luke's resurrection story one of the principal players is, guess who, "...*Mary, the mother of James*". Now Mary is the mother of Jesus also, but Luke doesn't say that because, curiously, among the early Christians, once Jesus goes to the cross, and out the grave, and through the clouds, once Jesus becomes Lord and Savior for us all, the holy family, Mary and James and Jude become reluctant to claim him as their own, it is as if Jesus belongs to all of us now.

You'll remember in John's gospel that on the cross Jesus had bequeathed his mother to the Apostle John to live in his home, and to the Church to belong to that family, and yet by the resurrection in Luke, Mary is being called "*the mother of James*", even though early in Luke's gospel she had played a starring role as the mother of Jesus. So Jesus moves Mary away from the wood shop and his younger brothers at about the same moment that Luke begins to write of Mary as the mother of the younger brothers.

It's strange because in that part of Luke that describes the women around Jesus, right at the end in chapter 8, Jesus' own mother Mary appears in tandem with James and the younger brothers, trying to get Jesus to return to the brothers' wood shop and Mary's family table, but he won't come, Jesus tells them, 'cause he's has found a new family. The disciples, Jesus tells them, men and women both, are now Jesus' mother, sisters and brothers. So early on in Luke, Jesus won't go home.

But later when Jesus died on at the cross and rose from the grave, his mother and his brothers go to him. And after the resurrection in the book of Acts, Luke tells us that Mary and the brothers are in the upper room staying with Jesus' new family, all those brothers and sisters that Jesus had left the wood shop to save. And I think the point of all this is that family on the one hand, love

and marriage and children, brothers and sisters, and church on the other hand, love and worship and brothers and sisters have always been intertwined, were always meant to support and strengthen one another.

And the reason for that is what we've been reading about in James for a month. He's been warning us how deep and bad is the Fall from the standpoint of our trying to hold together as brothers and sisters in family and in church. So James has warned teachers, people like me, that handling the truth, speaking the gospel is a profound and dangerous business. Teachers will answer to God for the quality and the honesty of what they've taught. James has described the tongue as a powerful and incendiary danger, settling the whole course of life, what James called "*the wheel of Genesis...aflame*".

And what James has been picturing for us is not just any tongue or any words, but the Serpent's tongue and the words he spoke in the garden, words that led the first human family, man and woman both, to think that God wasn't God, the truth wasn't true, that life was about us, our making the rules, our defining what works, our grabbing what looks good and making it ours, over and against how God had told them to live. It was those words, the Serpent's tongue that James warned us was "*a restless evil, full of deadly poison*".

And the point of all the drama and the memories James evokes from Genesis was to warn us that our tongues, our words and thoughts about God and about truth weigh much more than most of us ever imagine. Because Adam and the woman in the Garden fell, long and hard and together, all tangled and broken and bent ...by words, wrong speech, bad doctrine that from a Serpent's tongue sounded pretty and sweet.

And the first thing to go, once God was shoved aside, was the love and trust Adam and the woman held for each other. Once God found them and confronted them in the garden, Adam's testimony was that she had caused it all "The woman you gave me made this happen" And the woman, still without a name at that point in Genesis, said, "The Serpent deceived me and I ate!" It was testimony that really showed up her husband as the one who failed to guard the garden. So once caught, the man and the woman pointed the finger at each other and both of them were right, each of them was guilty.

They had already entered the estrangement that all of us have struggled against ever since, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, neighbors and friends, peoples and nations. In Genesis 3, God warned the woman that she would both want and need and try to dominate her husband, and that he would fight back, ruling over her, often fiercely and unreasonably. So childbirth and childrearing would become an adventure, wonder interwoven with danger and pain.

Survival would become a painstaking struggle, never to be taken for granted, dangers within and dangers without, all of it threatening to tear us apart. It is a judgment against sin that all of us have lived with ever since. But with the judgment came grace. They would stay together. They would have offspring. And one of their descendants would crush the head of the Serpent, in other words, God would send a man who would turn the wheel of Genesis back in the right direction.

And it was with this good word, this promising word from God that Adam finally got around to naming his wife, or perhaps renaming her which is what I suspect. God often in the Bible renamed people once they gave their lives to him. So Jacob became Israel, Simon became Peter, Saul became Paul. And the moment they heard the promise the woman became “Eve” which, as I’ve told you many times, is Hebrew for “Alive”. And from that moment God began working in the heart of Adam and Eve and their believing descendants heart to make us alive, to free from the death and bondage that the Serpent imposed on us when we listened to and believed his lies.

The trick being that not all Adam and Eve’s descendants would believe. In that very first generation after them, there was Cain who wanted and grabbed and took for himself and Abel who lived like Christ, he believed his parent’s gospel and paid for it with his life. And what James wants us to remember this morning is that to belong to God, to live like Jesus, we need to choose which gospel to believe, which family to belong to, Eve the mother of the living who believed the truth, or the Serpent, who promises us that we can be like God, but really is peddling lies and death.

So James warns the Church, God’s family, Eve’s family, to be careful who we listen to. He writes, *“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by a good way of life, his works in the meekness of wisdom.”* And he goes on to warn us that there is a counterfeit wisdom out there. We talked about it last week before communion, a wisdom from the dust, a wisdom that ignores God and follows the doctrine of the Serpent, be the master, grab what you think you deed, make the rules yourself. But this week, James shows us a wisdom come down from heaven.

He says, *“The wisdom from above is, first, pure.”* This word “pure” has been misunderstood down through the ages. Biblical purity, God’s purity is not freedom from any sort of sexuality whatsoever. It is not never wanting or needing anything material, not the abandonment of any sort of personal dreams or hopes or ambitions. God made us to want to be loved and held close, he made us to need food and clothing and shelter, and he made us to want to be significant, to do things and be things that matter and make a difference. To eradicate desires like these would be to become something other than human. To think that purity is that is to believe the first lie the Serpent told the woman, that God has forbidden us to eat anything at all! Real purity, God’s

purity is to have these wants and needs and dreams and to believe that God will supply them, to be willing to learn and obey from God what it is to be loved and safe and whole and significant.

To be pure is to love and trust God first, to listen to him and sort out our wants and needs and affections and aspiration within the boundaries of the commandments he gave us. The truth is that in the garden there was a world of things the man and the woman could eat. God had set them up so that both of them, all of us could find the love and closeness, the safety and significance we want and need and dream about. Now to be sure, since the Fall, all those things have become much harder to reach, much more complicated to hold onto.

But the good news, the gospel, is that Jesus came both to live and to teach what it means to be pure, how it is that we can trust God and still get enough of what we need so that our bodies don't fail and our hearts don't lose hope. Jesus said, *"The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy, but I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly."* Jesus said, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things will be added to you."* It follows that biblical purity, biblical wisdom is to trust God and wait for what we need without trampling what God said to grab *"these...things"* for ourselves.

It is this principle of being pure, of loving and trusting God first, that brings wisdom from heaven within our reach. James teaches that God's wisdom is *"peaceable"*. A person who believes that God will meet his needs doesn't need to go to war to get anything or be anything. We can afford to be *"gentle"*, James tells us. If God is God, we don't have to rule every circumstance, master every decision. Wisdom from heaven is, James tells us *"open to reason"*. We can be taught by others, in the company of others. We can listen to ideas without being existentially threatened.

When God is first and we are small, James tells us, we are *"full of mercy and good fruits"*. Jesus taught that, to enter his kingdom, we would have to become like little children in this sense. The world invites each of us to imagine we're a hero and to think that other guy, the one who challenges our mastery is a villain. Isn't that what the Serpent promised, *"...you will be like God"*? And the other guy is just wrong. But in God's kingdom, there are no heroes or villains, just sinners banking on grace and trying to learn wisdom. We need mercy from God and we owe it to each other.

Wisdom from heaven, James teaches us, makes us *"impartial"*. This is what happens when we repent of the "I am a hero, you are a villain" mentality that the Serpent sold us in the garden. We learn to hear the truth from brothers and sisters who sin, even when their sin has hurt us.

If they love the Lord, if they're faithful to God's family, they deserve a hearing even if they think things and say things that hurt us and may be wrong. In Proverbs 17, Solomon taught, "*Better is an open rebuke than hidden love...Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy...Iron sharpens iron and one brother sharpens another.*" The point being that it is in family covenants, our families and God's family that we should be safe enough to challenge one another's thoughts, to work through real differences in a way that gets us closer to God and closer to each other.

Finally, James tells us, wisdom from heaven teaches us to be "*sincere*". Let God be first in our lives, letting him teach us in his Word how far we are from pure, how often we're not right, teaches us an outlook toward others, a humility about ourselves, that allows us to share things with each other that are less than pretty, shiny and happy. Taught by God's commandments, tempered by his grace, we can begin to afford to be who we are, which is an art requiring wisdom. Solomon's proverbs are full of warnings that we can't simply spill what's in our heart, thoughtlessly and unregulated to anyone.

But the covenants God gave us guarding our marriages and families, and his family, the Church, were given make places where we can afford to be ourselves, to work out wisdom and salvation in sacred places governed by grace. Because the zeal that grows from love must be governed by wisdom. God is a jealous God, both commanding zeal from us and giving us grace. There is no such thing as a love that never gets angry, love is zeal and grace in the same room.