

"The Sin of Boasting"
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

The James who wrote the Letter of James was none other than, James, Jesus' younger brother. Jesus had brothers and sisters in his family and James was one of them.

James wrote to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. "Twelve Tribes" means that he wrote to a Jewish audience.

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings." (James 1:1)

This is a Jewish audience who worshipped Jesus and who was being persecuted because of this.

Where Paul was theological and sometimes long winded, James' advice was short, terse, and pragmatic.

As these new Christians began to carve out an identity for themselves under persecution and eventually outside the Temple and synagogue they lacked wisdom. "How do we apply the teachings, the stories, and the life of Jesus to our own lives?" they asked.

James was a wise elder of the Church. He is called James the Just. He was the head of the oldest church and leader of the most conservative portion of Jewish Christianity in Jerusalem.

James presided at the First Council of Jerusalem. He was the one who decided the question of whether Gentiles should be circumcised in order to be saved.

He said in Acts 15:19, "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God".

That saved the young Church from splitting. When Paul and Barnabas came before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to defend their unorthodox mission to the Gentiles, it was James who invented a way for

that mission to continue. When Paul's ministry continued to provoke some believers in Jerusalem, James was among those who came up with a way for Paul to demonstrate his regard for The Law.

James was a wise and practical leader. "Who is wise and understanding among you? he asked. "From what do conflicts and disputes arise?" He knew the answer...

You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

James' counsel is, "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth."

It's hard not to measure ourselves against others we know. I am often my own worst enemy as my insecurities are brought forth when I attempt to measure myself against others. Whether it is material possessions or general progress in life, I attempt to draw self-worth from others. Then that nagging question of "am I good enough?" begins to creep into my mind, and if I let it, it will continue down to my heart.

Our self-worth should not be measured against others but found in God. If we could see ourselves the way God looks at us, we would see nothing but deep love and care. It is from God that we derive our identity and from whom we feel the abundance of love.

Good works-gentleness-wisdom vs. envy-ambition-falsehood is the struggle within and without every soul. It is the spiritual warfare that goes on in every human life and in every church--Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox.

Once in my men's accountability group we were reading Jordan Peterson's, "12 Rules of Life". Peterson says that left to our own devices that we are all "naked apes" and when we give into our animalistic desires that we tear one another apart.

What does God want? God wants us to live in humility not in envy-ambition-boasting. When we boast we stretch the truth. When we boast we say "look at me" and "forget you". The Sin of Boasting is more than inflating our egos, lying about our income, or proclaiming how good we are compared to the next guy, or that we are the only one with the right answer and everyone else is wrong.

The Sin of Boasting is different than celebrating our God given gifts. It is doing so at the expense of belittling another one whom God loves and for whom Christ died.

"Imagine", James seems to be asking us, "What then does life look like in a church community that lives by God's wisdom?"

Kathy L. Dawson is Associate Professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia who suggests these for starters:

- Church officers are chosen on the criteria of godly wisdom, rather than how much money they give to the church.
- Worship leadership is not just handled by the paid staff, but is shared among the church membership of all ages and stations.
- Disputes are handled with mercy and love, seeking peace above selfish ambition.
- Stewardship becomes not just a season of pledge collection, but a yearlong spiritual discipline taught and lived by the community.
- Prayer is not selfish, asking for what will feed individual desires, but seeks the good fruits that will meet the needs of all.
- Peacemaking and social-justice ministries become ways of addressing the earthly wisdom that surrounds us.
- Our primary identity is measured by our closeness to God rather than the possessions we accumulate.

Let me close with these thoughts.

There will always be conflicts in the Church. We can choose to behave like chimps and rip one another apart or we can live in God's wisdom.

James the Just was a wise leader that God put in the right place during a difficult and contentious time. He was someone who was true to his own most conservative portion of Jewish Christianity in Jerusalem, and yet he made room for Paul and Barnabas and their mission to the unwashed Gentiles. How can we be Christians who find ways to include rather than to exclude like James the Just? How can we follow his example too?

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