Proper 20 • James 3:13–4:10

Jeffrey Kloha
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, klohaj@csl.edu
For the “tongue” itself is not the real root of the problem. Our words are a vicious, contagious symptom, but the disease is one of the heart. “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mk 7:21–23).

“From the same mouth”—our mouth—“come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.” Indeed, they should not, but they are. This text from James offers scant explicit gospel, but it does remind us who (and whose) we are. In spite of the restless evil of our tongues (and hearts), we have been harnessed by a new Master and turned to a different kind of speech: “blessing our Lord and Father.” That, in fact, is the miracle of faith and salvation in Christ. The evil power of our words is common human experience; but our Creator has done something new and wonderfully surprising: he has “worded our mouths” with praise and prayers and blessing. He makes a fig tree bear olives, and a brackish pool spring forth fresh water. In short, he makes Christians out of us. “A pointing finger may turn back, but a word does not return.” And God’s word of mercy does not turn back, either, and it does wonderful things—for us, in us, and through us—with a power that comes from God (cf. Is 55:10–11).

William W. Schumacher

Proper 20 • James 3:13–4:10 • September 20, 2015

James 3 and 4 stand among the harshest condemnations found in the NT. To be called “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” is certainly not the life to which the saints have been called. But it is nevertheless evident among us: bitter jealousy (3:14), strife (3:14, 16), disorder (3:16), foul deeds (3:16), quarrels, fights, (4:1–2), and covetousness (4:2) are all present in our world, in our congregations, in our families, on our blogs, and, most troubling, in our hearts (3:14, 4:1). Preaching the law to our congregations—and to ourselves—will not be difficult from this text.

In fact, the law may be all that we see in this text. But what is the purpose of this preaching of the law by James? It is to call to repentance, with the result that the Lord “lifts us up.” James 4:8–10 is, in fact, the heart of the book. Far from teaching “works righteousness,” James drives his hearers to the realization that they have abandoned their Lord, sought to live for themselves alone, and as a result have nothing but death. They are, using the language of the Old Testament, “adulterous people” (cf. Jer 3, esp. 3:20) who have become “friends of the world.” They are “double-minded” (Jas 1:8), people who claim to be God’s people yet live as people of the world. The final condemnation comes in 4:5 best rendered as a pair of condemning questions: “Or do you suppose that the Scripture speaks uselessly? Does the Spirit that he causes to dwell in us crave jealously?” These rebukes expose the self-delusion of thinking that God allows us to get away with living double-minded lives.
But. As in Paul, James shifts from law to gospel with a δύναμις (4:6). The Scriptures do not speak uselessly, and indeed they speak a promise: “he gives a greater gift.” While the ESV and other translations render χάρις πτω as “grace,” here James refers again to God as the giver of the gifts (1:5 and 1:17). His gift is greater than our failure. It is upon the “humble” that God bestows gifts, upon those who repent and trust his promise.

Verses 4:8–10 is the call to repentance and new life in this God who lifts up. The verses are an inclusion of repentance: “Therefore, submit yourselves to God” (4:8) and “Humble yourselves before the Lord” (4:10) are the actions of the penitent, of those who can only trust the promise. What does the act of repentance look like? Turning from the devil and toward God (4:7–8), cleansing and purifying (4:8), mourning and contrition (4:8–9). All actions of the covenant people of God, and also the actions of those who are now in Christ—those who live not by their own power and strength but solely by the precious blood of Jesus.

Jesus, of course, is not explicitly mentioned in this text, and scarcely at all in the Epistle of James. But it is addressed to those who “hold the faith of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” In what does this faith consist? In being “lifted up” to new life in him (Jn 12:32). This new life no longer consists in jealousy, strife, quarrels, bitter deeds, etc. Rather, in Christ we are lifted up to a life that is above such self-serving and destructive behavior; lifted up to help and befriend our neighbor in every bodily need; lifted up to speak well of our neighbor and put the best construction on everything. For we have been lifted up.

Jeffrey Kloha

Proper 21 • James 5:(1–12) 13–20 • September 27, 2015

The book of James is a collection of exhortations written to encourage Christians to live out their Christian identity in their daily lives until Christ returns. Due to the nature of the book, James feels more like a collection of proverbs than a narrative that flows from beginning to end. A common fear when preaching on a text from the book of James is that it may be heard only as condemning law. Because of this, a sermon from James must emphasize the grace-based identity of the hearer so the exhortations are taken as instructions for Christian living and not as works righteousness.

Chapter five is a prime example. There are at least three distinct topics in this pericope: a warning to the rich, exhortation for patience in suffering, and the role of prayer in Christian life. The pericope suggests one might focus on the first two topics in verses 1–12 (warning to the rich and patience in suffering) or the third topic in verses 13–20 (the role of prayer). While it is possible to lump them together, each topic warrants its own treatment.

In the context of James, the first exhortation (Jas 5:1–6) can feel like it does not fit the flow of the text. The sudden seeming shift in audience emphasizes the proverbial nature of the book as a whole and differs from the two that follow. Scholars debate who