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Proper 20 • James 3:13–4:10

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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 jealousy?” 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 $\delta\lambda\omicron\upsilon$ (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 $\chi\alpha\omicron\rho\iota\varsigma$ 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.