

I May Be Wrong

Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3

I was painfully young, in my first full time job serving the church, when I encountered a controversy that had split down the middle the faculty of our small Bible College, where I was a brand-new faculty member. I had good friends on both sides of the division, and didn't know whether to side with the dissenters or the defenders. Both sides had good arguments in their favor. How do you decide between two opinions when both can equally cite Scripture, theology, and even the *Book of Order* in their defense?

I discovered dependable guidance in the James passage before us today. One side was peaceable, non-defensive, willing to yield, while the other was constantly on the attack and refused to give an inch. I cast my lot with those who were easily entreated, and my life's direction was forever altered for the good by that decision.

A good friend and elder from my first congregation was the first-rate editor of our city newspaper. When he retired some years after I had moved on, he agreed to edit a religious periodical well-known for its strong critiques of historic denominations, especially our own. He stayed in that role for many years, at the end of which he wrote me a letter, charging me with having defected from true faith, because I was living in the belly of the beast as a denominational official. He contended that if my convictions had in any way changed from where they stood those decades ago, I had gone rogue. Our email exchange over those charges was a sad ending to a long friendship. Apparently for him and his cohorts, any significant adjustments in our theology justified shunning long-time friends.

Over the years the "Christian Century" magazine has published a long series of articles entitled "How My Mind Has Changed." In it many luminaries such as Karl Barth, Emilie Townes, Reinhold Niebuhr, Letty Russell, Billy Graham, Frederick Buechner, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have related significant changes in their thinking, marking their growth in mind and spirit. Indeed, the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means literally "changing one's mind." Do we ever outgrow our need of repentance, of being able to change our mind?

In today's text, James lifts up willingness to yield as a sign of godly wisdom. It is the readiness to say, "I may be wrong." A key difference between "knowledge" and "wisdom" is that one is about all the information we may master, while the other acknowledges all that we *don't* know.

I was privileged to be able to earn a Ph.D. at a major university. I entered the program giddy over all I was going to learn, about how expert I would become in my chosen field. As my studies progressed, my greatest learning was how much I did *not* know. I learned to speak more softly, to listen more than I talk. Sure, I argued with my peers, contending for my position on this or that. That's all part of the fun, after all. But in the end, I came to realize just how much more there is to know than any one of us can possibly grasp. I think that any education worth

its salt will lead people less to become “experts” than to become lifelong learners. The more we know, the more we realize how much we don’t know.

James’s picture of the early Christian saints is not pretty. In the section immediately before our passage, he lectures them on speaking out of both sides of their mouths by blessing God one minute and cursing a person made in God’s image the next. He characterizes their tongues as raging fires, untamable and unstoppable. Then immediately following our passage he exposes their double-mindedness in their efforts to live by the world’s rules even while they claim allegiance to the rule of God. James is not timid in his pastoral counsel.

Our own passage is sung in two very different keys. On the one hand James praises godly ways and all their good fruit, then on the other he excoriates the persistent disputes, inordinate desires, and all-around worldly ways evident in the church. One is the way of true wisdom that builds up, the other a false wisdom that tears down.

The contrast is stark. Just like Psalm 1. Blessed are those who avoid the ways of the world, the psalmist says, noting especially “scornfulness” as a pathway to destruction. Putting others down. It has no place among God’s people. It is a form of the judgmentalism that James goes on to excoriate later in chapter four. It is destructive to those at whom the scorn is directed, but even more destructive to the one who speaks scornfully of others.

Godly wisdom is scorn-free. It refuses to indulge in cynicism, carping, or conniving against others. It’s just as bad for our soul if we direct it near or afar, to the person in the next pew or the congregation down the road, or to 901 Allegheny or 100 Witherspoon or the Vatican. Scorn corrodes our own souls, regardless of how near or far our object of scorn may be. But it damages others most when it’s directed to those who are nearest to us. And that is sometimes the kind of scorn we indulge in most vigorously.

Criminologists tell us that most murders are committed by a family member, not a stranger. Similarly, we are more likely to speak ill of those near to us than of distant people or institutions. A close-up attack does real, lasting damage to its victim. We are rightly outraged at the horrific revelations of pastors using their position as a platform for predatory abuse of children. It would be better if a millstone were hung around their neck and they were cast into the sea, to quote Jesus. I would add to that *any* predatory behavior that *any* religious leader exhibits toward *anyone* under their spiritual care.

Why are we less outraged over non-physical predation, expressed in scornful verbal attacks on one another? Do we really believe that old ditty that is so utterly false, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me?” Garbage. This is precisely what James is decrying in the early verses of chapter four: preying upon and seizing and doing injury to others with our words, to gain advantage over them. Speaking ill of each other can be at least as damaging to our own selves and to the objects of our attack as if we were inflicting physical damage.

We are entering a season that makes it easy for me to leave my TV off. It's the run-up to national elections. Already the bile is flowing back and forth in a proliferation of candidate ads that turn my stomach. One cannot watch any commercial TV without being inundated by them. Candidates know full well that everyone hates negative ads, yet they still use them because research proves they are effective, even though they are hated. Opposing candidates are willing to bash and maul each other to win higher place in our system. We shudder in disgust. This is precisely the kind of worldly behavior James is fingering in the early church. Aren't you glad the church finally figured out how to squelch all that mutual attack stuff? Or did it?

So how can we get past our scornful ways? "Delight in the ways of the Lord," the psalmist counsels. If we do, we'll be fruitful and prosper. James describes the ways of the Lord as "...pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." No duplicity allowed. No room for saying one thing here and another there, for saying one thing and doing another.

For my money, "willingness to yield" is the most difficult, yet perhaps the most foundational of these characteristics. It is a necessary condition for gentleness, mercy, and peaceability. It all begins with these four words, "I. May. Be. Wrong." It is not something I can demand you to say; it is something I must demand of myself. It is the opposite of judgmentalism, which always elevates me above those I am judging. It is true humility, free of hypocrisy. It is an acknowledgment of my great need, rather than promotion of my interests and assets.

It is the posture we must bring to our Lord's Table, where we are all equally in need. Only when we acknowledge our poverty can we fully receive the riches of the bread of life and the cup of salvation our Lord Jesus stands ready to offer all who look to him for mercy, wholeness, and justice.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.