



## 7. Flirting with the World (James 3:13-4:6)

As we have started to explore the letter of James in the last few weeks, we have seen the way in which Jewish believers were under pressure in their faith but at the same time, their lives did not match the calling. They had the right words, but it was not showing in their lives. Being Jewish they would have been strong on the keeping of the law – or at least the contemporary Jewish version of it. They would have been staunch commandment keepers. To keep the law was a virtue to them. They were proud not to have murdered, committed adultery, stolen or lied but James shows that there was more to the letter of the law. Living in a way that honoured God goes deep into the desires of our innermost being.

Like Jesus before him, James shows us that the purity of a holy God by demonstrating that partiality (discriminating against someone), or just refusing to help someone in need is as bad as murder in God's eyes. By the way they used or misused their tongues, they bore false witness. Their lives just didn't reflect the purity of God. Faith without works is dead and these people had the stench of death about them because their mouths and lives didn't match.

Why is James doing this? To show that God's standards are holy ones and we must live holy lives. Faith without works is dead. Our living holy lives demonstrate our faith. Our lives speak more eloquently of our faith than our words. If we are going to make a difference here in Swaffham, then the words and lives have to match. Let me give you a verse in chapter 1:22 *Don't fool yourself into thinking you're a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in through one ear and out through the other. Act on what you hear! (MSG)*

Acting on the Word is the only wise thing to do in life. James says *13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. Who's wise? Our lives show how wise we are by the deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. The Message renders it in this way Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts* We've come across similar sentiments before in chapter 1. Let me give you the Message version of verse 21 of chapter 1: *In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.*

How are we going to make that difference in Swaffham? By living and acting wisely. How do we do that?

- By making Number One Number Two

*14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

We live in the "I" generation. We think we're modern but the Greeks and Romans were into the cult of self long before we were. We are a society where personal ambition and self-gratification are rated more important than anything else. People that make it in our society are applauded for their accomplishments. How are we different. We are wise – number one is number two. If you look at all the strife and problems in our society – and even worse – in our churches, you'll find someone's ego at the bottom of it. Usually it is a few egos who won't back down because they are too proud to do so.

The worse thing is that strife is usually caused because someone thinks that they have more

spiritual position than others. Usually it's worldly or even devilish James tells us. The way of Christ is one of humility. In fact, that word humility would better be translated meekness in the AV. Meekness isn't just humility or gentleness – it's the opposite of self-assertiveness or self-interest says W E Vine<sup>1</sup>. The sense is making a conscious effort to make number one number two. It's not a mark of human weakness as some people would put it. It's a natural outcome of an *agape* life where one lives and dies for others. The Lord Jesus Christ showed us meekness when out of strength He took on the weaknesses of human flesh to die for us and purchase our salvation.

How do we make an impact in Swaffham – by making Number One Number Two in our dealings with the world.

● By thinking in community

A product of the number one society has been the collapse of community. Even in a place like Swaffham, our neighbours may be strangers. And that aspect of worldliness came into the church a long while ago. If you take a look in a Christian bookshop, you'll find plenty of books on how to be a better Christian – how to pray, how to know God better, how to be filled with the Spirit. There are books on all aspects of personal life, but there are so few on being church. That's a pity because we have a God who has given us community. We grow because we worship and serve with other believers. Christians who believe they can do without church quickly wither or have problems.

If we have a look at the nature of the wisdom that comes from heaven, we find it's a wisdom that makes us to relate to our fellow believers.

*17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.*

There's nothing swell-seeking in being peace-loving, considerate, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. It's not a spirit of establishing my needs, my wants, my desires – it's all about helping others.

And here's the root of bitter envy and selfish ambition – covetousness. So you want to promote yourself or your views at the expense of others – it's covetousness. In itself there's nothing wrong with ambition. God wants us to have ambition when we strive to get the best out of the gifts and talents He's given us. But what about when we use others, exploit others and step on others to get what we want. It becomes covetousness.

Have we ever used people to manipulate something that promoted us at the expense of others? It's a form of covetousness and it invariably leads to fighting – which is of course tantamount to murder as well according to Jesus and James. I think I've mentioned this before, but in my experience, splits in churches rarely are on matters of principle – like sound doctrine – but on characters and ambitions. One lot of people want their way over another and it's usually all nicely dressed so people sound spiritual. *2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.* But it's all about coveting power and influence. And it's sin. And trying to get what you want over others in the church come what may is covetousness and it damages the work of God.

This stands as a warning to us. In this church, most of us have come from a number of different types of background. If I got a fiver for everyone who has said how much better it was in their last church, I'd be a rich man by now. And was all pull in different directions. Perhaps that's where we have a problem as a church. We want this church to be our last one. We covet that which belongs to another church in another place and never celebrate what we have here and say to God "what do you want here Lord and where do I fit in". It's not quarreling or fighting but it isn't unity either. Let's make this church the one GOD wants it to be. All our past churches have given us insights. Let's not covet the past but use them to serve Him more effectively in

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<sup>1</sup> Vine WE, *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Nashville, Nelson, 1997 (1966), p728

what HE wants to do here. That's what the exercise is we are asking you to do. Not to tell us how good your last church was, but to suggest how this church may be the one God wants it to be as we face the future.

● By fearing God and not flirting with the world

*You do not have, because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. 4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." [6] Prov. 3:34} Submit yourselves to God.*

How do we act wisely? We fear God and don't flirt with the world.

We all have the experience in life of thinking that somehow things could be better than we are. We feel maybe that God does not answer our prayers. Why is my life not better than it is? Why is our church not better than it is?

Then ask yourselves these questions?

What am I asking God to do? We often don't ask because we have no expectation that God is going to do anything. Whether it is about healing. Or about some crisis in our lives. Or whether we think God can do anything in Swaffham. We don't ask God because we don't believe. Is God's arm so short He cannot save? Is He so powerless that He can't do anything. If He's not doing it, then we rationalise it and talk about His sovereign will.

Let's stop blaming God from being moody – because that's what we are saying – and start looking at ourselves. Did we ask? If we did ask, why did we ask? God does not honour the covetous. But he freely gives when He is honoured. For whose pleasure do we ask. Verse 5 is quite ambiguous: NRSV *God {Gk [He]} yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us*". In other words, God desires that we be like Him in who we are, what we say and what we do. Or He has answered, yet we don't like His answer so we keep on asking. Or we're not listening.

So let's look at our motives. Are we flirting with the world? God hates it when we do that. It's a form of adultery. Adultery you say – thinking that's a sin you'd never commit.

Adultery isn't just the act, but the motive of infidelity that gets you there. God hates infidelity to Him. If you are acting and prying outside His will then you are unfaithful; however noble what you are doing is. People just never seem to get the idea that they can be involved in any kind of deed and still be outside the will of God.

It may be noble but it's infidelity, it's adultery, it's sin. In the time of Amos, people worshipped God faithfully but it was an abomination because it was not what God required of them. You may come to church. You may use the name of Jesus. You may be heavily involved with the church. But are you an adulterer because of your infidelity to Him? We all do it and then expect God to hear and answer prayer. Frankly, it's remarkable he answers as many as He does – although to those who dishonour Him with infidelity, no is a pretty good answer.

Let's examine our lives. Are we faithful to Him. Or are we committing the adultery of flirting with the world as we live our lives? Do we covet for things or even for what we had in the past?

God wants us to honour Him in our lives day by day. He wants us to honour Him by building His church. *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." [6] Prov. 3:34} Submit yourselves to God.* Let's jump off our high horses and come before Him in humility. We need to change. We need to be faithful – submit yourselves to God. This church needs to change if we are to become the salt and light that this community needs. It doesn't matter how noble whatever we do is if that is not what God requires of us. That's what submission means. Let's understand that. Let's come before Him in humility and say "Lord what do you need of me?"

**What do you need of us? Holy Spirit, break me, mould me, fill me. Make me who I should be. Holy Spirit, break us, mould us, fill us. Make us into the church you want us to be. Not our last church or the church down the road. Make us YOUR church and bring glory to Yourself.**



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