

Supernova

How Self-Centeredness Makes Us Destructive

Discovering Practical Christianity (James) Series - Pt. 6

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James 3:13-4:12

Introduction

SELFISHNESS is a Root of All Kinds of EVIL

- **Selfishness makes us really mean.** Truly the concept of ‘Me First’ at the heart of almost all sin. It can make us monsters. Let me give you a four examples. When we view the world through selfish lens we may...
 - **1.) See Opponents & Obstacles vs. Friends & Ministry** - We see other people as opponents or at least obstacles in our way. That makes us treat other people terribly because we are trying to get around them. They no longer are the point, they are in the way of the point. This can easily lead to resentment.
 - **2.) Tell God No** – If God is on the throne of your life, then every time He gives a directive the answer should be an immediate yes. When we tell God no, we are saying that we are the king and He is not. That is so offensive to our Creator. It was telling God no, that plunged our world into sin, death and decay. It was telling God no, that has led to suffering unquantifiable.
 - **3.) Lose our Peace and Joy** – the more selfish we are the more disappointing the world becomes. It will never be enough for us. The good times won’t be good enough. The special moments won’t be special enough. The praise we receive won’t satisfy enough. The result of selfishness is living in bitterness and disappointment because this world wasn’t set up to serve us, it was set up to serve God.
 - **4.) Become Easy Puppets for the Enemy** - The more we are self-focused the more the Enemy can more easily manipulate us to do his will. Why? Because he knows well the road to selfish pride and knows how to stimulate it in us. He simply needs to whisper offense into our ears and we are immediately angry at the person next to us.
- **God’s Purpose** – In opposition to us seeing the world through the lens of how it benefits us, **God wants us to see it through the lens of what He can pour THROUGH us into the world to bring healing and love.** People are to be loved. People are precious. It’s not about what we get, but what we can provide. This unlocks God’s blessings to remain blessings. It unlocks a joy in seeing God be glorified. It unlocks the blessings of contentment and satisfaction, because we are here to add to God’s Kingdom, not build one of our own.
- **Context = Leaders, BUT** – James continues on with his correction of the church in Jerusalem by turning his attention even more directly toward the leaders of the church. When we read this, we should understand that context FIRST and then realize that there is a lot of it that applies to us as well. We can’t merely push it off as only a leader thing. We are all leaders and influencers in different spheres. It applies to us too. Maybe James wouldn’t be so harsh on us if we aren’t leading or he didn’t see such damage coming out of our mouths, but we

never want to miss an opportunity to let the Holy Spirit shine a light into our soul to see what we may need to adjust and align for God's glory.

- **Prior Message** - Last time we were together we read that James particularly saw damage coming from leaders/people's words. Our tongues, he said, are dangerous. Our words have the power to raise up and tear down, particularly when we have influence over other people. He even said that because of the danger, not many people should want to be teachers or leaders because they will be held accountable to a greater degree.
- **Today's Focus** – in today's passage James pulls the screen back that the leaders were hiding behind. Too often the bad behavior of leaders is shrouded or hidden by the idea that they are on a different level and different rules apply. These leaders seem to be claiming that they are so wise that they are allowed to say whatever they want and they are excusing their behavior.
 - **What's your favorite form of justification and hiding?**

Lesson

- **The Cloak of Wisdom**
 - **James Rebukes Mean Leaders & Talks About Wisdom**
 - **James 3:13-18** – *“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure¹, then peaceable², gentle³, open to reason⁴, full of mercy⁵ and good fruits, impartial and sincere⁶. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace⁷.”*
 - **Jewish Teachers = Wisdom** – A key to understanding this passage is to realize that in the Jewish culture, teachers or leaders were not simply smart, they were

¹ “The wisdom from above is pure, a term, infrequent in both LXX and NT, which here describes not only freedom from ceremonial or corporal defilement but sincere moral and spiritual integrity, associated especially with Christ, as in 1 John 3:3. The wise man will copy Christ and keep himself “unspotted from the world” (1:27). Thus “purity” is not just one quality among others but the key to them all.” NICNT

² “Peaceable (elsewhere in the NT only in Heb. 12:11) may be used to cover the narrower classical “freedom from strife with others” and the distinctively Hebraic meaning of inward peace, *shalom*, i.e., “well being,” especially “salvation,” not altogether unlike the Latin use of *Salve* as a greeting. Contrast vv. 14–16. The neighborly virtues in the remainder of v. 17 suggest the social rather than the introspective force of the word: the good Christian not only prefers to be peaceable but also does his best to spread peace among his fellows. True wisdom is not disputatious but conciliatory, exemplifying the spirit and teaching of Christ, which was the very antithesis of censorious self-seeking.” NICNT

³ “The word translated *humane* is essentially Greek and without any single equivalent in English: compare Latin *clementia*. Matthew Arnold’s definition “sweet reasonableness” is good if it includes the man who is fair, considerate, and generous rather than rigid and exacting in his relations with others: thus in Aristotle it is contrasted with “strict justice,” and is used of judges who do not press the letter of the law.⁸⁸ Thucydides also speaks of men of moderation who listen to reason. It was also highly prized by the rabbis.⁹⁰ This quality Christ constantly exhibited especially toward his enemies.” NICNT

⁴ “Yielding to persuasion, only here in the NT and once in the LXX (4 Macc. 8:6), is the opposite of “disobedient,” and is used both of military discipline and for observance of legal and moral standards in ordinary life. We may conjecture that the dissension in the church was caused not only by the conduct of the leaders but also by the rank and file. They are reminded of a quality notable in the character of Christ, in his obedience to his Father’s will.”

⁵ “...it is full of *mercy* rather than “venom” (3:8), in the broader sense of “loving kindness” and *good fruits* (see Matt. 4:7). The Jews believed in mercy, though it was often restrictive, certain classes being excluded from its benefit. Here James is closer to Jesus, and notably his beatitude on the merciful. Such mercy is all-embracing, without “respect of persons,” and triumphs in the Day of Judgment (2:13).”

⁶ “*Undivided in mind* (here only in the NT, and in the LXX only in Prov. 25:1) repeats the truth of Jas. 1:6 and 2:24, condemning the waverer, the negative form implying the opposite, namely, singlemindedness (see Mitton, p. 141); and the rare final adjective, a reference perhaps to the “Pharisaic leaven” lingering among Jewish Christians (Hort), indicates the essential sincerity of the wisdom from above, *untainted by hypocrisy*.”

⁷ “Though its general meaning and connection with what has gone before is clear enough, its exact meaning is difficult.” NICNT

considered WISE⁸. Jews believed that true wisdom came from God Himself so if they were doling out wisdom, they were getting it from God and were closer to God than other people. This exalted them in the eyes of the people (and in their own eyes unfortunately).

- **The Shroud of Wisdom** – When someone is considered to be a different level of being, a higher, more elite human, closer to God (e.g. priest), it distorts the ability to engage with them appropriately. They are able to use the leadership dynamic as a type of cloak/shroud that keeps them from being questioned. When they are mean to people they can say, I'm speaking for God. When they are selfish, they can say, don't question me. When they are ambitious, they can make it sound religious.
- **James' Rebuke = If you were truly wise, we could see it in your actions and behaviors, not just your words.** James isn't playing here. He's pulling back that cloak and as the Bishop/regional big dog of Israel churches, he was calling out the localized leaders and saying, 'you keep telling people that you are wise and presiding for God, but your actions show differently. You've got to live it, not just say it.
- **The Main 2 Problems: 1.) Bitter Jealousy, 2.) Selfish ambition** – James says, if you are a bad guy, you don't get to brag and lie about it. Let's call it what it is: you are selfish. You want to be a big deal because you are jealous of other people getting credit and you want to be the best because you think you deserve it, and others don't. Not only is that not WISE, but it's also DEMONIC. You are acting like the devil acted when he was thrown out of heaven. This perspective and these kinds of attitudes are going to lead to destruction. The church will start seeing all kinds of damage (disorder and every evil practice)
- **What a Real Wise Leader Looks Like** – James exposes the bad guys by putting out a standard for what they and their ministry SHOULD look like.
 - **Purity = Christlike integrity** – moral and spiritual integrity that flows through behaviors and attitudes.
 - **Peaceable = internally and externally** – Not only peaceful in themselves but creating peace around them. Any unsettling would be done on purpose for a good purpose. They don't thrive in people being at odds with one another. They aren't encouraging strife and hatred.
 - **Gentle = not harshly demanding** – Fair, considerate, gentle and not rigidly letter of the law.
 - **Open to Reason = Dedicated to what's right** – self-disciplined and following what is right.
 - **Full of Mercy = unbiasedly merciful to all.** It's not just giving mercy to your crew, but to all without favoritism.
 - **Full of Good Fruits = Doing good for others.** It's not just good works that benefit the person doing them, it's good things done for the good of others.

⁸ "Of teaching the Jewish ideal was high, as is shown in the Jewish use of the term "wise" for the teacher: it signifies "in Jewish usage one who has a knowledge of practical moral wisdom, resting on a knowledge of God" NICNT Commentary, James Adamson

- **Impartial = Truly unbiased.**
- **Sincere = Untainted by hypocrisy.** Truly honest and good to all.
 - **Common Theme** – as I was studying these terms, one theme emerged clearly to me, the bad leaders were different to their group than the general group. They were creating factions, partisanship, divides. They were good to their people and mean to other groups.
- **Fighting for #1**
 - **The Reason Why We Fight and Why God Won't Play That Game**
 - **James 4:1-3** – *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”*
 - **James Goes General** – Although James likely still has the bad leadership in mind, he broadens the conversation to include everyone in the church in these passages.
 - **What causes fights with people?** – Quarrels and fights, tensions. Think through the different conflicts you've had and how they were handled. Dig down and think through what the argument was really about. Was it about the issue or were you trying to control a narrative? Was it about facts or did you want them to change their opinion? **It's not that all disagreement or tensions are bad, it's saying that when it gets to quarrels and fighting usually it's a power struggle.** One person wants to be right and another person wants to be right. One person wants control and another person wants control. One person wants to say how it's going to be and another person wants to say how it's going to be. **When we get into a mode that our opinions are most important, it creates unnecessary tension.**
 - **It's Selfishness** – James says that at the heart of it, our passions are at war within us. What does he mean? He means that on one hand we know that God is the ultimate One that everything is about. We know that there is absolute Truth whether we can arrive at it or not. We know that we don't get to control the world. We know that we ought to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. **We know that relationships are more important to win than arguments. BUT, dang it, they are on my last nerve!** They are so wrong! They think they are all that! They are insulting me! They have what I deserve! And the list goes on.
 - **When we don't get what we want, we do terrible things** – Let's talk about all the power grabs in the world. Think about it on a national level, think about it on a regional level. Think about it on a personal level. Why would we harm someone else? What could possibly be the motive for hurting someone else? Why bother? Why put forth the effort to engage with someone else in a negative way? Here's the reality, they are in the way of what we want. Why would a person murder someone? To get something or remove a challenge. Why would a

person gossip about another? To make themselves feel better at the cost of another's reputation. Why is there domestic violence? Because of lashing out selfishly in anger. And the list goes on. It always comes back to selfishness out of control.

- **fight, quarrel, murder...dang that escalated fast** – James knows that **the different ways we harm people are not a difference in quality but in quantity.** We think that we would never murder someone but we kill them in our hearts rather easily.
 - **We get in bad moods in general when we don't get what we want** – I know it sounds insulting and perhaps it is, but, in some ways, **we are all a bunch of brats.** We may not lash out with our fists but we lash out with our attitudes and our tongues, right? We even know how to manipulate with silence. We know how to throw adult tantrums. It's kind of embarrassing.
 - **Where's God's help in this?** He's blocking your prayers and saying no because He knows the motive behind the request. **He knows that it's not healthy.** He knows you and I aren't healthy when we ask for stuff like that. As a good parent He has to sift the requests on what would be best for us. We are asking out of our selfishness and sin.
- **Allegiance to Dual Kingdoms**
 - **The Impossibility of Embracing the World and God Simultaneously**
 - **James 4:4-6** – *“You adulterous⁹ people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says¹⁰, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”¹¹?⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*
 - **Spiritually Adulterous** – we need to take some time to unwrap this phrase, because it's used a LOT in the Old Testament and it's a powerful image. Here's what it means...relationship with God is one of love and commitment. It's kind of like a marriage. There is a contract agreement of loyalty and fidelity. God's expectation is that He would be our One greatest love and that our lives are dedicated to Him. So, when we sin, when we choose ourselves or others over Him, **it's not only a breaking of a contract, it's personally violating.** It's like spiritual or relational adultery. In the Old Testament, spiritual adultery was one common complaint that God had against Israel. Why? Because they were supposed to be a theocracy (government rule by God), but they kept serving

⁹ “Here *adulteresses (moichalides)*, a Greek vulgarism, is used not literally but in the common OT sense of unfaithfulness to God. KJV follows a later Byzantine gloss, “adulterers and adulteresses.” “In the OT all sin and apostasy are spoken of as adultery” (Hort; see, e.g., Hos. 2:9, 19, 20; 9:1; Exod. 34:15). The marriage metaphor was taken over by Jesus in denouncing Israel as an “adulterous generation” (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38), by Paul of the Church as the Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:1, 2; Eph. 5:22f.; see Rev. 19:7; 21:9), and in this verse by James of the new covenant with Israel. Here, as the context shows, *adulteresses* is figurative of idolatry, and the false god is *the world*.” NICNT

¹⁰ “The source of the *saying in the scriptures* is totally unknown to us. It has been traced variously...” NICNT

¹¹ “These considerations, therefore, lead us to conclude that James is here referring not to the yearning of God nor that of his Spirit, but to the sinful propensities of the spirit implanted in man...So NEB correctly translates: “The spirit which God implanted in man turns to envious desires” NICNT

other gods. They kept violating His commandments. They kept allowing selfishness to get in the way.

- **What is Friendship with the World?** – the word for friendship here (*philos*) means loving like a friend. What would that entail? Investment and partnership. What's wrong with that? Who's it with? Remember, the Bible uses the term world (*kosmos*) in various ways, but one of the most common is to describe **secular society that is anti-God. Therefore, to be friends with the world would mean partnering and investing your resources and heart into things that are against God.**
 - **What does it look like to be an enemy of God?** – The word for enemy (*echtros*) means **adversary**, or 'one against'. Practically speaking friendship and enemy are polar opposites. Either you are partnering and investing, or you are against and resisting. Satan is described as an adversary to God. He is against what God is for. When we disobey God, we are acting as an enemy of God.
 - **What it means that God is jealous 'over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'?** - There are some, like the NICNT commentary that don't believe this is talking about God at all but it's mistranslated. It is rather referring to the sinful desires in a human's spirit. Honestly, I don't know what to think about it. But I think there is something for us to glean either way. If it means that God is jealous for us, it means there's a **passion and intensity behind His demand for total allegiance**. There's nothing wrong with that. Of course, since we are sinful human beings our jealousy is not pure, it's tainted, so our type of jealousy is bad. His would be good. If it translates better that the jealousy of a man's sinful spirit is what is bothering us, it makes sense – as well. Our 'flesh' is all kinds of problems for us. Why? It's contrary to God and pulls us the wrong way.
 - **God is so Grace-Full** – **God does not change His nature due to our sin**. He is full of grace and continues to be so, during our sinful times. He could and perhaps should, for the sake of justice, destroy us when we sin, but He doesn't. His love compels Him to be grace-filled toward us. It's another reason why God is so wonderful.
 - **God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble** – **the best way to get on God's bad side is to be arrogant and proud**. He doesn't handle that very well. It's one of the greatest affronts to Him that we can do. It's challenging His nature and snubbing what He's done for us. **He's really nice to the softies.** 😊
- **The Solution**
 - **How to Bring Ourselves Back in Alignment with God**
 - **James 4:7-10** – *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”*

- **How to Bring Ourselves Back Into Alignment with God** – James is now shifting gears and turning the corner to what we do about it practically. If we, as Christians and leaders are so messed up, **what do we do to turn it around in our lives?** James has a plan.
- **Submit to God** – I love the quote: **“First rule about getting out of a hole, stop digging.”** The first thing we need to do when we are sinful is to stop sinning and that means that we are submitting to God. We agree to do it His way no matter what that entails. **We give up our power struggle and we say, ‘Yes, Lord.’** Period.
- **Resist the Devil, and he will flee** – This is a very powerful statement. It gives us hope and confidence that not only will our spiritual attack not be forever, but there is an active thing we can do to get the devil to leave us alone. James says, resist him and he will leave. Now, **why would he leave? My best guess is that he has other things he wants to do** and other targets that are easier. I would guess that his team has limited time and limited resources and there is no point in constantly harassing someone that you can’t win over or fully tear down. Move on.
- **Draw near to God and He will draw near to you** – At first this sounds encouraging because it means that when we desperately want to get next to God, He won’t reject us, but He will meet us in our efforts. Then upon second glance there’s a bit of a nervousness...wait, are you saying that He’s not near me right now? I have to get next to Him to get Him involved? No, of course not. When you are dealing with an omnipresent, omniscient, all-powerful God you have to use analogies instead of realities to explain concepts. In other words, we say, Holy Spirit come down upon us, when in fact, He’s right here and dwelling within us. But what we mean is reveal yourself as near and act like you are near. We are asking for a change in atmosphere and environment. **We are asking for Him to take action.** In the same way, here, when we seek God and give up our selfishness, He activates in a different way. **He gets to shift into a different relational paradigm.** Instead of having to be the disciplining parent role, He gets to shift into the comforting parent role.
- **Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts** – How do we cleanse our hands? We **confess and ask for forgiveness.** Why would we need to cleanse? We are sinners and double-minded. What does double-minded mean? It means that we are partly with God and partly not, which isn’t really a thing. We think that we can keep one foot in both worlds and be fine, but that lack of integrity ruins our ability to do either well. When it says to purify our hearts, it means to confess our all the junk and sin. It means that we spend time in the presence of the Holy fire of the Holy Spirit to let Him burn it out. How does all of this look practically? It looks like a deep, emotional, prayer time.
- **Be wretched, mourn, weep, gloomy and humble yourselves before God** – Wow, this is intense language. What is James saying here? Why is it such a big deal? Because **the violation is so bad and it’s so destructive that the only way for this ship to be turned around is to get extreme in the other direction.** They need some serious repentance here. Instead of being ‘kind of sorry’, this is groveling,

shut it down, type of repentance. Only get up when God lifts you up, kind of stuff.

- **Straw Judges**

- **The Danger of Judging One Another**

- **James 4:11-12** – *“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law¹². But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”*

- **Don't speak evil against one another brothers & sisters** – I don't think that it's odd or shocking for pastor James to tell Christians not to speak evil against one another, but I would ask, 'what kind of evil are you talking about? What's your specific concern here?'. I think the context is judging one another, which we'll get into in a moment. But right here we need to realize that when we aren't treating each other correctly, we are doing evil. It sounds harsh but we need to call it what it is. The word 'speak evil' is *katalaleo* in Greek and it involves things like: backbiting, defamation, accusation, rebuking, blaming, condemning, falsely judging, etc.
- **Judging each other (what does judging mean?)** – the word in Greek is *krino* which has a variety of meanings depending on context. Generally it means **to make a determination, form an opinion. But when we form an opinion, one type of opinion is not like another.** For a 2-year-old to form an opinion that your hair looks weird, is not the same as a professional hairstylist. For a parent to make a judgment on the behavior of their child is not the same as a judge in a court. So, making determinations are good, but closing an opinion on someone is not. **We don't have enough information to close the book on something or someone. Only God has all the pieces, so he's the only One who can truly judge to that degree.**
- **Judging speaks evil against the law (judges the law)** – when we judge, James says, we are speaking evil against the law. We are in a sense judging the law. What in the world does that mean? It means that **we are saying that we know better** than even the Old Testament Law that God gave us. It means that we are elevating our opinion above that of God's.
- **That's God's territory, not ours** – there is only ONE lawgiver and judge and we aren't it. It's God alone. **He is the one who is able to save and destroy. We are playing games.**
- **Who are we to judge our neighbor?** – Because we don't have all the pieces, and that other human beings are not ultimately accountable to us, what in the world

¹² “Not only is the law personified, but it is in some sense identified. The precise meaning is somewhat obscure. Possibly the brother may be said to personify law, if he is law-abiding; to speak evil of him therefore is to speak evil of the law which inspired his conduct. Judging and doing the law are delicately contrasted: man must obey the law, not judge it; to set oneself above the law is to usurp the divine prerogative. Indeed the rabbis taught that judging our neighbor logically leads to the graver sin of judging God.” NICNT

are we doing trying to act like a judge of our neighbor? It's not only absurd, it's wrong.

Conclusion

- **So much of our sin simply comes from selfishness**
 - Dying to self is difficult but necessary
 - Choosing God's path and purpose unlocks the greatest version of you
 - It's all about Him anyway.
- Let's take some **time of confession and renewing our allegiance** to our Lord today.