

## ***Harsh Honesty***

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James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

*“...the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable...”*

### *Movement 1 – The Troubled Church of James*

Imagine what James saw in the churches of his day. Let me paint for you a picture. There is a classic scene from the television show *Malcolm in the Middle*; it is a scene that I enjoy every time I see it. The scene takes place in a batting cage park, and is a beautiful ballet of chaos and mayhem. In this scene you are looking through the eyes of Lois, the mother of the family, at her husband and four boys. She sees her husband entangled with two clowns and getting pummeled in the stomach, her oldest boy shoving a clown's face in a birthday cake, the two middle boys pulling the hair and biting the ankles of two other clowns, and the youngest boy hidden under a table, his face covered with frosting, enjoying the paradise of all the sugar he can eat. She looks at this mess, this mayhem, and smiles because this is her family. It is a great scene that shows a mother at peace with the troubled, messy family that she calls her own. It is also a great scene because when do you see a family fighting with a gang of clowns?

When I read anything from the letter of James, my mind turns to this scene from *Malcolm in the Middle*, but in a slightly different way. I can imagine James looking over the landscape of churches before him and I try to see those churches through his eyes. There are some churches which are giving seats of honor to the rich, and telling the poor to stand off on the side. There are some churches which have declared great faith, but are showing little action for that faith. There are Christians bickering with other Christians. There are Christians who have faith, but lord it over others in a show for power. When I think about the ministry and teachings of Christ, and the dissonance of those teachings when played against the actions of these churches, it is almost as absurd as a family fighting a gang of clowns. I imagine James saw a landscape of troubled churches acting in an absurd way. The big difference is that I don't think James was smiling when he surveyed these churches. When he saw Christians slandering other Christians he did not grin. When he heard someone say, “good luck and God bless” but not take any actions to help the person gain a better life, James did not smile. When he saw the desires of individuals taking precedent over the life of the church, James did not smile. The Biblical scholar Sharyn Dowd, along with many others, suggests that unlike many of Paul's letters which were written for specific churches struggling with specific issues, the letter of James was not written for just one church, but for many churches. James was writing to a landscape of troubled churches. These were churches that were still in their childhood, and it was like they were running around without their parents.

Through his letter, James was trying to set things right and trying to keep people true to Christ. One of the specific issues that James was addressing in this passage was the lives of the teachers who knew about Christ, but still acted in the same way as the Platonic, Aristotelian, Cynic, and Sophist teachers. These were teachers who wanted power and prestige because they had an inner knowledge of Christ. James saw teachers taking the grace of Christ and clothing it in robes of the world, and churches endorsing such a practice. This was just one of many things that James saw with the churches in his time, and he comments on other problems which churches were wrestling with in other parts of the letter. So imagine what James saw in the churches of his day, and you can understand why James wrote what he did.

### *The Troubled Churches of Today*

Imagine what James would see in the churches of today. If James were to visit, would we be so quick as to proudly show ourselves off? Sure, James would see churches that are working hard to help the poor, hungry and the least of this society. Sure, James would see churches that are striving to live the love they have received from Christ. Sure, James would see churches that are becoming positive points of impact in neighborhoods, churches that are trying to reach out to the sick, and churches that try to live out their faith. James would see some good things in the churches of today. Yet James would also see churches that give more to their edifice than they give to the poor. James would see congregations that condemn other congregations. James would witness Christians yelling at other Christians, Christians denying other Christians in their faith, bickering, fighting and lying. James would see churches involved in sexual abuse scandals, churches involved in financial scandals, and churches supporting and advocating violence. James would see a world that has accepted and assumed that churches are places where people will slander each other, where people will lie to each other, and where people will vie for power. It is surprising to find a church that cannot speak of at least one major blow-up at one time or another (for some churches, it is more than one). It is surprising to find a church that has not advocated one societal ill or another at some time. I think about the landscape that James might see if he were to look at the churches today, and think he might see the black and white, drab and broken landscape that you see in the movie *Sin City*. In that movie, everything is corrupt, from the courts to the cops, and especially the church. Now I do not think the church is completely corrupt, but when I read this letter, I cannot help but wonder if James is writing to us. The harsh honesty is cutting and in many ways is accurate for us all. There has been envy and selfish ambition in the church. There has been disorder and wickedness of every kind in the church. There have been conflicts, and blood has even been spilt. I heard of a church that will treat you differently depending on the amount of your pledge. There was a time when Baptists and Methodists were trying to get accepted in the upper echelons of American society, and did so by accusing the other as being a Quaker group in disguise. Even here at Lower Merion Baptist Church, we can think of times when the actions of members of this congregation were less than stellar. Even here, we can think of times when our actions would cause us to blush with embarrassment. We may claim that we have grown since the first century when James wrote his letter, but it often feels like we are just adolescent churches, and we still have a long way to go. There are times when we get it right, but we must also accept the harsh honesty that there are times when we get it very wrong, and I imagine what James would see if he were here today.

### *Movement 3 – The Cause?*

Why is it that we have so many problems? Why is it that after two thousand years, we are still in the same rut of bickering, lying, and just not getting along? Why is it that we cannot seem to pull ourselves to a better place, to be that happy, perfect little church void of any and all conflict? We can imagine the church of smiling, happy people. We can imagine the church of perfection, where everyone is ready and waiting to give up his or her chair for someone else, where everyone is looking for someone to serve, where poor cannot be found for miles around because the members of the congregation have gone out and have done what was needed to help the poor in their lot. We can imagine that church, but for some reason, we just can't obtain it. What is it that holds us back, that holds us down and that keeps our dream church at bay?

James opens our eyes to one cause: desire. He also asks where the conflicts and disputes come from, but only rhetorically. For just as soon as the question hangs in the air, James offers an answer – the cravings within us. The yearning, the craving, the desire for something that we want is what causes the divisions and the dissension. Imagine that there is a banquet table before

us. Imagine the roast beef on one end, tender and succulent. Then the fish, fresh salmon, the lobster, the potatoes, the best vegetables, the fruit and breads all are emitting their own seducing smells. Beyond that we see the desserts, pies, the pastries, the cakes, the ice cream, cookies and candy all calling for us to dive in and enjoy. Yet we can only choose one thing from the table. Our whole congregation can only eat from one item. And while we are all looking at the same table, our cravings and desires would be multiple. Some would want the meats, some would want the fruits, and some would want the desserts. I bet we would do whatever we could to try to convince the rest of the group that the food item we desire is the best for everyone. I can imagine people shouting back and forth over fruits and fish. I imagine people slandering meats and bread. The desire, and the cravings would drive our actions and cause divisions in the community.

If you have never seen the movie, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, then I encourage you to watch it. If you have, then you know what I am talking about. In that movie, Humphrey Bogart and Tim Holt go up a mountain to find gold and change their fortunes. On the way up, a prospector warns them about the power and lure of gold.

“But I tell you, if you was to make a real strike, you couldn't be dragged away. Not even the threat of miserable death would keep you from trying to add 10,000 more. Ten, you'd want to get twenty-five; twenty-five you'd want to get fifty; fifty, a hundred. Like roulette. One more turn, you know. Always one more.”

They find the gold, and just as the prospector predicted, their desires for more and more change, shape, and break their relationships. They lose trust for another, they lose sleep, and begin to lose their minds. In one scene Bogart's character is talking to the prospector:

**Fred C. Dobbs**: Why am I elected to go to the village? Why me instead of you and Curtin? Oh, don't think I don't see through that. You two've thrown in against me. The two days I'd be gone would give you plenty of time to discover where my goods are, wouldn't it?

**Howard**: If you feel along those lines, why don't you take your goods with you?

**Fred C. Dobbs**: And run the risk of having them taken from me by bandits?

**Howard**: If you was to run into bandits, you'd be out of luck anyway. They'd kill you for the shoes on your feet.

**Fred C. Dobbs**: Oh, so that's it. Everything's clear now. You're hoping bandits will get me. That would save you a lot of trouble, wouldn't it? And your consciences wouldn't bother you none, neither.

Their desire and their cravings tore apart their relationships and even their lives. This is how it is with the church. What is worse, our cravings even direct our prayers. We pray for security, we pray for a larger church, we pray that we would be right, and James indicts us reminding that we do not receive because “we ask wrongly in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.” Our desires for a certain kind of music, our desires for a certain kind of worship, our desires for a look, a style, and an approach to Christianity effect and divide our community. This is a part of human nature, so it is no wonder that we seem to be in a similar place as the church was two thousand years ago. In Milton's classic *Paradise Lost*, the devil whispers in Eve's ear, and gives her desire. According to Milton, it was desire that caused Eve to eat the fruit, and that desire has been passed on from generation to generation, muddying our souls, creating conflict in our family, and causing division in our church. No wonder we have so many problems, we all have our own hopes and desires, and our cravings directing our actions.

#### *Movement 4 – The Solution? Give the Devil a Black Eye*

How do we change? How do we get out of this rut, and obtain the perfect church we want to be? How do we stop our cravings, our desires and become the perfect Christians that we dream about? How do we change?

We could try harder. We could write a list of rules and regulations. We could come up with procedures for behavior and control how we live and how we act. We could steel ourselves in our pews, hold on tight to our Bibles, and refuse to budge to any whim and any craving. This would be taking on our faults head on. This would be standing up to our own weaknesses, and saying “enough.” One of the members of this congregation told me about a sermon where the people were encouraged to take such an approach. The people were told to stand up and shout “no” to their cravings. Stand up and shout “no” to the whims of the world. Stand up and demand that all those things which are distracting, which are dividing to leave or be thrown out. Stand up, and take on your shortcomings with your two-clenched fist. Stand up, and give the devil a black eye instead of an open hand. This is one way, one approach.

So we would have to make some fairly strict rules to follow. We would have to be clear about our doctrines and dogma. We would have to be certain about what actions are permissible and which actions are not. Like the early puritan church, we could set standards of behavior, moral codes of conduct so we can work, train and bring this church out of its rut of desires and into the perfect and superior church that we all want to be. Puritan leaders demanded a moral perfectionism. They called on the people to examine themselves daily and look to see how they could work and strive to be the more perfect and pure people that they believed they were called to be. We have been that way before. In the 1800s we have excluded person after person because individuals did not attend church regularly, did not pray enough, spent time in taverns, dancing, or any other actions that were seen as unbecoming. We could take the strong man approach and come at our cravings, our desires, our shortcomings with our chest puffed up, and our muscles bulging. We could fight our way to perfection so that we could proudly claim to be God’s perfect children in God’s perfect church. That is one way to change, is it a way that you would like to change?

#### *Movement 5 – Another Solution? Submit to God’s Wisdom*

How should we change? Is there another way, a way that is not so forceful, a way that is not so demanding on our actions? Because when I consider this first way, I wonder how much it comes out of the world. The world teaches us that we need to control; we need to have power over ourselves and others. Rules and regulations all seem to be very much like control and power. The scholar Walter Wink, talks about the cycle of dominance that is a part of the actions of the world. The way we are taught to live is to dominate anything we can, from nature, to our neighbor. Rules, regulations, and even giving the devil a black eye feels to me like the dominance that is the way of the world. Yet when I read in James’ letter about the fruits of God, I wonder if that is the best way to change and to be the people that we believe God has called us to be. James reminds us that the wisdom from above, the wisdom from God is “pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” This does not sound like the chest thumping, closed fist, controlling solution that I offered above. This does not sound like rules and regulations, like doctrines and self-examination followed by self-flagellation. This sounds different. Peace, gentleness and a willingness to yield are not the ways of the world, but that is the wisdom of God.

There is a book called *The Servant* that describes the difference. In this book a one time successful executive left the business world and entered into a monastery. He left the world of

deals, mergers, and take-overs. He left the world where Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* was standard reading and entered into a world with the Gospels of our Lord Jesus Christ as the standard readings. In this monastery, he would work with other businessmen and women, executives, and others to help them find a different way of living. It was a way of service, a way of gentleness, and a way of redirecting desires from money to God. He entered into a life of submission in order to gain a gentle, peaceful and whole life.

This is another way to break out of our cycle of fallenness and cravings. Instead of trying to beat them out of ourselves and each other, we submit to God, we give our lives to God and ask God to lead us. We let God take our cravings, and receive the holy longing which will guide our lives in the way we need to live. We let God take our desires, and let the holy longing of the Lord lead us in the path of peace and righteousness. This is another way to grow, to change and to become the people we want to be. One of my biggest desires is for this church to grow in numbers. I desire for more and more people to be in the pews. But that is a desire of the world. The world teaches that the larger the church, the better the church. That same world teaches that the person with the most money is the most important person. Yet God does not look at our wallets, but at our hearts. God does not look at our rolls but at our actions. When I submit to God, my desire for a large church falls to the side, and I desire a church that practices love, that offers peace, and that lives a life of mercy and a willingness to yield. This may be a church of ten or a church of ten thousand; it does not matter. What matters is that we submit to the wisdom of God and not the wisdom of the world. How should we change? Is this the way that you would like to change, to grow and to be the Christians and the church that God calls us to be?

#### *Movement 6 – The Peaceable Church*

And what will we become? What will we look like when we submit to God's will instead of our own cravings? We will be a church that does not try to be better, but just tries to do right by the way of the Lord. We will be a church that does not look to condemn, but to remind of Christ's forgiveness. We will be a church that takes a long time to make decisions, because everyone is willing to yield to everyone else. We will be a church that listens to the spirit and that is led by the spirit. The church will become a garden, a place of peace and rest. We will become a church that changes the world not by forcing ideas and agendas, but by influencing through actions and relationships. Can you see that church? Can you be that church?

Brothers and sisters this is the path of Christ. It is a path that says love is the primary way no matter what. It is a path that speaks the truth, the harsh honesty to the powers of the world, and to the powers of the church. Yet at the same time it is a path that is always open to the leaders and the participants of the world and the church through the cross. The cross is Christ yielding to the world, and the empty grave is God transforming the world. When we submit to God, we will find our cross, we will live our cross in our submission, but at the same time we will overcome the world through the new life we receive through Christ. That is what we are and what we are becoming. A new creation, a new community through Christ. Can you see that Church. Can you desire that church? Submit to God, resist the devilish ways of the world, and you will become fully a child of the Lord.

AMEN