### “You Ask Wrongly” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 22, 2024

**James 3:16–4:3**

16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness . . . 17But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. . .

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

**Mark 9:33–37**

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

There seems to be a fair amount of negativity in each of these Scriptures: disputes, envy, status seeking, even violence. Why is that? And can we draw any *positive* lessons from them, not just “thou shalt nots”? Wouldn’t it be great if we had solutions to these problems that really worked? Jesus and James offer some solutions.

The James passage implies people sometimes have a certain lack of gentleness and humility, and instead show envy and disorder and selfishness. He says we don’t get what we ask because we ask *wrongly*. This probably means we have narrowed down our view to materialistic and selfish goals, and what we are asking for are materialistic things rather than spiritual values. You can see this clearly illustrated by the competitive apostles in the Mark passage.

Are these two passages trying to teach us something about desire, motivations, and how to put first things first? They both uplift certain positive values, in contrast to the negatives. The James passage emphasizes good motives, mercy, impartiality, and harmony. The Mark passage is promoting service, humility, kindness and welcoming.

James speaks of selfish cravings that are within us, which lead to disputes and conflicts. The gospel passage shows the apostles engaging in exactly that kind of craving for status and power and prestige, leading them to argue with and jostle each other. It is a remarkable principle of Jesus’, and is repeated several times in the gospels, that “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

It’s depressing to think of the apostles embodying such selfish motives, wanting to get positions of power within Jesus’ kingdom, but that’s what happened. Jesus used it as a teaching opportunity, but it probably also saddened him deeply to see them missing the mark so badly. Don’t we see ourselves in some of the apostles’ actions? Jesus did not pick perfect people to help him spread the Word. He knew they had faults and would make mistakes. But he loved them; he met them at their level, and was able to guide them to a more spiritual direction.

We can derive many positive lessons from the apostles’ actions and Jesus’ response, however. From James, the Lord’s brother, we hear that wisdom is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (3:17). Further, we can conclude that we need to develop good and healthy cravings and desires, instead of only selfish and material ones. We can learn to ask *rightly*, to ask for *spiritual* capacities and powers. If we are in spiritual harmony with Jesus, we will be likely to ask rightly, with spiritual values foremost. We can get a similar lesson from the Mark story: if we are in harmony with Jesus and God then we won’t be striving for power and authority, we will be striving for ways to serve, to welcome, to include others.

Notice how Jesus uses the language of *welcome* at the end, not just humility, but also of the need to be welcoming. Welcome the child. Welcome everyone who wishes to call upon Jesus. Welcome your brother rather than competing with him.

How might this manifest? Well, it might mean that we become better listeners in meetings and discussions, *listening* to what the other says rather than trying to outdo him, or engage in any kind of one-upsmanship. I think most of us already have a distaste for one-upsmanship. It seems so un-classy and foolish, really. Most of us know that if we want friends we need to be friendly, for that creates a welcoming path.

What if we try to combine the lesson about welcoming the other, with the lesson about learning to ask rightly? We get a lesson about living spiritually, caring about others, but also taking responsibility for our own healthy spirituality, which involves learning to pray rightly and act rightly.

We get a kind of spiritual maturity where we care deeply about others, but aren’t hovering over them or trying to control them. We care about others, with respect for their need to grow and learn for themselves. We stand on our own two feet while also noticing when others might need a helping hand—and when they might *not*.

Instead of competing with others we might learn to compete with ourselves, striving to become better listeners, better friends, better respecters of others. And it also is good to show ourselves a little grace, and not be too hyper-self-critical if we fall short of our ideals, which we certainly will. Being “full of mercy” (James 3:17) might also need to apply to how we treat ourselves. Further, we need to *allow* ourselves to be welcomed into Jesus’ family. Don’t worry about whether you are worthy or not; Jesus doesn’t hesitate to invite you, so come on in.

In the week ahead, reflect upon what you *need*, not necessarily what you want. Pick a quiet moment to start a conversation with Jesus and God. Ask, then, for guidance. Be ready to receive love from above, and to share it around. That’s bringing heaven to earth.