

Five Spiritual Laws for Day-to-Day Living (James 3:13-4:10)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely *practical letter* to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In prior lessons, we discussed the well-known passage that explains that both our faith and our works (obedient action on our part) are necessary for us to be saved. We also looked at the great dangers that can come on us individually and as a church if we do not control what comes out of our mouths.
- c. In the passage we will study today, from the first half of **James chapter 3**, we will look at other practical matters of living the Christian life.
 - i. Once again, let us consider the great extent to which James' teachings are reinforcing and applying things that Jesus taught in the gospels.

II. The Characteristics of Spiritual Wisdom (Contrasted with Worldly Wisdom)

- a. Read **James 3:13-18**.
- b. James picks up the topic of wisdom, which he introduced at the start of **James chapter 1**. There, he encouraged anyone lacking wisdom to pray for it.
- c. Here, in the current passage, he speaks of *two different types* of wisdom.
 - i. The *first type of wisdom* comes "from above," from God.
 - 1. This is true spiritual wisdom.
 - 2. It is the first characteristic of the Holy Spirit, as enumerated in **Isaiah 11**. Read **Isaiah 11:1-3**, which in the LXX mentions seven characteristics of the Spirit.
 - ii. The other *type of "wisdom"* is earthly, sensual, even demonic.
 - 1. This reminds me of when Jesus said that His followers must be *as wise as serpents*.
 - a. "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be *wise as serpents* and harmless as doves."
(**Matthew 10:16**, NKJV)

- b. The demonic forces have a type of 'wisdom.' They are crafty and use their intelligence for selfish and evil pursuits.
 - 2. Likewise, those people who have this kind of 'wisdom' are characterized by bitter envy, self-seeking hearts, boasting, deceit, confusion and all types of wickedness.
- iii. Godly wisdom, the wisdom that comes from above, is not simply an intellectual endeavor (solving tough intellectual problems, insight into human nature, able to explain theological details, scholarly prowess, etc.).
 - 1. It produces the good fruit that comes from a righteous way of life.
 - 2. It has a practical impact on how we live and how we treat others.
 - 3. It leads to a pure heart, a gentle spirit, a willingness to yield (and not insisting on always getting one's own way).
 - 4. It does not show partiality to others (on the basis of their wealth, worldly talents, popularity, or what they might be able to do for us).
 - 5. It leads to us being merciful when others sin against us and repent, asking for our forgiveness.
 - 6. It keeps us far from hypocrisy. How we live our lives matches what we claim to be.
 - 7. This type of wisdom leads us to become *more like Jesus Christ in our character*.
- d. Jesus also taught about the importance of godly wisdom.
 - i. "The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here." (**Matthew 12:42**, NKJV)
 - 1. Jesus taught that the Queen of Sheba would condemn that generation on the Day of Judgment. She traveled from "the ends of the earth" to seek the wisdom of Solomon, but they refused to come to *Jesus, who had even greater wisdom* from God.

- ii. “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a *wise man* who built his house on the rock...” (**Matthew 7:24**, NKJV)
 - 1. Jesus, the wisest man who ever lived, said that the truly wise person is the one who seeks Him, obeys His teachings and puts these things into practice.
- e. While various philosophies of the ancient and modern world call people to grow in one type of wisdom, the kind of wisdom Jesus offers goes far beyond mental insights and creative problem-solving. It transforms the way we live. That is what He taught, and that is how wise Christians have understood it through the ages.
 - i. Early Christian writer Justin Martyr contrasted the wisdom of the Greek philosophes with the type of wisdom held up by Christians.
 - 1. “The teachings of Jesus have transformed our lives. We who previously delighted in immorality now embrace chastity exclusively. We who used to practice magical arts now devote our lives to the Good and Unbegotten God. We who valued the acquisition of wealth and possessions above all things now bring what we have into a common pool and share with everyone in need. [**Acts 4:32**] Many of us used to hate and destroy one another; we would not live with people of a different race because of their different customs. But now, since the coming of Christ, we live familiarly with such people, and we pray for our enemies. We seek to persuade those who unjustly hate us to live by the wonderful teachings of Christ so that they can enjoy the wonderful hope of God’s reward with us.”
 - a. Justin explained here that becoming a Christian was not merely embracing a new set of beliefs. It also involved *embracing a new way of life* that was much different from the worldly practices they formerly had.
 - 2. “...Christ also taught us to suffer patiently, to be ready to serve all others, and to be free from anger. ‘If a man strikes you on one cheek, offer the other to him also. And do not hinder the one who would take away your cloak or coat. Whoever stays angry is in danger of the fire of punishment. If anyone compels you to go with him a mile, go two. And let your good works shine before men that, upon seeing them, they may glorify your Father in heaven.’ (**Luke 6:29; Matthew 5:22, 41, 16**)

3. "Christ also taught us not to struggle with others, or to imitate wicked people. Rather, he urged us to lead all people away from dishonor and wickedness by our patience and gentleness. The fact that we actually follow his teachings is demonstrated by the many Christians who once followed your way of thinking [*this letter was addressed to the pagan leaders of society in Rome*]. Now they have changed their violent and oppressive dispositions. Some of them were won to Christianity by the righteousness they observed in the life of their Christian neighbors. Others were won by the extraordinary restraint Christian travelers displayed when they were cheated. Still others were attracted by the honesty of the Christians with whom they transacted business."
 - a. The fact that people saw Christians actually living out the teachings of Jesus was what inspired many from pagan backgrounds to become Christians.
 - b. In *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: the Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*, a book by Alan Kreider, the author begins by asking the question, "Why did the Christian faith spread so rapidly in the Roman Empire, in the beginning, despite all the inherent challenges?"
 - i. In the writings of Justin Martyr, perhaps we have at least a partial answer to Kreider's question.
 - ii. It was the unusual lifestyle of the Christians that impressed unbelieving pagans to want to know more. The Christians demonstrated a new and higher way of life, unlike anything the pagans had encountered previously.
4. "Let it be understood that those who are not living by Christ's teachings are not Christians at all – even though they might profess his teachings with their lips. For Christ himself said it is not the ones who merely make a profession of him who will be saved, but the ones *who do the works*, warning, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. For whoever listens to me and follows my teachings listens to him who sent me. For many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not eat and drink in your name, and perform wonders in it?" But then I will say to them, "Depart from me,

you workers of evil.” Then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when the wicked are sent into everlasting fire. But the righteous will shine as the sun....’ (**Matthew 7:21-23**; **Matthew 13:42-43**)”

- a. Here again, Justin Martyr makes it clear that real Christians are those who are following Jesus’ teaching (as opposed to only believing in him).
 - i. This agrees with what Jesus Himself said:
 - 1. “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples...’” (**John 8:31**, NIV)
- b. (Source for the Justin Martyr quotes above: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*; modern translation provided in *We Don’t Speak Great Things, We Live Them*, part 2, chapter 3, pp. 79, 83 and 85, Scroll Publishing, 1989)
- c. (For original arrangement of the Justin Martyr quotes above, see Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chs. 14 and 16; found in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1, pp. 167-168)

III. A Few Spiritual Laws

- a. Many of us are familiar with the so-called ‘Four Spiritual Laws’, a very popular approach that many evangelical Protestants use to spread their faith.
 - i. The first of these ‘Laws’ is: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”
 - ii. James spoke about some real “spiritual laws” that are a lot more challenging than the popular modern ones that somebody came up with. Let us consider what he considered to be “laws” established by God, which we will do well to heed.
- b. Read **James 4:1-10**.
- c. In this passage are several timeless spiritual principles, which might be called ‘laws’. They are simple, easy to remember, and will help keep us on track. They reveal a lot about the nature of God and how He tends to operate with us.
 - i. The concept here reminds me of the see-saw (or teeter-totter) at our Maine family vacation spot. It is very simple, so much so that even small children can understand how it works and how to use it.

1. With the old see-saw, when you push one end down, the other end goes up. It has been working that way for decades, and for generations!
 2. With the spiritual laws laid out by James, in each case, while the outcome results from what God does, the first step that initiates the process is taken (or not) by us.
 - a. Therefore, what we do *does impact the outcome*, but God is the one who accomplishes the result.
 - b. It shows how our faith and actions work together with the resulting action from God.
- ii. **Law No. 1:** There are two components of effective prayer that are mentioned here.
1. He does NOT say “God has a wonderful plan for your life, and is just waiting to bless you in this life if you simply turn your life over to Him.” (from the first of the famous “Four Spiritual Laws”.
 2. He also does NOT say “If you believe hard enough, you can manifest whatever you want” (a/k/a so-called “magical thinking”).
 3. The two elements discussed here are:
 - a. You do not have *because you do not ask*.
 - i. Jesus taught not only that we should ask, but that we should ask *repeatedly, persevering in prayer*.
 - ii. See the parable of the Persistent Widow, in **Luke 18:1-8**.
 - b. For some of those asking, they do not receive *because they are asking with the wrong motives* (seeking personal, selfish gain or pleasure).
 - i. It seems to me that this one verse demolishes the so-called ‘prosperity gospel’.
 - ii. Recall also how Jesus taught us to pray, in **Matthew 6** and **Luke 11**.
 1. Not asking for more than our basic necessities.

2. "May your will be done". Asking *for God's will to be done*, rather than our own.
(**Mathew 6:10**)
 - a. Jesus Himself prayed this way in the Garden of Gethsemane, in anticipation of going to the cross.
(**Matthew 26:39**)
 3. [Note that later on in this letter, James will teach other important principles of effective prayer.]
- iii. **Law No. 2:** We can be *EITHER* a friend of the world or a friend of God.
1. It is impossible to be friends with both.
 - a. It is like a married person who gets involved with another person. To attempt to do this is (figuratively) becoming an adulterer or adulteress in God's eyes.
 2. If we Christians choose to make ourselves friends of the world, we will thereby become *enemies of God*.
 - a. Jesus taught the same thing.
 - i. "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (**Matthew 6:24**, NKJV)
 - b. [Side note. Here, James is quoting another "writing" when he says, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously." There is no consensus on what he is referring to. A summary of several passages in the OT? Something else? One possibility is **Wisdom of Solomon 6:23** in the LXX, particularly since one of the words James uses is used so rarely, but does appear in that passage from Wisdom of Solomon.]
- iv. **Law No. 3:** God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.
1. This is taken from **Proverbs 3:34** (in most Bibles; corresponding to **Proverbs 3:37** in the OSB).
 - a. Peter makes the same point, quoting the same passage, in **1 Peter 5:5-6**.

2. If we are proud and arrogant, the Lord will oppose us. However, if we are humble, He will extend grace to us.
3. **Questions:** According to Peter, James and Solomon, does God give His grace to us if we choose to be proud? Is the grace of God extended to people regardless of their spiritual condition and regardless of anything they do?
 - a. **Answer:** No, of course not. From the **Proverbs 3** passage, God gives grace only to those who choose to be humble. He does not give the same favor to proud people.
 - i. From this passage, it *does not* make sense that (as Protestants typically claim) the term “grace / charis” as used in Scripture can be defined as *UNMERITED* favor.
 - b. The word “grace” (Greek: χάρις / charis), used by Paul and others in the New Testament, was familiar to anyone who had been reading the Old Testament from the LXX. The Greek word used here by James (and by Paul in **Ephesians 2:8-9**) is a common, frequently appearing word in the LXX.
 - i. That word, often translated as “grace”, can mean *favor, benefit or kindness* (shown to someone). While the term can be used to describe a kindness given that is unmerited, the word itself is not limited to that. There are also places where it clearly is referring to a “favor” or “benefit” given that was the result of someone’s prior merit worthy action.
 1. In other words, the term “charis / grace” refers to a benefit or kindness received that could be EITHER merited or unmerited.
 - ii. If you have believed the popular Protestant explanation of ‘grace = (only) unmerited favor,’ please take the following test for yourself.
 1. Wherever you see the term ‘charis’ in the LXX or the New Testament, see if the passage makes any sense if you replace “charis” with “*unmerited favor*”.

2. A few examples where the definition "unmerited favor" *does not work* include:
 - a. **Genesis 6:8** in LXX, first appearance in the Scriptures.
There it says that Noah found *favor* in God's eyes. That was because he stood out as the one man who was following the Lord in the midst of a corrupt generation.
 - b. **Proverbs 3:23-24** in LXX it says:
"My son, do not be careless but *keep my counsel and thinking*, that your soul may live, and *grace* may be around your neck...."
 - i. Again, the "grace" or favor received was the result of God blessing him *for keeping the Lord's counsel*. The favor would be received as the result of something positive the recipient had done.
 - c. In **Luke 2:52**, it says that Jesus, as a child, "increased in favor (= charis) with God and men."
 - i. Both God and men looked on Jesus favorably. From context, the word does not mean "*unmerited favor*".
 - d. In **Hebrews 12:15**, it says,
"...looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the *grace* of God..."
 - i. If grace means "unmerited favor", how can someone take heed lest a person "fall short" of it? It does not make sense that a person could "fall short" of something that was totally unmerited.

- c. The problem today is that Protestants focus (only) on **Ephesians 2:8-9**, incorrectly assuming that Paul's use of "works" is referring to any actions we do, then back-defining "grace" as "*unmerited* favor".
 - i. However, Paul is using the term "grace" as it means everywhere else: the favor or benefit provided by God.
 - ii. We are saved by God's favor, not by works of the Law of Moses (see parallel arguments from **Romans** and **Galatians**).
 - iii. Likewise, God gives his favor to those who are humble (not to the proud, whom He opposes).
- v. **Law No. 4:** If we resist the devil, He will flee from us.
 - 1. While many Christians today rarely think about Satan, he is discussed extensively throughout the New Testament as our powerful adversary.
 - 2. We are called to take the first step. The good news here is that after we resist the devil, Satan will be repelled and will flee from us.
 - 3. This is an important principle and promise to equip us for spiritual warfare.
- vi. **Law No. 5:** If / when we draw near to God, He will draw near to us.
 - 1. He is patiently waiting for us to take the first step back to Him.
 - 2. Let us take that first step by mourning for our sins, repenting, and turning back to God.
 - 3. If we have been double-minded, purify our hearts and repent.
 - 4. If we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will lift us up.
 - 5. Don't just wait for God. Take the necessary first step in approaching Him!

IV. Conclusion and Takeaways

- a. Seek the wisdom that comes from above. Not the one popular in the world.
- b. True spiritual wisdom is much more than mental understanding. The wise man puts the teachings of Jesus into practice.
 - i. That is the kind of wisdom Jesus brought into the world, and demonstrated with His own life for us.
 - ii. That is what wise Christians have always grasped.
- c. Never forget the timeless spiritual principles provided here by James. They are rather simple, but generally put the initiative back in our court... after which we can count on the Lord to respond and help us in our time of need.
 - i. Take the first steps to approach God and to resist Satan!