



“WILLING TO YIELD”

**SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 11: 18-20; JAMES 3: 13-4:3, 7-8A
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

September 23, 2018

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Jeremiah 11:18-20

11:18 It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds.

11:19 But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!"

11:20 But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

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

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

3:17 But 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.

3:18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

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?

4:2 You 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.

4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Quick! You step onto an elevator and a total stranger sees a symbol of your faith: a cross on your necklace, a GCPC Palooza T-shirt, a Bible in your hand, and they ask you the question: Why are you a Christian?

You only have time for one sentence. No time to think.

Why are you a Christian? (Get answers from the congregation for a minute or two)

Let's say you have no visible symbol of your faith to tip someone off that you are a Jesus follower, how would anyone know? Is there anything about the way you live, the way you speak, the way you move about the world that tells the world you are a person of faith?

Think about that for a minute. Notice how the question makes you feel. Notice how quickly or how laboriously you can answer the question for yourself.

This is exactly what James wants to ask of us.

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

We're not sure who James was—there are at least 5 James named in scripture and he doesn't claim to be any of them. He doesn't address any one church, like the Corinthians or the Ephesians; he addresses all followers of the "The Way." That's why this book of the Bible is what we call a "catholic" epistle (that's catholic with a little "c," which means universal). He's talking to Jesus followers in general. That's us, right, just your average, run-of-the-mill Jesus followers.

We don't know **who** James was but we do know **what** he was—he was a teacher, and a hard-hitting one. James wasn't the kind of teacher who handed out stickers for effort or spooned out false praise just so his students would like him.

He loves us enough to lay it on the line—he loves God enough to risk our rejection, to risk our discomfort and dislike.

Several of you mentioned to me after last week's sermon on James 3:1-12 on the tongue that you thought the sermon must have been written for you! James would be thrilled! He did write these words for you—and for me. He wrote them for all of us—and, frankly, they are a little disconcerting!

James is a put up or shut up kind of guy.

And the lectionary is hitting us hard with James this season. You know what the lectionary is, right? It's the 3-year cycle of Bible passages designated for each Sunday that all churches are invited to follow. We usually stick to the lectionary here—it is just one thing that protects us preachers against deciding what to preach on and then searching for scripture to make our case. It should be the other way around—we are given scripture and its teachings shape our preaching. I usually try to choose the passages that are the hardest ones for me to understand or that I don't like.

The lectionary often feels providential to me. And these James passages definitely do given what's going on in our world and in our country these days. It feels really important that we're being called to examine the integrity of our faith.

James says stop calling yourself Christian if you're not going to live like you are Christian—if we're not going to talk like we are or work like we are, or most of all if we're not going to risk ourselves like we are Christians.

James didn't care about popularity; he cared about piety.

Christianity is not a set of ideas or beliefs, James wants you to remember, it is a way of life, an orientation to life's challenges that trusts and submits to God's love.

James wants to know: What's keeping you, what's stopping you from totally trusting God's love, from totally yielding to God's power in your life?

3:14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

3:15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

3:16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

You see for James, there's wisdom and then there's wisdom. Wisdom that the world teaches us is about scarcity, and competition, and grasping, and arrogance.

And then there's wisdom from above that teaches us peace, gentleness, mercy with no hypocrisy, with no partiality.

The earth's wisdom creates disorder—it teaches us envy. Envy is what Socrates called an “ulcer of the soul.” Envy teaches us to want what others have. Envy trains us to always think about what we don't have, what we are not—it comes from a scarcity model of the world—scarce resources, scarce love, scarce grace and scarce success.

James also uses the word, *eritheia*, a word rarely used in the Greek language. It means “selfish ambition” and it comes from the logic of envy. It teaches us to do whatever we have to do to get ahead, to get what we want, to be better than others. The logic of envy teaches us to be arrogant.

But God's wisdom teaches us humility, and deep peace—even tranquility, in difficult times, that enable us to stay present and to risk ourselves for healing and justice and mercy without fear. God's wisdom does not arise from scarcity but from abundance.

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4:2 You 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.

4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

The cravings that pit us against each other and ourselves have wounded this country for generations. The inherited trauma of the doctrine of discovery, chattel slavery, and forced migrations is imprinted in our continued struggles to heal as a nation from these cravings—this scarcity mentality, this envy, this selfish ambition that sees others as disposable.

James' words speak hard truth to us in our cultural moment, as we hear the voices of those most impacted by the violent ways resources have been seized throughout history and used for the gain of a few. Stolen labor, stolen land, stolen cultures, stolen lives—“you want something and do not have it, so you commit murder.”

And these cravings even convinced us of a god who blessed these destructive ways of accumulating wealth in this country—the prosperity gospel links wealth

accumulation to God's partiality towards some—God will bless you if you just pray hard enough for what you want. James says the exact opposite: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."

Selfish ambition and envy are diseased ways of being in the world. Wisdom from heaven is not arrogant, but gentle, humble, willing to yield.

Envy teaches us to hoard. Heaven reminds us nothing we have was ever ours to start with.

Envy tells us we'll never be enough or have enough. Heaven heals us, down deep in our souls—and tells us we are not our possessions. It is the logic of scarcity that teaches us to loathe ourselves, it is the wisdom of heaven that tell us we are beloved.

Envy tells us we can't trust each other. Heaven help us if we live like that is true.

This week, members of the GCPC staff met with other clergy and faith leaders in Asheville to discern how the faith community can more faithfully witness to God's abundance and God's justice in our community with the way we use our resources.

The question really distilled down to this: what are we willing to risk to follow Jesus into the economic challenges of our community?

Brothers and sisters, this is not a question about how charitable we are willing to be. This is a question about how faithful we are willing to be.

The group shared our frustrations about things like affordable housing, white supremacy embedded in our systems and in our churches, the gate-keeping practices of some food and relief ministries in our community, and the challenge of centering voices of impacted people in our power structures as they currently operate.

There are many ways that James' challenge is in our face today at Grace Covenant—how is our faith lived, how is it voiced, how does it embody wisdom from above?

I look back on this week at Grace Covenant and I am humbled by how much God is **working on us**, by how many healing opportunities God is pouring into our daily life together. God is gifting us with so many ways to commit to the life of faith. When we know these things come from God, there is no danger of becoming prideful, arrogant, or boastful. If we start to think it is our doing, then the logic of envy begins to creep in.

In just one week here, there are countless examples of God teaching us, God holding us accountable, and God loving us into a more excellent way of being people of faith.

Monday: Our temporary shelter from the storm packed up when the weather broke, but only after our guests and ministry partners spent time and energy making sure donated food was distributed and shared. **Tuesday:** Serve Council dedicated its regularly scheduled meeting to racial equity work with Tami Forte-Logan, to examining how white supremacy is in us and how it impacts the ways we share our resources. **Wednesday:** Samantha, Richard, and I had a conference call about a pilgrimage GCPC is being invited to participate in next May to retrace the Trail of Tears, a shameful part of America's heritage of stealing land. **Thursday:** Members of the WNC Sanctuary Movement came here to learn more about GCPC's self-reflection work in our sanctuary process and how we might assist other faith communities engaged in this work. **Friday:** Our Padrino Team had our monthly lunch holding ourselves accountable for how our faith is calling us to be in relationship with Ana Garcia as she walks this difficult road with her husband detained and facing possible deportation. **Saturday:** A team of gardeners worked in the garden—helping to cultivate food justice in our community. And those are just a few things God was up to around here this week.

Every single day, God is challenging us to change our way of being and doing and speaking in the world.

Even so, breaking out of old patterns is difficult. But there is too much at stake for us to resist this work that God is doing in our midst.

James is telling us to put up or shut up. If we call ourselves Christian, then we've got to show the world what following Jesus looks like.

And as God as my witness, following Jesus doesn't mean letting a scarcity mentality define us. As God as my witness, following Jesus doesn't mean letting fear determine us. As God as my witness, following Jesus doesn't mean avoiding hard teachings or the growing pains of faith.

4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

We come together each week to draw near to God—and to shore up our trust that God is drawing near to us even now.

It's our job to show the world not just why we are Christians, but how we are Christians when we feel God's power cultivating healing and justice within us and around us.

And if you've got one sentence to explain it, perhaps we can do no better than the words James' gives us. We're willing to yield.

Thanks be to God.