

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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Double-minded  
James 3:13 - 4:8, Mark 9:30-37

The letter our brother James writes is quite blatant and accusatory- he calls his audience double-minded, sinners, murderers, adulterers and enemies of God! Who IS this guy? I did a little research to find out. Here is a summary of what scholars generally agree.<sup>1</sup>

The letter was written by a man named James to the Jewish Christians- Jews before they began following Jesus- living dispersed- outside of Jerusalem- in the diaspora. It is likely the second oldest document in the Greek Testament, the oldest being the Gospel According to Mark. It probably was written between 45 and 55 of the Common Era, during a time of problems outside (persecution of Christians) and inside the church. It is written in the literary style similar to Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and other Hebrew Testament texts, and is considered a wisdom text.

After much discussion our forefathers, agreed James was the brother of Jesus. James the Just followed the Jewish law and he did not follow Jesus during his ministry, (in John 7:5 says even his brothers did not believe in him), but like

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Blankenbaker, *What the Bible is All About*, (Gospel Light: Ventura, CA, Rev. Ed. 1998), pg. 278-279.  
Alfred Plummer, "The General Epistles of St. James & St. Jude" in *The Expositor's Bible*, (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham), pg. 1-237.  
Porter L. Barrington, "The Epistle of James," in *The Christian Life Bible*, (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), pg 1254-1255.

Paul became a follower after he experienced the risen Christ (1Corinthians 15:7). He was overseer of the church in Jerusalem. Now some scholars call James a brother of Jesus, and some a half-brother. Let it suffice to say that it involves at least two things: interpretation of Biblical texts, and the difference between Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions regarding Mary, Jesus' mother.

Either way, although he may have been of two minds about his brother before his faith experience of the resurrected Jesus, James clearly had a change in heart and mind. He writes to provide practical advice for individuals and as churches in any time and place. He does not quote Jesus, his wisdom generally reflects the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus taught, "blessed are the meek or gentle, for they shall inherit the earth, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled, blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God, and blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be sons of God." (Matthew 5:5-6, 8-9). Today we heard James address wisdom, humility, righteousness, and being peacemakers. He encourages showing wisdom through gentle service, purity and righteousness by making peace and seeking those things that make us the friends of God, and humility by words, actions, and attitudes toward others, and drawing near and submitting to God.

Good advice- hard to follow, truly understand, or break it down into the issues of our daily lives, and action. I think he hits the nail on the head in the last verse we heard today- you double-minded. It is hard not to be double-minded. The story we heard today about Jesus and his disciples is a good example. Chapter 9, verse 30 is half way through the Gospel According to Mark. Jesus has been healing and teaching them the truth all along. He has shown how to live in God's Way, and he has told them what is to come-his arrest, his crucifixion, and his resurrection.

Jesus told them who he is and what is going to happen. He and Peter have argued over it. He told them to follow him they must pick up their cross, that those who want to save their lives must not be afraid to lose it. Three saw him transfigured and heard God's voice calling him Beloved Son. Yet in verse 32 it says: they did not understand and they were afraid to ask him. Then, Jesus asks them what they have been talking about. They don't actually lie- they commit a sin of omission- they fall silent, perhaps ashamed. Jesus obviously knows what they were talking about- because instead of waiting for their answer, he goes right ahead and teaches them a lesson. What is happening is that the disciples are being double-minded.

They say they are followers of Jesus, yet they are afraid to be open to him, afraid to ask him questions. I think that they do not understand what he is

teaching, about his arrest, death, and resurrection because they are in denial and do not want to know. They know how he has taught them to live, yet they are not doing it. They even start haggling over who is the greatest, trying to set up a chain of command. It shows that they don't understand what Jesus has taught- his Father's kingdom does not need an organization chart! It also shows their duplicity and double-mindedness- they say they don't understand about Jesus' death, yet we all know that you only need a line of succession in an organization in which you are going to lose the leader!

And Jesus, in his eternal patience, teaches them again in very simple terms what he has been trying to live out among them all along. He takes a child- a child in that society did not represent the most precious gift of God and the hopeful symbol of the future. Instead, the child represented the most disposable, the most forgotten, the least of the society. On top was the Roman Emperor, then military and wealthy elite, then average Roman citizens, then the leaders of the protectorates- the temple priests of Jerusalem, then wealthy and educated male Israelites, then the other men, then the women, children, poor, widows, disabled, ill, elderly and servants.

So Jesus takes a small child and has her stand in the protected middle of their circle, and then emphasizes the protection by wrapping the child tenderly in his embrace. This lowly creature of God he says, is not only who you must

become, but you must humble yourself to be her servant. Because in this person, in this moment, you welcome and receive God. Double-minded! The world and society outside the circle, and God and God's kingdom inside!

So where are we in all this double-mindedness? Do we go around with two minds- as James would say- one in the world, and one drawing close to God? Back in May, I told you about results of a Pew survey. People were asked if they identified with a particular religion. Generally speaking, in prior surveys, 5% of the people say they have no religious affiliation. But during difficult times, perhaps a conflict due to a scandal in a religious group, up to 15% of the people say they have no religious affiliation. This time the researchers kept track of the age of individuals. 30% of the younger generation say they have no religious affiliation. The researchers then asked them why. The response? Because they have found intolerant and hypocritical people and teachings in religion. Double-mindedness.

James wrote that we cannot have a mind of earthly and heavenly wisdom. There is a conflict, and even a conflict of interest- and for those of us who love God, God's interest comes first. In our society today, there is a lot of uneasiness, a feeling of lost security and disorder. We have become polarized around political issues and agendas. Some people try to couch it in terms of religious beliefs or morals. But look closely and don't be fooled. In the end you will see, they are all

conflicts and disputes stemming from envy, selfish ambition, and cravings for power, personal aggrandizement and prestige. This is earthly wisdom and personal pleasure.

Heavenly wisdom comes out of a personal relationship with God and results in practical concern not only for our selves, our families, and our church, but for our neighbors, our fellow citizens, for all of God's people, including our enemies. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And for those who make peace, the harvest is not only a peaceful world, but a solid relationship with God.

The rule of power brings more struggle and chaos and is in contrast with God's rule of peace and wisdom. Wise churches, wise people not only listen, preach and talk the Gospel, they walk the talk. And humility does not allow us to make others feel less than us so we feel confident. Instead, we seek to live in the nature of God. God's nature is self-giving. If we are humble we are self-giving. If we are self-giving, we will not have envious, bitter, angry, or prideful attitudes that leads to fighting. Pure and gentle wisdom and peacemaking shows no partiality in attitude toward people, it embodies God and God's compassion. If we are double-minded we will have conflicting priorities, earthly wisdom or God's wisdom, and we will not accomplish anything. If we have a conflict of interest, we are not who God is calling us to be.

In our individual lives, in our families, our church, our community, we are called to discern what God is calling us to do and be. To focus on this goal and let all other concerns become secondary, even fall to the wayside. What other concerns are these? Unresolved issues of the past, and concerns about the future. We must instead be single minded about God's vision and priorities. An example for today is our congregational meeting. Today you will select a search committee. You must be single minded in electing your representatives. They must be single minded in serving you and the vision that you together discern from God for this church.

The disciples wanted to follow Jesus' heavenly wisdom- they wanted to understand, but when things got difficult they fell back on the familiar ways of the world. They were double-minded. It is hard! But we have each other to lean on, to talk to, and to pray for us.

Mother Teresa was known for her single mindedness and self-giving work in serving God among the poor. In her humility she stated, "we can do no great things, only small things with great love." When it got hard, she said, "God doesn't require us to succeed, God only requires us to try." She knew her limits, yet she knew the direction trust needs to flow. Tongue in cheek she said, "I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that [God] didn't trust

me so much.” Let great love, persistence, and trust in God be the strengths we draw upon, and our community together. Amen.