

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

When covid hit, no one was prepared for the political responses that would come, especially among Christians. There had been a growing sense of unity among Christians and conferences such as Together for the Gospel or The Gospel Coalition experienced tremendous blessing. Thousands of Christians gathered together celebrating their unity in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But just as the broader culture experienced division, so did Christians. How should we respond to the government shut downs? Various opinions were taken, and the result was fall out in every direction. Some felt there should be more passivity while others felt there should be more resistance. And the apparent unity that had existed among Christians resulted in all sorts of fracturing, just as it had in the broader culture. Families, friendships, and faith communities were divided over how to respond.

In fairness, no one was prepared for a pandemic. No one knew how devastating the virus may be. And no one was expecting how polarizing the responses would be. When church was deemed “non-essential” by the government, many people felt that there was a subtle discrimination at the government. Christians’ beliefs about politics and God was suddenly put on the test. How should we respond? I do think that faithful Christians responded in various ways, and James makes some points here that can help us to think more clearly about how we should respond when we are facing opposition from the broader culture. He calls us to be wise and understanding. What does it look like to be wise and understanding?

Do good in meekness (v. 13)

What does it look like to be wise and understanding? To do good in the meekness of wisdom. But what does this mean? Understanding this phrase can help us greatly in responding when we feel like we are being opposed, whether overtly or subtly. Behind James’ thinking is most certainly the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:5 that the meek will inherit the earth, and Jesus is expanding on David’s words from Psalm 37:10-11 that the meek will inherit the land. The expectation of the OT was that the Messiah would come and give justice to the meek (Isa. 11:4). But understanding this phrase “the meekness of wisdom” is critical in moving forward.

Often, when we hear the word “meek,” we think of someone who is passive or weak. It’s someone who is a bit of a pushover. But there are a few examples from the OT that help us understand what it means to be meek. In Numbers 12:3, Moses is described as “very meek, more than all the people on the face of the earth.” The story in Numbers 12 is that Moses and his leadership was being attacked by his brother Aaron and sister Miriam for marrying a Cushite woman, probably in an attempt to discredit Moses and get more authority. Notice that challenges rarely come direct – they don’t challenge Moses’ authority directly but seek to undermine him. Instead of reacting against his siblings, The Lord rebukes Aaron and Miriam, and Miriam is struck with leprosy. This would have silenced and removed Miriam from the

camp. In response, the Lord says to Moses' siblings that he speaks with Moses mouth to mouth, clearly, because he is the Lord's prophet.

And how did Moses respond? When Aaron pleads with Moses, Moses prays to the Lord for healing. This is a great display of what meekness is. He didn't respond with passivity. He prayed to the Lord for good to be done to his sister.

This is a great example of what it means to show good conduct in the works of the meekness of righteousness. We do not seek revenge, we do not aim to even vindicate ourselves; we entrust ourselves to the Lord who will protect his people, even when people treat us with opposition, evil, as we wait on the Lord. It is not a passive acceptance of mistreatment, but a resolve to believe that Jesus is Lord and that vengeance is his to repay.

Resist zealous and selfish ambition (vv. 14-16)

The reason James encourages good deeds in meekness is to counter how some people have been behaving. They have been showing jealous behaviour and selfish ambition. We typically think of these attitudes as merely inward. But James is speaking about the actions and the word that he uses for jealous has at its root the idea of being zealous. While Paul will speak of being zealous for good works (Titus 2:14), it has this idea of being passionate eagerness. And with selfish ambition, we can imagine how people who are persecuted would act in a way that wants to defend themselves and retaliate. In the context of James, we already know how this is not heavenly wisdom, but earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

Just consider the temptations that have already come: divisive speech rooted in anger (1:19-20); playing favourites with the rich to see if they can use their power to protect (2:1-7), using harsh words to threaten others (3:6-10). This is not spiritual, but devilish. This is not the way to maturity because it is not rooted in the wisdom of God.

Every type of reaction will produce some form of results. Either it will produce the way of life or death. James describes what are the results in v. 16 – there will be disorder and every vile practice. When people use the means of the world to accomplish results, harsh words, threats, anger, favouritism, and selfish ambition will show up. These methods do not produce the righteous life God desires (1:20). These are the ways of the world and of the devil and will only result in further division and strife and pain.

Sow Peace To Harvest Righteousness (vv. 17-18)

So what are the good works that we should do when we are tempted to lash out, get even, and seek revenge? James echoes the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:1-12. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, sincere, impartial, and sincere.

Practically, what does it look like to sow peace? The first thing is that we need to have control of our tongues. It is easy to lash out and use harsh words. But the damage that an uncontrolled tongue can do is great. I once was told that words are easy to get out but almost impossible to get back in – it's like trying to get toothpaste back in the tube once you've squeezed it out. But a better example is taking a feather pillow and opening it up outside on a windy day and dumping the feathers. When you try and retrieve the feathers, it is impossible to gather them all back. The same is true with words. When we unleash harsh words, we can apologize but we can never take all of them back because they spread too far and wide for us to recover them. Peace begins with controlled mouths, bridled rather than just speaking our minds.

Second, sowing peace means not favouring those who have power, but doing good to those who are powerless. When you don't have power, the temptation is to find power. But the way to power isn't by catering to the rich but by caring for the most vulnerable. What made Christianity so powerful in the first few centuries was that they were the ones who went to the garbage dumps and retrieved living babies abandoned for death. They were the ones who cared for people in their old age who had no one to care for them. They didn't cater to the rich and powerful, but cared for the vulnerable.

Third, sowing peace means blessing rather than cursing with our words. As we talked about this last week, we have been blessed to bring the blessing of Abraham to the world. The gospel of peace calls us to speak the truth in love. We don't need to be harsh or rude or demanding, but we should be clear and gentle while doing good.

So when James says that we should be sincere and impartial (that word could also mean unwavering), we are not swayed by others but we are steadfast. We are to be gentle and kind, not quarrelsome.

The results of earthly actions are contrasted with heavenly actions. Getting even will only create greater animosity and vengeance. But doing good will create a harvest of righteousness. If what we are aiming for is the righteousness of God (1:20), then the way we are vindicated is not by harshness but by gentleness. The work of faith is not seen in anger but in meekness.

Coming out of Covid, there have been polarizing opinions among Christians as to how we should deal with government overreach. Were churches that followed the mandates unfaithful? Were those who stayed open foolish? It's not that simple. I think that both those who closed and those who were open could be foolish or faithful. And here is the reason why: when we speak with gentleness and meekness, when we are not harsh towards one another, when we do good to our neighbours around us by caring for them when they are sick or suffering, and when we do that in various ways, we are following the path of James, who is reminding us of the way of Jesus. Generosity, patience, and kindness is what is needed, speaking honestly and gently, trusting that the Lord will vindicate us rather than having to defend our rights by aligning with political powers.

A Guide for Non-Conformists: The Harvest of Righteousness – Jas 3:13-18

Covid was a test for us as Christians as to how we would respond to the temptations of totalitarianism by the state. James is giving us the better way. We need to have honest conversations about how we can respond better by doing good in meekness, keeping a check on our tongues, and sowing peace to harvest righteousness.