The Art of Giving In for Another’s Sake

Fourth in the series “Values that Build Loving Relationships”

# Scripture: James 3:13-4:8a

# Key idea: A humble heart sees the needs of others more compassionately.

# Intro:

## Gelassenheit

If you’re like me you’re fascinated with Amish culture. It’s not just the sight of the black buggies, the young men with flat-brimmed hats on bicycles, the old-time farming culture, and the beautiful horses. I’m interested in what perpetuates a culture so different, so seemingly backward, yet at the same time so vibrant. When I was young, Amish territory was more restricted to Lancaster area of Pennsylvania and some areas in Ohio and Indiana. But, as farm rural populations in my native Western New York plummeted, and as Amish enclaves became over-populated, Western New York became a new haven for Amish communities. I’ve done a little reading, trying to discover what it is that holds Amish culture together. Obviously there are many complex factors, but there is one very important one that is pretty foreign to us, but resonates very well with the passage in James that we are studying today. It goes by a German name, since we really don’t have a very good equivalent for it in our culture or our language. The German word is Gelassenheit. Quoting from Donald Kraybill in his book The Riddle of Amish Culture, we learn:

Gelassenheit means "submission" – yielding to a higher authority. An abstract concept, it carries a variety of specific meanings – self surrender, resignation to God's will, yielding to God and to others, self-denial, contentment, a calm spirit. Various words in the Amish vocabulary capture the practical dimensions of Gelassenheit: obedience, humility, submission, thrift, and simplicity… The meek spirit of Gelassenheit unfolds as individuals yield to higher authorities: the will of God, church elders, parents, community, and tradition….It is a way of thinking about one's relationship to God. The faithful Christian yields to divine providence without trying to change or influence history. Gelassenheit is also a way of thinking about one's relationship to others. It means serving and respecting others and obeying the consensus of the community... It is a redemptive paradox for the Amish. They believe that the followers of Christ and the martyrs of old were called to lose their lives in order to save them… The person who forgoes personal advancements for the sake of family and community makes a redemptive sacrifice that transforms the church into a common body – the body of Christ. Gelassenheit is a social process that recycles the individual’s energies for the community's purposes, a recycling empowered by the words of Jesus, the blood of the martyrs, and the blessing of Amish ancestors. (The Riddle of Amish Culture by Donald B. Kraybill, p. 25-27)

In daily life, Gelassenheit means "giving up" and "giving in." The child learns this at an early age. Parents teach their children that self-will must be given up if they want to become children of God. The large size of Amish families teaches young children to wait their turn as they yield to the other siblings. Large families prepare the child for an adult life of yieldedness… A slow and thoughtful answer, a deference to the other's idea, and a reluctance to interrupt the conversation are signs of Gelassenheit.

(The Riddle of Amish Culture by Donald B. Kraybill, p. 29, 30)

*An example is found in an Amish school book rhyme.*

I must be a Christian child
Gentle, patient, meek, and mild;
Must be honest, simple, true
In my words and actions too.
I must cheerfully obey,
Giving up my will and way.
(The Riddle of Amish Culture by Donald B. Kraybill, p. 30)

This cultural value of Gelassenheit from the Amish has much to teach us in relation to the Scripture text we have chosen today.

## The wisdom of humility and submission in James

In this section of the book of James, the writer is drawing a huge contrast between the kind of wisdom that is shown by followers of Christ and the behaviors which pass for wisdom in the world around him. Even today, we wonder, in all the pull and tug of various religious backgrounds, divisive political opinions, multiple philosophies of life, ideologies and isms, what does it mean to be really wise? That is exactly the question that James is trying to answer in the section that I have selected for today’s message.

When it comes to our relationships which is what this series of messages is about, all of us want to do the wisest things, even when those things are not the easiest choices. It turns out that a dose of Gelassenheit might help us all to be a little wiser. Let’s see what that might mean and why it might help.

# Two contrasting heart attitudes

The contrast of the book of James is first of all a contrast between heart attitudes. One set of heart attitudes is described as from heaven, as heavenly. The other as from Earth, and even demonically influenced. So with a contrast like that, it becomes very important for us to investigate.

## Humility – the heavenly wisdom

### The meaning

Here in James chapter 3 verse thirteen, I’m looking at the word translated in the NIV as “humility” and in the NRSV as “gentleness.” When I am investigating the meaning of a word in Scripture, I like to look at the constellation of characteristics that go with it in the Scripture text where this word is found. In this case, we are given a whole list of companion words in verse seventeen (NIV and NRSV); pure, peace-loving, considerate (gentle), submissive (willing to yield), full of mercy, impartial, and sincere (without hypocrisy). This is a constellation of characteristics that challenge our selfishness. One can see from this list where a cultural value like Gelassenheit might have developed in a religious community such as the Amish. It has deep biblical touch points.

### English word empathy certainly is included.

While not directly mentioned, empathy seems to be definitely implied.

 “Empathy is of the major characteristics of positive relationships.” (H. Norman Wright, Family is Still a Great Idea p. 82)

Empathy means to feel with –

“It involves trying to view life through the other person’s eyes, attempting to feel as another feels and hearing life through their perceptions.” (Family is Still a Great Idea by H. Norman Wright p. 83)

### Other passages

We can understand the idea of submissiveness or willingness to yield which is included in our list by appealing to other passages in James. James 1:21 tells us to “humbly accept the Word planted in you.” James 4:6, 7 we are told that God opposes the proud but extends favor to the humble so we should “Submit yourselves, then, to God.” So the first type of yieldedness that must describe us is submission to God.

### Giving in for the other’s sake

What does this attitude of humility and peacemaking and gentleness have to say when we are in conflict about who is going to get their way in a relationship? A comparative verse that comes to mind is Eph. 5:21

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

 I call it being willing to give in when the best interests of the relationship call for it. It is a peace-making attitude that sows deeds of love and kindness into the relationship.

### A couple illustrations comes to mind.

1. A husband was going to have a difficult conversation that day with a rather unsympathetic boss about his compensation level. His pay had not been raised for some time and it was that time of year for the subject to come up. That evening as he came in the house, he noticed the table was set especially for a beautiful dinner and the house smelled of good food cooking. His wife had taken extra trouble to plan and set out a special supper for him. He said immediately, “How did you know that I would get the raise that we were hoping for?”

She replied, “I didn’t! But I thought that if you didn’t get it, this would tell you how much I love you and that you were still #1 in my eyes. You might need the encouragement. But if you did get it, well, we could always use a special time to celebrate together.”

That wife thought about the needs of her husband above her own.

2. Another person that came to mind that I had read about was an older gentleman. He was going into the dentist early in the morning. But he insisted that he be out by 9:30 so he could make his 10 am appointment. The staff was curious and soon found out that the appointment was to see his wife who was a resident at the local nursing home.

The younger hygienist said to him, “But I thought you told me that she doesn’t know you anymore? Why are you worried about when you get there? If I were you, I’m not sure I would even bother to go in every day!” The older man turned to her with the look of a man who was settling an argument for good and replied a little sternly, “Ma’am, she may not know who I am anymore, but I still know who she is!”

Now that gentleman knows about the kind of love that considers the needs of others, that keeps covenant, that is considerate and merciful!

## Self-centered arrogance – the earthly wisdom

How would we describe the opposite group of characteristics which James lists? The list in the passage we read begins with bitter envy, selfish ambition, and covetousness. The earthly wisdom that puts oneself forward envies with bitterness the positions, accomplishments and wealth of others and covets their possessions and status. We are not talking about some mild competitive desire, but a destructive envious ambition that becomes willing to desire the worst for another and even help misfortune along in order to get ahead. This group of characteristics also includes being proud, serving the god of pleasure, and being in friendship with the world, meaning adopting the godless values of people around who have no use for God. None of these are godly characteristics.

In stark contrast to the heavenly wisdom, these characteristics are labeled as to their origin by James as worldly, sensual and even demonic. I admire the wisdom of James in listing all three possible sources for such desires—the world or the godless influences around us, our sensual self, and the devil. Sometimes we are too quick to blame everything on the devil. Other times we blame ourselves or someone else when it would be wiser to recognize that he is at his devilish task of trying to destroy us. Sometimes the problem is simply that we in human weakness are giving in to our lower selves.

Unfortunately, there are many people who are in leadership in sports, theater, television and movies, politics and other places who are described more by the second list of characteristics than by the first one. As Christians, we need to learn to recognize the type of wisdom by which people are living. Unfortunately, Gelassenheit is not much admired by most Americans, and to our loss.

### Teachers and preachers too are susceptible to the wrong attitude

Commentator William Barclay wrote:

Arrogance was the besetting sin of the rabbis. The greatest of the Jewish teachers were well aware of that. In the sayings of the fathers we read, "He that is arrogant in decision is foolish, wicked, puffed up in spirit." It was the advice of one of the wisemen: "It rests with thy colleagues to choose whether they will adopt thy opinion: it is not for thee to force it upon them." Few are in such constant spiritual peril as teachers and preachers. … It is very difficult to be a teacher or a preacher and to remain humble; but it is absolutely necessary…We may find in this passage (James 3:13, 14) four characteristics of the wrong kind of teaching.

1. It is fanatical. The truth it holds is held with unbalanced violence rather than with reasoned conviction.
2. It is bitter. It regards its opponents as enemies to be annihilated rather than as friends to be persuaded.
3. It is selfishly ambitious. It is, in the end, more eager to display itself than to display the truth, and it is interested more in the victory of its own opinions than in the victory of the truth.
4. It is arrogant. Its attitude is pride in its knowledge rather than humility in its ignorance. The real scholar will be far more aware of what he does not know than of what he does know. (The Daily Bible Study Series, pages 91 to 93)

 The wrong kind of attitude can destroy teachers and preachers too, souring their message, poisoning their relationships and blunting their effectiveness.

Grace has a constant characteristic – a man cannot receive it until he has realized his need of it, and has come to God humbly pleading for help. Therefore, it must always remain true that God sets himself against the proud and gives lavishly of his grace to the humble. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." This is a quotation from Proverbs 3:34; and it is made again in one Peter 5:5. . (The Daily Bible Study Series, page 105)

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| Table of Contrasting Attitudes |
| Wisdom from heaven | Wisdom from the world, sensual self or demons |
| Humble | Bitter envy |
| Pure (ready to come before God) | Selfish ambition |
| Peace-loving | Coveting |
| Considerate (gentle) | Proud |
| Submissive (willing to yield) | Serving the god of pleasure |
| Full of mercy  | Friendship with the world |
| Impartial |  |
| Sincere (without hypocrisy) |  |
| In submission to God |   |

# Contrasting relationship results

These two different kinds of wisdom result in two completely opposite results.

## Quarrels and Fights

The earthly wisdom that puts oneself forward, envies with bitterness the positions, accomplishments and wealth of others and covets their possessions and status. It causes terrible results—quarrels fights, disorder (confusion (KJV) disharmony (CJB)), and “every evil practice” including murder. What a horrible list! That list should be motivation in itself for us to seek to have the kind of wisdom that comes down from heaven as James describes it.

## Love and compassion

In contrast, the results of the attitude of humility and consideration of others, of submission to the needs of others, and showing mercy and sowing in peace are these; good behavior, good fruit, a harvest of righteousness. The person with this set of attitudes is also likely to be trusting in God for vindication.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4:10 NIV

Worldly “wisdom” does not do this.

Sometimes love is more a deliberate choice than a warm fuzzy feeling, as Myron rush describes in his book Hope for Hurting Relationships.

Selfishness is the opposite of love. Selfishness draws attention to "me" while love places the focus of attention on the other…. When we are experiencing the pain of the degenerating relationship, we don't feel like treating the other with the love described in this passage (1 Cor. 13:4-8). In fact, we want to treat them just the opposite. Therefore, we must force ourselves, against our emotions, to begin practicing love. We must be patient even when all within us is in a hurry. When all of our emotions are telling us to be rude, we must be polite. We must not be self-seeking even when our emotions cry out to focus on "me." No records or score can be kept when we are wronged, even though every emotion in us is bidding to get even. In other words, we do the things love is and "act out" the reality of love as described in this passage, even when we don't want to or feel like it. Love is action, not just the feeling. Love is acting in the best interest of the other person. If you want to rebuild the relationship you must act out of love. (Hope for Hurting Relationships by Myron Rush p. 102)

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| **Table of contrasting results** |
| Wisdom from heaven | Wisdom from the world, sensual self or demons |
| **Good behavior** | Disorder (confusion, disharmony) |
| **Good fruit** | Evil practices |
| **Sowing in peace** | Fights, quarrels |
| **Harvest of righteousness** | murder |

# Conclusion

When we are humble and submitted to God, we are also compassionate and willing to subordinate our will and needs to the needs of others.

### Concluding example of heavenly wisdom at work in serving another:

An illustration of the attitude of which James speaks was a true story that I read about a young couple from Houghton College who were involved in what is called Allegheny County outreach. The county in which Houghton College is located is one of the two poorest in New York State. So for many years there has been a group of students at the college who volunteered to go into the community and serve as big brothers and sisters, mentors, and informal teaching aides for students from underprivileged families in the county. Becky Browning testifies about how she came to know a little girl with fetal alcohol syndrome:

 “In my junior year, my roommate’s friend, Kim, was Kathy’s “big sister.” I never desired to be part of ACO, but as Kim’s graduation approached, I clearly felt the Lord’s persistent nudge and reluctantly offered to take Kathy as my “little sister.” I didn’t realize that Kim had also heard the Lord speak to her about someone asking specifically to take her place. The following year, Kathy, became a “little sister” to my fiancé Steve and me… It was a never-ending battle to discover where Kathy’s family was living. Her recently widowed mother began moving in with different men, never leaving a forwarding address…. The constant search for Kathy became our routine. They lived in filth, with garbage, dirty dishes, empty beer cans and cigarette butts strewn throughout the house. One of Kathy’s schoolteachers advised us to forget her, saying that she was too far behind socially, physically and academically and that it was a waste of time to “bring a pig into the house.” We knew there was more to Kathy than her teacher saw; God’s heart was toward this girl. We left the discussion with more resolve than ever. (Houghton Magazine Winter 2017 p. 20)

To make a long story short, in spite of a move several states away, Becky and Steve kept track of Kathy and eventually were able to adopt her. Talk about gentle, sincere, consistent, loving patience, full of true spiritual wisdom and good fruit! Wow! May God help us to be that kind of “wise!”