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**Oak Grove UMC**  
**August 20, 2017**  
**Better: Church**

**James 3:13- 4:7a**

<sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

<sup>4</sup>Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. <sup>4</sup>Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup>Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? <sup>6</sup>But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” <sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves therefore to God.

**(Slide 1: Better: Church)**

“Do you get paid to do that?,” she asked in an interested tone.

“Ummm, no?” I responded.

“Oh, well that’s stupid,” she blurted out. After a pause in which she realized that she had probably just insulted me, she explained, “I mean, why would anybody give away their time for free?”

I’ve thought about that conversation a lot since then, not because I was offended, but because I was intrigued by her unabashed adherence to the worldview that her comment reflects.

A worldview that takes our time, our energy our passions, our relationships and holds them all up to one single litmus test: “what’s in it for me?”

**(Slide 2: God asks us to live by a different question...)**

But God asks us to live by a different question: “What’s in it for my neighbor?”

Being the Church is all about giving ourselves away for free -- our time, our energy, our caring, our passion -- doing things together that benefit others rather than ourselves.

God calls us to do exactly the thing that my acquaintance called “stupid!”

And that’s what James is talking about in chapters 3 and 4. James is talking about the steep contrast between “the ways of the world” -- this worldview which James describes as “selfish ambition” (James 3:14; 16) and “the wisdom from above,” which, “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (James 3:17).

James is explaining to the church he is writing that the reason they have so many conflicts and issues is because the selfish ambitions of the world are seeping into the church.

People were beating each other up with gossip (3:1-12) and conflicts (4:1) and envy (3:14) and boasting about being better than others (3:14). James was pointing out that these are all worldly standards of success that really have nothing to do with the mission of the church. And when we, the church, chase after these worldly things we end up looking like a bunch of hypocrites who talk about loving God and loving our neighbors, but act like our hearts are filled with selfish ambition.

And I can so relate.

As a Pastor the temptation to want “*my church*” to be bigger, better and “more vital” so that I can feel like I’m being successful in my career is a spiritual battle that I have to wrestle with weekly, even though I know this is

not \*my\* church, this is \*God's\* church and I am not Jesus, I just work for Him.

However, that doesn't mean that the church shouldn't have goals.

It's important to have good measures of success that help us to evaluate the fruitfulness of our ministries.

I would even argue that wanting to be the best church that God is calling us to be is a holy goal.

But we need to make sure that the measures we are using are based on God's standards, rather than based on the world's standards of selfish ambition.

What if we judged the success of our worship service by whether or not it provides a peaceable and gentle experience for all who enter?

What if we evaluated our leadership based on their willingness to yield and share power and the fullness of their mercy?

What changes in programming would we make if we judged the effectiveness of our ministries by the fruits of the spirit they produce in the lives of the people who attend them?

Rather than measuring success simply by the number of people who attend?

What if we asked ourselves:

What priorities does God have for my life right now?

And gave ourselves permission to do the deep and sometimes scary work of discernment?

The deep and sometimes scary work of saying no and letting go of something ... so that we can make space to say yes to God... to say yes to the life that God is calling us into.

**(Slide 3: A better definition of better)**

James quotes Proverbs 3:34, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." and instructs us to "Submit yourselves therefore to God." (4:6)

Humility and submission are kind of scary ideas in a culture that equates humility with humiliation  
And submission with powerlessness.

But that's not what James is talking about.

James is talking about the paradox of our faith.

When we submit ourselves to God -- that's when we find real creative power instead of the false destructive power of the world.

When we humble ourselves, that's when God raises us up into new life.

When we let go of the destructive idiocy of selfish ambition and all of it's ridiculous, unachievable, anxiety producing measures of success.

The great paradox is revealed  
when we stop pursuing selfish ambition and start serving others.  
We discover that serving others is the most personally rewarding, self-esteem enhancing, fulfilling, meaningful thing there is to do.

If we want a better church, a better life, a better community, a better world, James tells us, we need a better definition of "better."

A definition that isn't all mucked up with the selfish ambitions of "the world"  
A definition of better that is rooted in God's wisdom.

That is, "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (James 3:17).

Children's Message:

Props: bottle of bubbles

(blow some bubbles) Can you catch the bubbles? Would you like to try blowing some bubbles?

You have to be gentle when playing with bubbles. You need to blow gently or they break, you need to handle them very gently or they pop.

Our scripture today from James chapter 3 tells us that we need to be gentle with people too:

<sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." (James 3:13)

What are some gentle ways to act towards people?

Using gentle touches or respecting their personal space and not touching them.

Using gentle words -- which means we don't make fun of people, instead we say nice things.

We include people as we listen to them instead of talking all the time.

Gentle God, teach us to be gentle, with words and actions, In Jesus' name. Amen.