

about another person, but this must be reserved for issues where two or three witnesses are attempting to secure justice in regard to a crime committed, or where the welfare of the community of faith requires a warning about a given individual. Even here, however, every effort must be made to find ways of warning without specifically demeaning someone else. So while there are legitimate cases where negative speech must occur, let us not make the exception a rationale for *lashon hara'*. May the Lord strengthen our respective communities as we seek to love each other in word and deed, and not allow the trap of *lashon hara'* to diminish our effectiveness for Him!

(End of Excursus)

13 – Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

In the previous section of our chapter, James has centered his attention on the evil of *lashon hara'*, “gossip” and “slander,” describing in picturesque terms the great damage that can be done to a believing community when such evil speech prevails. It is like a forest fire which devours everything in its path. He then goes on to teach us that those who are truly born from above and whose lives are therefore changed by the work of the Ruach in regeneration and sanctification, will never be characterized as “gossips” and “slanderers.” Even as a fountain of water cannot bring forth clean and salty water, or as a fig tree produces olives or a grape vine brings forth figs, so a person who has been truly born again to a new life will not be characterized or known as one who engages in evil speech (*lashon hara'*).

But even though the believer’s life is not to be characterized by gossip and slander, yet even true believers still have the sinful nature and are able to grieve the Spirit of God by yielding to the flesh and thereby sinning (cf. Eph 4:30; Gal 5:17).

So with this in mind, James now teaches us what it is that most often motivates a person to engage in gossip or slander. It is to attain for oneself a place of prominence by ascribing faults and weaknesses in others, particularly those who may be in a place of leadership and authority. As Calvin notes:

As the lust of slandering arises mostly from pride, and as the false conceit of wisdom for the most part generates pride, he therefore speaks here of wisdom. It is usual with hypocrites

to exalt and shew off themselves by criminating all others...¹

Therefore, it seems clear that in our text James addresses his words in our verse to those who consider themselves wise and understanding and who therefore need to examine themselves against the true marks of wisdom and understanding.

Who among you is wise and understanding? – The way that James asks this question is obvious: he is speaking to each individual, asking if they consider themselves wise and understanding. In other words, his words are an appeal for self-examination. “Do you consider yourself to be wise and understanding?” While surely this is a question that is appropriate for everyone to consider, it would seem within the immediate context of the epistle that James has in mind particularly those who, by their engaging in gossip, consider themselves as those who should hold a prominent position within the community and have, in order to gain such positions, engaged in slanderous speech about those who have been appointed as leaders in the community.

James refers specifically to those who consider themselves to be “wise” (σοφός, *sophos*) and “understanding” (ἐπιστήμων, *epistēmōn*). These two words are often used together in the Lxx as a set description of persons who have proven themselves through their disciplined life. For instance, Moses uses these words when he admonishes the tribes to choose those who would be appointed as leaders:

Choose wise and discerning and experienced men from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads.... So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you, leaders of thousands and of hundreds, of fifties and of tens, and officers for your tribes. (Deut 1:13, 15)

In the Tanach, wisdom (חָכְמָה, *chākmāh*/σοφία, *sophia*) is that which serves a person to do well in life’s decisions and in one’s own work and activities. In the Apostolic Scriptures, *sophia* is used in a negative sense of those who live according to “worldly wisdom”² but it can be also used as a designation for leaders and as a desirable quality in the believing community.

1 Calvin, *James*, p. 324.

2 Matt 11:25; Luke 10:21; Rom 1:22; 1 Cor 1:19–20, 25–27; 3:18–19, 20.

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men (*sophia*) and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, (Matt 23:34)

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise (*sophia*), making the most of your time, because the days are evil. (Eph 5:15–16)

The word “understanding” (ἐπιστήμων, *epistēmōn*) may emphasize knowledge as a key component in being able to complete assigned tasks. While in the Tanach the word for “wisdom” הַכְּמָה is most often translated by the Lxx with σοφός, *sophos*, our word “understanding,” ἐπιστήμων, *epistēmōn* in the Lxx, is usually a translation of בִּינָה (*bīn*) or יָדָעַ (yada’), “to discern” and “to know,” thus, describing one who has the required knowledge to properly complete the assigned tasks.

It seems, therefore, quite possible that James has in mind the teaching of the Tanach, that those who are given leadership responsibilities must show they are qualified for such positions by demonstrating a life marked by wisdom and knowledge. Knowledge is acquisition of truth while wisdom is the ability to utilize such truth for the good of others and thus for the glory of God.

*Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom—*Now James comes to the heart of his instruction: true wisdom and understanding is evidenced, not by someone seeking to rise to a position of prominence by putting others down or trying to put themselves forward, but rather by proving their true godly character by “good behavior” expressed in “the gentleness of wisdom.”

The first emphasis is on the word “show” (δείκνυμι, *deiknumi*), that is, to make something evident by means of actions, not merely by words. James used this same word with the same emphasis in 2:18.

But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:18)

His point in chapter two is summarized in the final statement of that chapter: “faith without works is dead.” Indeed, “dead faith” is not faith at all, for true faith produces actions or works in harmony with that faith. Here, in our text, one whom God intends to be given a leadership task within the body of Messiah will prove their appointment by a life conformed to God’s principles and standards, which James refers to as

“his good behavior,” or as the Greek might more accurately be understood, “his good manner of life,” for the word ἀναστροφή (*anastrophē*) has the general sense of “a way of life expressed according to certain principles.”¹ For a believer in Yeshua, it must become the driving desire in his or her life to live according to God’s principles, first and foremost in order to honor Him, and in so doing, to be a living witness and testimony to others of God’s love and grace in saving sinners. Thus, truly living to honor God flows from a heart that desires to please Him first. As Manton notes:

We must study to honor God and honor our profession of faith. It is one thing to do works that can be seen and another to do them in order that they shall be seen.²

Then James couples “wisdom” with “gentleness.” The one who is truly wise will be known as such by the pattern of his life as he displays wisdom in choices, pursuits, and regular actions. James emphasizes “gentleness” (πραῦς, *praus*) as the concomitant attribute of godly wisdom. In the Apostolic Scriptures, this word *praus*, “gentleness,” is regularly accompanied by the concept of “humility.”

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Gal 6:1)

with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, (Eph 4:2)

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; (Col 3:12)

Here, once again, we see that those who are truly wise and understanding are not attempting to put themselves above others by putting them down with words of slander or gossip. Rather, those who are wise and understanding, who therefore are ready to serve the Lord as leaders within the community, are those whose lives as a whole are marked by obedience to the Lord in the way they live their lives, and who have

1 BDAG, “ἀναστροφή,” p. 73.

2 Manton, *James*, p. 301.

demonstrated to have wisdom coupled with the understanding and gentleness. In other words, they are being conformed to the very person of Yeshua, for He said:

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.
(Matt 11:29)

To be more and more conformed to the very image of Messiah is the true mark of wisdom and understanding.

14–15 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

The present tense “you have” (ἔχετε, *exete*) indicates that their bitter jealousy and selfish ambition has become the general character for which they are known. Here, once again, it is evident that James is referring to those who claim to be believers in Yeshua and who, whether overtly or in a hidden manner, are seeking to put themselves in a position of prominence within the community, by engaging in slander and gossip against others in order to show themselves as superior.

Such actions flow from “bitter jealousy” (ζῆλον πικρόν) and “selfish ambition” (ἐριθειαν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν). The word translated as “jealousy” (ζῆλος, *zēlos*) can carry either a positive or a negative connotation. If positive, it has the sense of “to have an intense positive interest in something; zeal, ardor, marked by a sense of dedication.” If negative, the word has the sense of “intense negative feelings over another’s achievements or success, jealousy, envy,”¹ thus “jealousy.” In our verse, James gives the added description as “bitter” which intensifies the jealousy. Obviously, this describes someone who so desires to put himself in a prominent position that it has consumed his attention and driven his sinful behavior.

Thus James gives a second description of the inner workings of the person consumed by “bitter jealousy.” That person has a heart filled with “selfish ambition.” Here is the root of the problem: self-centeredness, that is, seeking to put oneself in a place above others, to allow pride to dismiss any sense of true humility. Such jealousy is “bitter” because it only brings forth ruin, that which has no value but only causes destruction, not only for the person himself but for those who are

1 BDAG, “ζῆλος,” p. 427.

victims of his self-centered behavior.

...do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. The admonition of James to anyone who is filled with such “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” is to humble themselves and recognize that to live with such bitterness and self centeredness is to live a lie, to proclaim by their life just the opposite of what they confess with their mouth. By their actions, they “lie against the truth,” that is, to bring the truth of God into disrepute as though it is not true at all, but a lie. By their words they claim to be followers of Yeshua, but by their deeds they prove themselves to be against Him.

This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. – Obviously James refers to “This wisdom” as counterfeit.¹ This kind of “wisdom” is not that which is obtained from God, i.e., it “does not come down from above” but rather is “earthly,” that is, a product of the fallen world; “natural,” that is, the product of fallen mankind; and finally “demonic.” Here is the source of such “wisdom.” It is the attempt of the enemy to make the *ekklesia* of Messiah Yeshua, the gathering of His chosen people, to be a spectacle mocked by the world. If those who confess to have the light and life of Yeshua Himself are consumed with “bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambitions,” they show themselves to be unworthy of the “fair Name” of Yeshua (cf. James 2:7).

Once again, James is not holding back on giving the stark truth as he describes the debauchery that comes within the body of Messiah when self-ambitions take charge and that which God hates becomes the common state of affairs among those who claim to be followers of Yeshua.

There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers. (Prov 6:16–19)

It is as though James is saying, “Stop telling people you are a follower of Messiah, don’t claim to have a true relationship with God and don’t even pretend you are one of His unless and until you repent and stop engaging in that which God hates.” One wonders what would happen

1 Note the NIV correctly puts “wisdom” in quotes: Such “‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”

if James were preaching these words in today's assemblies of believers. One commentator suggests:

Preaching of this kind would not be warmly received in the modern church. But this harshness is precisely the point. For everyone who thinks the church and the Christian faith are to be exploited for their own personal interests, James's words cut to the quick. His rebuke must be spoken again and again because of our spectacular tendency to betray the faith by our actions.¹

16– For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

James' obvious point is that at the heart of true faith is a life willing to submit to God, having a growing desire to please and honor Him, to be led and molded by the work of the Ruach, and to have one's life more and more modeled after the very life of Yeshua. This means to die to oneself, i.e., to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to be conformed into the very image of Yeshua. The sinful nature desires that one's energy, hopes, desires, and will be directed to oneself. Indeed, self-centeredness is the opposite of being Messiah-centered. Even as He gave His life for us, so we are compelled by His love and by the indwelling Spirit to give our lives over to Him, and by doing so, to fulfill the purpose for our very existence, for we were created in the image of God in order to bear witness to His greatness.

Thus Paul admonishes us:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:2)

And Paul's own testimony:

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Messiah, and may be found in

¹ Richardson, *James in The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman, 1997), Vol. 36, pp. 164–65.

Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Torah, but that which is through faith in Messiah, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:8–11)

...*there is disorder and every evil thing.* – Where people within a believing community are engaged in “jealousy and selfish ambition,” that is, they are characterized by that which is opposite of the very person of Yeshua, and thus of the purpose of God for His people, there can only be a fountain that gives forth disorder and more—“every evil thing” (πᾶν φαῦλον πρᾶγμα), that is, all manner of base and evil deeds, actions, and their consequences.

James’ words ought likewise to be considered by those who have leadership positions within the believing community. As Moo puts it in his commentary:

While what James says here applies to any Christian who prides himself or herself on being “wise and understanding,” he may especially have in mind the leaders of the community. For envy and selfish ambition among the leaders have tremendous potential to damage the unity and order of the church as a whole. When those who are being looked to for direction and wise counsel act on the basis of a personal agenda or in a spirit of “one-upmanship” toward one another, great damage to the church ensues.¹

Surely these pointed and inspired words of the Scriptures ought to strengthen our resolve to turn from any form of jealousy or self-centered ambitions, and especially from slander and gossip, and give ourselves wholly to honor the One Who died for us and to be living testimonies of His glory, power, grace, and love, not only as individuals, but especially as being community members together in a local assembly.

17– But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

The opening word “But” (δέ, *de*) marks a contrast to the “wisdom”

1 Douglas Moo, *James*, p. 174.