

## “Minding Your Peace and Cues”

James 3:13-4:3

*Series: Faith That Works Week 5. Surrendering Selfishness*

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There was an elderly couple who lived in a nursing home. Though married for 60 years, their relationship was filled with constant arguments, disagreements, and shouting contests. They argued and squabbled from sun up until they fell in bed at night. It became so bad the nursing home threatened to throw them out if they didn't change their ways. Even then, the couple couldn't agree on what to do. Finally, the wife said to her husband: “I'll tell you what, Joe, let's pray that one of us dies. And after the funeral is over, I'll go live with my sister.”

We all desire peace. We pray for peace on earth. It's one of the top items on the agenda of most world leaders. Even those fighting on the front lines on both sides say they are waging war to achieve peace. It's on everyone's mind. Yet peace is one quality missing from many lives.

So how do you find peace in your marriage, your family, with your friends, coworkers, church members, neighbors and in your community? Why is it so hard to find peace? We usually begin by looking in the wrong place. We expect the other person to change, come to their senses and ask (or beg) for our forgiveness. We know exactly what they did wrong and what they should do to make it right. Unfortunately the other person thinks the same. The result is a stalemate or the silent treatment – which is no treat at all.

The Apostle James tells us it's not wise to expect the other person to make the first move. **Peacemaking Begins with Me.** James teaches me to first search my own heart and discover what's hiding in there. He writes

If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. James 3:14-16

He mentions two deadly poisons which kill peace. The first is “bitter envy.” The word ‘bitter’ refers to poisoned or polluted water. ‘Envy’ is the Greek word zelos from which we get our word “zealous” and “zealot” which means someone who is extreme or out of control. Do you see the picture? Bitterness, left unchecked, is a pollution which takes over your heart. The one most often hurt by it is you. Someone told me once “Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

The other dangerous infection is “selfish ambition.” Originally this word referred to selfish politicians who use corruption to get into office. Not a pretty picture. This passage describes any selfishness that causes rivalry and arguments.

A Sunday school teacher discusses the Ten Commandments with her class of five and six-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to “Honor thy father and

thy mother,” she asks, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat, one little boy answered, “Thou shall not kill.”

Which will die first: your selfishness or your self? The starting point for peace is in you. Search your heart. Do you find yourself arguing in your head against a rival? Do you imagine yourself presenting your case, justifying your thoughts and actions, and always winning the argument? Is there any bitterness, jealousy, envy or selfishness? James says if you find these deadly poisons don't declare them or deny them. Delete them. I cannot control how other people think or act. I can work on my own feelings. Where was I wrong? What did I do that caused this stand off? Why did I react so strongly in this situation? Once I've identified these poisons, I turn to God and ask Him for the antidote.

James' second prescription says: **Peacemaking Depends on God's Power**. He reminds us we need wisdom from God above. Here is what happens when God's powerful wisdom fills you.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. James 3:17-18

Each word is worthy of deeper investigation. Let's look at three. God's wisdom is first pure: it's not tainted or contaminated with a hidden selfish motive. You aren't simply saying, "I'm sorry," in order to lure the person back into an argument as in: "I'm sorry, but you were really wrong when you said..." God's wisdom is pure not poisoned. Another mark of godly wisdom is "submissive" which actually means a willingness to listen, learn and then relent. You can't mind your peace if you don't listen for cues from your opponent. Third, God's wisdom is "considerate" which requires us to correct an unjust situation, to put things right. When we stop trying to prove someone wrong, God helps us to listen and see what may be right in their point of view.

Notice all seven descriptions of peace require you to focus not on yourself but on the other person. James calls each of these seven qualities a seed which cannot grow unless it is sown or given away. Peace cannot happen if you focus on yourself or keep it to yourself. You must sow the seeds of peace in order to raise a harvest of healthy and right relationships. Instead of pointing fingers and saying, "You" try "We."

Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studied 59 couples and found that spouses who used second-person pronouns (you) tended toward negativity in interactions. Those using first-person plural pronouns (we) provided positive solutions to problems. The study concluded: "'You'-sayers tend to criticize, disagree, justify, and otherwise team with negativity. 'We' users seek compromise and other ideas pleasing to both partners."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel A. Simmons, Peter C. Gordon, and Dianne L. Chambless, "Pronouns in Marital Interaction: What Do 'You' and 'I' Say about Marital Health?" *Psychological Science* (Volume 16), pp. 932-936

Draw on God's wisdom and power because 'we' are in this together.

Third, **Peacemaking Surrenders Selfishness**. James says,

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4:1-3

James tells us conflict is caused by a clash of desires. While shopping for a new car a battle royal erupts between a husband and wife. He wants a new truck. She wants a fast sports car. The discussion gets heated until the wife states, "Look, I want something that goes from 0 to 130 in four seconds or less, and that's all there is to it! My birthday is coming up and you better surprise me or else!" When her big day comes, the wife goes out to the garage, but there's nothing that goes 0 to 130 in four seconds or less. Angry, she goes back into the house looking for her husband, but he's not home. Frustrated and upset, she goes into the bathroom to get ready—there, sitting on the floor, wrapped in a red ribbon, is a brand new scale! Funeral Services are pending.

Our desires set us on a collision course with each other. James points out we fight, quarrel and sometimes kill when we don't get what we want. Yet desire is never satisfied. It's a bottomless pit. So if we put desire in the driver's seat it will constantly put us on a crash course. For James, the answer is to pray. Listen to the voice of God instead of the demands of desire. Surrender selfishness. Seek God's will.

And finally: **Peacemaking Makes Sacrifices**. Picking up where James left off, the Apostle John teaches it is not enough to talk peace. We need to live it.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. I John 3:16-18

John gives us the greatest example of love from the greatest Peacemaker: our Lord Jesus. Love is more than a feeling. It's an action, a sacrifice. The Cross is the ultimate act of love – Jesus sacrificed Himself to make peace between God and us. Few of us will be asked to lay down our lives to make peace. But John suggests there is something we all can do to be peacemakers: share what we have with those in need.

James says, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18) Let's plant the seed of peace. Let's plant the seed of peace by recognizing where we are wrong. Let's plant the seed of peace by taking the first step to restore a strained relationship. Let's plant the seed of peace by making amends with your spouse, parent, sibling, child or coworker. Let's plant the seed of peace by listening and

understanding instead of arguing. Let's plant the seed of peace by making an extra effort to welcome a newcomer to Woodside. Let's plant the seed of peace by teaching children and youth how to follow Jesus. Let's plant the seed of peace by leading a Growth Group or Microchurch. Let's plant the seed of peace by working with the Prison and Recovery Ministry, Habitat for Humanity, Code Blue, the Dinner Ministry. When we plant the seed of peace, we sow hope, we reap a harvest of hope. Let's sow hope by taking a stand and making a commitment to give from all the financial gifts God gives to you. Your gifts will send hundreds of shoeboxes filled with toys, hygiene kits and the Good News of Jesus around the world. Your gifts teach the Word of God to children, youth, adults and seniors. Your gifts heal children, teach God's Word, provide clean water and an education in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Your gifts feed, clothe and educate children and youth in Zambia. With the state of the world right now it would be easy for you to pull back, to cut back, to give less. Yet now, more than ever, we need to step up and step out and give more because there are many in this world who need our help and God's hope. Your gifts bring peace to heart and mind, body and soul.

In September I was privileged to meet Veda Gill, the Executive Director of Presbyterian Education Board in Pakistan. These schools were started by Presbyterian missionaries in 1856. For the last twenty-five years Veda has grown the number of schools to 25. They teach 6,000 students 40% who are Christian and 60% Muslim. Veda sows seeds of peace and hope in the face of threats and hardships. Some in the community oppose her teaching about Christ. Others reject the education of girls.

Veda told a story of an anonymous caller who said to her there would be a riot at one of her schools and if she went to the school the legs which brought her there would not bring her home. Veda is a woman of great courage and faith. Undeterred by the threat she went to the school to face the mob. When they came at her she told them her only aim is to educate children and give them hope and a future. It was an intense stand-off. Then someone in the crowd shouted, "My mother went to this school. We must stop this." Another said, "My daughter goes to this school." Others shouted how the school blessed their families. Miraculously the mob began to break up, the crisis dissolved. After the group dispersed some individuals came up to Veda and said, "We are grateful for what you do. When we heard about the riot, we seeded ourselves into the mob in order to prevent them from harming you." Later, Veda told us, one of the leading Muslim Clerics formally opposed to her, sent his daughters to her school.

Your gifts make this peace possible. Let's sow hope.