

Adult Teaching Resources

September 20, 2015



Serious Church

True Faith — James 2:1-26

Pure Speech — James 3:1-12

Highborn Wisdom — James 3:13-4:10

Fervent Prayer — James 5:13-20

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Highborn Wisdom

3:13-4:10

FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Before the Lesson: Make copies of the handout, “Friendship with God: Imperatives and Promises,” for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question

Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

Think of a friend you have. What is one way your life is different because this person is your friend?

What is the longest friendship you currently have? How long have you been friends?

Information

In 1983, Howard Gardner shook the education world with his book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. In it, he insisted that there is more to intelligence than verbal and mathematic intelligence. There are many kinds of intelligences, including special, bodily kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist and existential. No one is intelligent in every way. Everyone is intelligent in some ways.

Wisdom is different from intelligence. How would you define the difference?

[On the board write the word “Wisdom.” Under that, put the words “False” and “True.” Make a column on the left side with the words “Signs,” “Character,” and “Outcome.”]

In the book of James, the author teaches us that there are two kinds of wisdom, false and true. As we listen to the readings, let’s listen for the different signs, character, and outcome of these two kinds of wisdom.

[Have a class member read James 3:13-18.]

What are the *signs* of false wisdom? Of true wisdom?

How does James define the *character* of false wisdom? Of true wisdom?

What does James say is the *outcome* of false wisdom? Of true wisdom?

[When you have completed this review of the passage, the outline of the board should look something like this outline:

Information *continued*

a. False wisdom

- (1) Signs (v. 14)—harsh zeal, personal ambition
- (2) Character (v. 15)—earthly, unspiritual, devilish
- (3) Outcome (v. 16)—disorder, depraved deeds

b. True wisdom

- (1) Signs (v. 17b)—pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, impartial, sincere
- (2) Character (v. 17a)— from above
- (3) Outcome (v. 18)— fruit of righteousness

Source: Charles H. Talbert. “James: Teaching Outlines and Selected Sermon Seeds.” *Review and Expositor*, 97 no 2, spring 2000. p. 176.]

THE BIBLE LESSON writer notes, “Wisdom that has its roots in a proper reverence for God results in a life of humility... The opposite of [this] wisdom is found in bitter envy, selfish ambition, and boastful pride.”

How do you connect wisdom and humility?

Why are persons “in the world” who have “bitter envy, selfish ambition, and boastful pride” admired?

How does true wisdom lead to peacemaking (v. 18)?

James has told us that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:17) Could the same be said of wisdom? Is wisdom without works “dead”? Why or why not?

In the next passage, James is going to talk about *cravings*. The wisdom we obtain and live by determines how we react to cravings for power or pleasure.

[Have a class member read James 4:1-3.]

The word for “cravings” (NRSV) is the Greek word *hedonai*. (The singular is *hedone*, pronounced HEY-done-aye) Its root is *hedus*, “pleasant.” It came to mean “sensual pleasure or enjoyment of any kind.” “Hedonism” comes from this Greek word. One commentator notes, “In one sense, *hedone* enriches the fullness of human existence. Pleasure can be a legitimate experience. But *hedone* also has a darker side. It can obscure the true meaning and purpose of life.” [Source: William L. Blevens. “A Call to Repent, Love Others and Remember God: James 4.” *Review & Expositor*. 83 no3 Sum 1986. p. 420.]

Often our cravings center on three things: money, sex, and power. How are these cravings legitimate? When do they cross the line to become illegitimate desires?

How can a true wisdom guide us in these cravings?

Information *continued*

“You have not because you ask not.” This verse is often to mean, “If you want something, all you need to do is ask God and you will get it. But if you don’t ask, God won’t give.” What does this verse really mean in its context?

James has some strong language for those who choose “hedonism,” a life centered on satisfying personal cravings.

[Have a class member read James 4:4-6.]

If we choose the way of hedonism, a life centered on satisfying our personal cravings, we are “adulterers” according to James. Who are we committing adultery against? How is hedonism like adultery?

James insists that we have a choice in who we want as our friend: our cravings or our God.

As James continues his letter to Christian believers, he uses this image of friendship. He is not so concerned in this passage about the people we hang out with. He has a bigger question in mind — are you a friend of God or a friend of the world?

“To enter into a friendship is to take up a new way of life because every friendship in some way reorders our lives and creates new commitments and responsibilities. Too, friendships change us because they form our character, shape our beliefs and convictions, and encourage certain kinds of behavior in us.” [Paul J. Wadell. “Living as the Friends of God.” *The Letter of James*. Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 43. Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Spring 2012. p. 70.]

If you think about friends you have made, you may recognize that a new friendship opens you to new ideas and new experiences. Any stories of how a friendship has done this for you?

Because we have a limited amount of time and energy, commitment to a new friendship inevitably closes the door on friendship with some other people. James argues that we do not have time and energy to commit to worldly pleasures and to God.

As we feel a unity with our closest friends, we can have this unity with God. “Charity incorporates us into the Trinitarian life of God so that we can participate *as God’s friends* in the love and goodness and happiness that is God, incompletely in this world, perfectly in the next life. What charity reveals about God is that God (as any friend would) wants our good, and our highest possible good is to dwell as fully as possible in the Trinitarian community of friendship that is God.” [Waddell. 74.]

How do feel about this idea that God invites us to be God’s friend?

If we are friends with someone, we also have a responsibility and a desire for their good and their success. How can we be friends of God, helping God’s dream for this world to be a success?

James next itemizes way we can nourish our friendship with God.

[Have a class member read James 4:7-10.]

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute the handout.]

James speaks with ten imperative verbs. As you look over this handout, is there one area in particular that is raised for you — an area you would like to the Holy Spirit to begin working within you?

Begin this time of silence with a prayer that God would reveal to do what you need to do to be a better friend of God. Read through the list of imperative statements James offers. What statement(s) speak to you at this moment? What commitment are you willing to make to address this commandment? [Quotations are from THE BIBLE LESSON found in Baptists Today.]

- Submit yourself to God.
- Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
- Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.
- Cleanse your hands, you sinners. [“sins of action”]
- Purify your hearts, you double-minded. [“sins of motive”]
- Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. [“Remember that James has accused his readers of murderous thoughts and spiritual adultery.”]
- Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Note that three of these imperatives end with promises.

- The devil will flee from you.
- God will draw near to you.
- God will exalt you.

Which of these promises are most meaningful to you at this time? Say a prayer of thanks to God for these promises. Pray for the faith to trust that God will keep these promises.

[After time enough for prayer and reflection, close in a prayer something like this: *God of all true wisdom, we are awed that you desire our friendship. We confess that we are too often attracted to the lures of pleasure and of foolish wisdom. Give us your wisdom. We accept your friendship. Help us to be even better friends of yours in this new week. Amen.*]

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnc.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Envy — In *Tools of Conviviality*, Ivan Illich wrote: “In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy” (excerpted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed. [Oxford University Press, 1980], 270:5).

Deadly sins — In addition to envy, the traditional list of “seven deadly sins” includes pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, and sloth. Note that covetousness and lust are closely related to envy, while the other four are indirectly related.

The text — The Revised Common Lectionary text for this week is James 3:13-18, 4:7-8a, which skips over some difficult but closely related verses. In the interest of completeness, we’ll consider James 3:13-4:10 in this lesson.

Seeing straight — Many of us have poor eyesight because our corneas are misshapen, distorting the incoming light rays so that they do not focus properly on the receptor cells in the back of eye. Glasses or contact lenses function to correct the distortion and bring vision into proper focus.

Envy occurs when selfish attitudes distort the way we see the world. Children want control of their siblings’ toys. A spouse may be jealous of his or her mate’s career and opportunities for travel, while the other longs for freedom from a demanding job outside the home. Church members may envy the power that others exercise within the congregation. When our spiritual vision gets out of focus, the result is internal frustration and external strife.

James’s call to embrace the “wisdom from above” provides the corrective lenses we need to get life back in focus. When we cultivate a proper relationship with God, we can see more clearly how to relate to others. This renewed clarity diminishes strife and magnifies peace by leading us to walk gently and kindly with others.

Sowing and reaping — “You reap what you sow” is an aphorism much older than the Bible, but also a truth just as new as today. Perhaps it would be helpful to us to think of our tongue as a farmer, and every word as a seed. If we sow from the deep stores of God’s wisdom, we can be assured of a “harvest of righteousness.”

If not . . . well, what would happen if we were to sow weed seeds? Our lives, in speech and in deed, can leave behind a legacy of good fruit that nourishes and strengthens others, or it can leave behind a field of weeds that sap others’ strength and make the world an ugly place.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Far and near — James’s encouragement for those who are far from God to draw near reminds me a bit of a frequent sketch on *Sesame Street*, which I enjoyed watching with my children when they were small. One of my favorite characters is Grover. In the sketch he taught spatial concepts by running away from the camera and shouting “Far!” Then he would run up close and say “Near!” Over and over again he repeated: “Far!” “Near!” “Far!” “Near!” James’s words are not as warm and fuzzy as Grover, but the concepts of “far” and “near” are important to his own teaching.

Who’s he quoting? — There’s a bit of a problem with James’s quotation in 4:5, because he says it is from scripture, but there is no such passage. Some scholars think James was quoting from an apocryphal work or a lost book that he considered to be scripture, while others argue that he was simply paraphrasing a similar verse or summing up his understanding of what the Old Testament says about God’s jealous desire for our love (cf. Exod. 34:14, Zech. 8:2). This last option is probably best.

In any case, the point is clear. While God longs to be close, humans are often proud and rebellious. Those who proudly insist on their own way will never know the depths of God’s grace experienced by those who love purely and who seek God’s will (4:6, cf. Prov. 3:34).

Nothing less — The attitude of humility James sought is illustrated nicely by a prayer credited to Bobby Richardson, an All Star second-baseman for the New York Yankees from 1955 to 1966. Richardson prayed: “Dear God, your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen.” (From “Personal Glimpses,” in *Reader’s Digest*, July 1971, p. 139).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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Did James teach or promote a prosperity gospel?

James did not teach that prayers for wealth get positive response, despite his use of the phrase “you have not, because you ask not” (4:2). God makes no promises to grant selfish desires. Biblical promises of answered prayer are consistently found in the context of asking within the will of God. For example, we read in 1 John that “this is the confidence we have in him: if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5:14). [DD]

Praying rightly is not always easy, because we are often tempted to pray for our own desires, rather than for God’s desire. One of my lateral ancestors was an early Baptist pastor named Samuel Cartledge, the brother of my great-grandfather about seven times removed. Samuel was one of Daniel Marshall’s first converts in the state of Georgia, and served as a pastor on either side of the Georgia-South Carolina border from 1779 to 1843. Among other things, he was known for being plain spoken and telling the truth.

Samuel’s grandson, a pastor named Abiah Morgan Cartledge, wrote a memoir in which he recounted a story about how the aging pastor had been a widower for some time when he was called on one occasion to come and pray for a very sick parishioner. While praying for God to heal the ailing man, Samuel seemed to be laboring under extreme difficulties. Afterward, he sat with bowed head before making a confession to the sick man’s wife. “My sister,” he said, “all the time I was trying to pray for your husband, and trying to pray in faith, the devil was whispering in my ear, saying ‘Now Daddy Cartledge, pray without faith, and the sick man will die, and you can marry the widow!’”

Proper prayer does not focus on what *we* want, but on what *God* wants. That is why we pray “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, *thy will be done* on earth, as it is in heaven. . .” (Matt. 6:9-10). The purpose of prayer is to seek God’s will, not our own.

Friendship with God

Imperatives and Promises

James 4:7-10 offers ten imperative verbs. As you look over these phrases, is there one area in particular that is raised for you? Is there an area you would like to the Holy Spirit to begin working within you?

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- Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

What statement(s) speak to you at this moment? What commitment are you willing to make to address this commandment?

Note that three of these imperatives end with promises.

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