

James 3:13-4:10
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Thought that Counts

I would like to share with you five powerful words: "It's the thought that counts." Perhaps you are already aware of how useful these words are and have used their power to your advantage. They come in handy when the birthday gift you've purchased for your wife is the wrong color and style, or worse yet, the wrong size. They are the best excuse available when you mistakenly call someone by the wrong name. They instantly change your perspective when your child has tried to make you breakfast in bed and has made a mess in the kitchen. And that sentence covers our inadequacy when we try to bring comfort and hope to a person undergoing loss or trial, and we struggle to find words that really meet their need.

"It's the thought that counts." These words have a way of covering our sins and our unintentional faults. Applied to others, they help us see behind their outward actions to the intention, to the love and care that motivate them. So, in view of this positive spin, we shouldn't be too disturbed when James asks us to look at our spiritual lives and know that "It's the thought that counts." But when we do that honestly, we begin to get uneasy. James opens our eyes to the thoughts that often lurk behind our words and works, and this is hard for us to see.

We instinctively know that thoughts and actions are connected. Yet we tend to focus more on the action. James asks us to consider the thoughts that lie behind our actions. The thoughts James describes make us pretty uncomfortable. He turns the spotlight on jealousy and selfish ambition, on passions, sinful desire, and coveting, and on the root sin of pride. He makes the connection between thoughts and action quite plain when he writes, *"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."* Later he refers to quarrels and fights as being caused by passions and desires.

All this is pretty distressing. Especially when we come here, we like to view ourselves as peace-loving, church-going Christians in the business of worship and prayer. Our first thought is that James' words of condemnation are obviously meant for those who aren't here, those not connected to the church. But if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that these aforementioned ugly thoughts are universal human traits. To some extent, we all have them. These thoughts, and the regrettable actions that inevitably flow from them, are found within Christian families and even within the community of believers. The Gospel reading was convincing proof of that. Even Jesus' inner circle of disciples was found arguing with one another over who was the greatest.

Jealousy and selfish ambition affect our relationships to the world around us. We want to be first, so we glare at the driver who cuts in ahead of us and mutter some expletive under our breath. We harbor resentment of the person who seems to have done better than us financially, or has more influence than we do.

Knowing that these tendencies are inherent within us, advertisers play to our self-centered desires. They tell us that if we want to fit in near the top, we must have the newest style in clothes, a vehicle with all the features, and the most advanced communication device. But perhaps the intangible things of personal power and the freedom to do things our own way are desired even more than these tangible, material things. When our sinful passions or desires are confronted, we tend to react defensively or even angrily.

Self-centered thoughts also affect our relationship with God. What are the thoughts behind our prayers? Are we seeking things for ourselves, outcomes that make us look better to others, or are we truly submitting ourselves to God and His will? Does our prayer become almost

a way to manipulate God into giving us what we want? If it seems that God is slow to answer, James suggests a reason: *"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."*

So whether it is with others or with God, there is a battle going on in our minds. Our thoughts are pulled toward the godly wisdom from above, and then back toward selfish, worldly wisdom. James strips away our last bit of self-justification when he says, *"You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?"* The thoughts of jealousy and selfish ambition, desire and covetousness are worldly, and they put us on the wrong side of the battle. The term adulterous is correctly applied when instead of remaining faithful to God we flirt with the world. Yes, thoughts count all right---they count against us.

But those are our thoughts. The only way to get out of the hole we've just dug is to consider what's going on in the mind and heart of God. God says to His people in Isaiah 55: 9, *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."* While James does ask us to consider our thoughts, what is even more important is that we stop and hear the thoughts of God. His thought is the thought that counts! What James asks us to consider is the wisdom of God, hidden for ages and now known fully among us in Christ. God's wisdom is closely connected with His love---His wonderful, undeserved love for His fallen creatures. Those thoughts of love led to His work for our redemption. When we sinned and deserved nothing but punishment, He continued to think of us in love and sent His Son to save us.

In Christ, we see God's wisdom from above working out our redemption. Christ was pure in thought word, and deed, perfectly following God's will. He was peaceable, working to restore peace between God and fallen humankind. He was gentle, not pushy and demanding as we can be, but careful and considerate of those in need. He was full of mercy, granting healing to many for all kinds of physical afflictions, and providing healing for sin for all people. Most of all He was submissive to His Father's will. He humbled Himself and was obedient to death on the cross.

As thoughts lead to deeds, God's thoughts regarding His fallen creatures led to action taken on our behalf. God put His thought into words. In the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, God entered our fallen world and took our sins upon Himself. James reminds us that it is God's thought that counts, for God's thinking and acting save us.

God has not stopped thinking this way, but continues to think and do these things today. He continues to pour forth His love for all of the world as the person and work of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in the saving gospel. God continues to think and act on our behalf. He continues to come to us as His Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament, offering forgiveness to us when we are troubled by how easily pride, envy and selfish ambition can overtake us. He comes to us with His sustaining love when we are struggling with illness, financial problems, and broken relationships. Whatever our situation, *He gives more grace.*

You can know for certain that God thinks of you now and won't stop thinking of you, no matter how badly you fumble and fail. His thoughts and actions for us bring about a marvelous change. In our relationship to Him, we don't have to struggle and strive to get God on our side. He is already thinking kindly of us before we pray or act. Instead of seeking our private benefit we can humbly ask that His kingdom come and His will be done among us also. His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. It points to His work for us and then to our life for Him in this world.

That brings about a change in our relationship to those around us. Yes, the world remains a battleground, a place of jealousy and selfish ambition. People still want to get ahead. But we have a different thought. We want others to share with us in the joys of the kingdom,

the certainty of being saved. We are guided by Paul's words in Phil. 2:3-5: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.* Because we share the interest that God has in the salvation of souls, we will step out in bold faith to invite an unchurched friend to hear about God's love. We will invest a portion of God's material blessing to support the work of proclaiming the Gospel here and in other mission fields. Our thoughts and attitudes will reflect God's will and His sacrificial love.

So it is the thought that counts: God's thought. God's thought for us has changed our lives from being centered on self to being centered on Him and others. He has changed our actions from a relentless pursuit of recognition into grateful rejoicing over our exalted status as members of His kingdom. Instead of pride and desire, our thoughts turn to thankfulness for His work of salvation in us and through us. Amen.