

Over the past 30 years my favorite computer game has been *Civilization*. I started playing in 1991, and later upgraded to *Civilization II*, then *III*, then *IV*. Now I tend to split my playing time between *Civ V* and *Civ VI*. In the various editions of *Civilization*, the basic trajectory is the same. You start with a wandering tribe in 4,000 BC. And you build a city, and then more cities. You collect resources, and try to build a civilization that will last into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Along the way you research numerous technologies, ranging from agriculture and the wheel and bronze working in the early years, to lasers and computers and nanotechnology later on. And you try to dominate the world. You can choose to dominate with science, or diplomacy, or the force of your culture. But I tend to play the scenario where to win you need to dominate militarily, conquering the other civilizations. Thus *Civilization* is part of a genre of games characterized as "4X." You win by Exploring, and Expanding, and Exploiting, and Exterminating.

Now, in real life I think I'm a pretty nice guy. But when I play *Civilization*, I will admit to being rather vicious. My usual strategy is to build up my forces and wait for another nation to attack me. And when they do, I make it my mission to defeat them. I don't mean win a war. I mean I try to wipe them off the map and eliminate them from the game and take over all their territory. I might make temporary peace treaties along the way to rebuild my forces. But then I declare war later, and attempt total global domination.

Now it's one thing to act that way in a computer game or a video game. But it becomes a problem if it spills over into the real world. Video games remind me that there is a dark and vicious side to my personality. Now, in some ways, these games provide a good safety valve to blow off some steam. But in the real world, I know that those darker aspects of my personality have to be contained and constrained.

They are contained and constrained by being part of a civilized society with norms and laws. And they are more importantly contained and constrained by my trying to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

And that's what our Epistle lesson from James is warning us about today. I preached on James a couple of weeks ago. We're in the midst of 5 weeks of readings from James.

And 2 weeks ago I talked about how James told us that our faith impels us to live in a different way. And James told us that our faith is made knowable to others by our deeds. And today, James has much more to say about living in a different way.

One of his key statements today is "Submit yourselves to God."<sup>1</sup>

And one of key indicators of submitting to God is that you're living a "good life," and that "your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."<sup>2</sup> This gentleness born of wisdom deserves a little unpacking. Gentleness is actually a quite powerful term. It's not a wimpy word. It's used of war horses that have been tamed and trained to accept bit and bridle. It implies power under control.

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<sup>1</sup> James 4:7

<sup>2</sup> James 3:13

In last week's Epistle, James talked about a horse being directed by a small bit, or a sailing ship being steered with a small rudder. And he said in the same way we should tame and control our tongues, because they can do much damage. And today he is saying that we need to control our darker impulses, because they too can do much damage.

So this gentleness born of wisdom is power that is under control, and in this case under the control of God's wisdom and God's direction and God's ways. It's part of submitting ourselves to God. With God guiding us we can do good works with the power and the gifts he has given us.

Then James says, if you're not under the control of God's wisdom, then you'll be guided by "bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts."<sup>3</sup>

And he spends a fair amount of time today on this theme. He continues, "Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."<sup>4</sup>

And James is probably talking at two levels. There's an individual level. And there's a societal level.

At an individual level, James is zeroing in on the source of conflict and dispute. He says they come from "your cravings that are at war within you."<sup>5</sup>

Then James talks about what comes from our cravings, from the dark side within us. He says,

"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."<sup>6</sup>

Now, we might think we're off the hook. 'I've never murdered anyone. James must not be talking about me.' But there's literal killing and there's figurative killing. I might not use a real knife. But I might knife someone in the back metaphorically.

James is saying, 'You want it. You don't have it. And so you fight over it.' This is true on so many levels. Fighting over what you want. Money. Power. Market share. Position.

And then James says,  
"You do not have, because you do not ask."<sup>7</sup>

The reason you don't have what you need is you don't ask for it.'

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<sup>3</sup> James 3:14

<sup>4</sup> James 3:16

<sup>5</sup> James 4:1

<sup>6</sup> James 4:2

<sup>7</sup> James 4:2

Okay, I'll ask. 'Oh God, please let win the lottery. That way I'll never have to work again.' Or maybe we pray like Janis Joplin: 'Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz.'

But God doesn't operate that way. James says as much.

He says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."<sup>8</sup> And the word for pleasures is *hedone*, from which we get our English word hedonism.

You ask for stuff to give you empty hedonistic pleasures, instead of asking God for what you really need.

James is telling us, 'God's not going to play that game.' It's like the old Rolling Stone's song, "You can't always get what you want," especially if it's just empty hedonistic pleasure. But if you ask God, you just might find, you get what you need.

You need to submit to God. You need to be like a horse with bit and bridle directed and led by God's wisdom and ways.

Obedying our desires, trying to obtain everything we covet—that's not what life's all about.

The ultimate goal is to use what God gives us for his glory. Everything belongs ultimately to God: our time, our talent, and yes, even our treasure. They come from God. They are given to us for a season to use. And we have no use for them when we're gone.

So it's all about remembering who we are and whose we are. Life is not about jockeying for position. It's about living as God's servants in the world.

But I would be remiss if I stopped there. Because James is not just worried about us as individuals. He's also worried about us as a group, as a society.

"Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."<sup>9</sup>

Envy. James mentions it twice, one time with the adjective bitter: bitter envy. This could also be translated as malice, and jealousy, and downright hatred.

And selfish ambition. It could also be translated as feuds, and factions, and placing a party spirit before the good of everyone.

Ouch. Sounds a lot like our culture.

And that envy and selfish ambition, James says, that malice and factionalism can lead to disorder and wickedness.

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<sup>8</sup> James 4:3

<sup>9</sup> James 3:16

And the word disorder is VERY strong. It can also be translated as sedition, or insurrection. And I don't have to tell you that we've seen that in our streets the past 15 months. We've seen rioting and violence from those on both the extreme left and the extreme right. And that is extremely dangerous.

Plus, we are divided right down the middle in our country. Almost 50/50. And the temptation is to look at those on the other side and question their patriotism, or even question their humanity. My side is right, therefore the other side must be wrong. And maybe they're un-American, or even evil. That too is extremely dangerous, politically, and spiritually.

Because it's tempting to see a line between good and evil between the side I'm on and the other side. And we might be tempted to use video game tactics: Expand, Exploit, Exterminate. Make sure our good side wins and their evil side is eliminated. But we mustn't be so naïve, and we mustn't be so simplistic.

Because the line between good and evil doesn't run between the party I support and the party I don't support. The line between good and evil doesn't run between the half of the country I agree with and the half I don't agree with. No.

I'll tell you where the line between good and evil really is. The line between good and evil is right here. It runs right down the middle of my mind and my heart. And it runs right down the middle of every one of your minds and your hearts. And it runs right down the middle of the minds and hearts of the people you don't agree with.

We are all broken and fallible people. And, yet, paradoxically, we are also all people created in the image of God, and deserving of dignity and respect.

So James is issuing us a tough warning.

If you covet something and cannot obtain it, then you engage in disputes and conflicts. You might covet total domination and total power for your side, but that's undoubtedly unobtainable in a country split 50/50.

And if you choose operate out of envy and selfish ambition, whether personally, or in large groups, then there will be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

You can act that way. Or you can submit yourself to God. You can get yourself under control. Instead of looking for evil out there, look in here. And get that under control.

Don't be double minded. Don't be torn by the world's ways versus God's ways.

Submit to God. Be trained and tamed by God. Submit to God's bit and bridle. Get the power of your mind and heart under God's control. And follow his wisdom and his ways.