

**JEALOUSY AND SELFISH AMBITION—
SURE STEPS TOWARD FAILURE
JAMES 3:13-16**

INTRODUCTION:

There is someone who wants to sell you advice on almost every corner. Sometimes there are trained counselors of one order or another, but sometimes they are self-appointed sources of wisdom. For a few dollars they will give you their insight on the course of action that you ought to take. However you need to be cautious---their counsel could be more expensive than you think! It could cost you your life.

When you go to the bookstore, you will find shelves full of "self-help" books. They are written by people who see themselves as an authority on the matter that they are presenting to you. There is a basic question, according to James, that you ought to ask before you follow their counsel. The question is: "How has the implementation of what they teach affected their lives?" If what they teach and how they live are not consistent with each other, then they should be avoided.

You may also receive offers for such counsel while you are watching the tube. They are offering to give you the needed insight for the living of your life.

There are many that write books and set forth plans that would give approval to jealousy and self-ambition. They will tell you that if you do not look out for "number one," no one will. If you do not learn how to intimidate others, then you will end up being intimidated. They will not call their advice "jealousy and selfish ambition", but when you take a careful look at what they are offering, it is will be seen for what it is—envy and selfish ambition. Evidently there were some in the first century that had come into the church as

teachers, who in their personal lives, were full of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. In this very practical book, James warns us that "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" will lead to certain ruin in your life. To follow them as a way of life is to take sure steps toward personal destruction. I want us to look at these practical words from James and be warned. Every one of us has a tendency within us to give place in our hearts to jealousy and selfish ambition.

I. BECAUSE THEY ARE IN CONFLICT WITH GOD'S STANDARD FOR LIFE.

James begins this word of instruction by warning: "But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth." The word translated "envy" could just as easily be translated "jealousy." In fact, it will more commonly be translated "jealousy." The teacher who is living this kind of life, James warns, should not "boast" about it. Neither are they to "deny the truth." Actually, what he says is "They are not to lie against the truth." Evidently he sees that there is truth that serves as a standard to follow. When you harbor in your hearts bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, you are violating this important standard that God has given to us. A little consideration will indicate that this is obvious.

1. Jealousy is in conflict with the principles of love and gratitude.

Any time you find bitter jealousy in a heart, there are two important ingredients that will be missing. The two ingredients that God wants to find in every heart will be rooted out by "bitter jealousy." The first of these elements that will be rooted out is gratitude.

Whenever you are jealous of something that someone else has, you are not grateful for

what you do have. You are not content with the providences of God in your life because you feel cheated. You feel like God has mistreated you because He has given to someone else something that you need in order to complete your happiness. So wherever there is jealousy, gratitude will die.

The other element that will be missing is love. Jealousy is the opposite of love. Love rejoices in the prosperity and blessing of another person. Love is delighted when another person has something that is meaningful and helpful in their lives. Paul declared that "love does not envy ...is not self seeking." It is jealousy that is envious of that which the other person has and cannot rejoice in it being a part of their lives. So it is obvious that if you are giving place in your heart to bitter jealousy, you are violating the standard that God has set for us.

Dr. Timothy George in his commentary on Galatians says of this word, "At the root of all sentiments of jealousy is the basic posture of ingratitude to God, a failure to accept ones life as a gift from God. To envy what someone else has is to fling one's own gifts before God in unthankful rebellion and spite" (New American Commentary, page 395.)

Someone else has observed that this is a way of life that becomes more common as you grow older. It may well be most obvious during the middle years of life. They write, "The ambitious youth can see himself surpassed and not be envious. After all he has youth."

"But a middle aged man who sees himself surpassed has lost his youth and doubts of any vastly larger powers are hidden in him. Envy can fall upon him, therefore, like a fever."

"Envy can be met at all levels of life, but it is more common among professional people and those competing for popular favors in the world of entertainment and of sport. But no one is free from the possibility of it."

2. Selfish ambition is in conflict with the principles of service and humility.

The word translated "selfish ambition" is used a number of times in the New Testament. It describes someone who is pushing forward for personal ends. It is usually associated with contentiousness and factiousness. It will have about it an attitude toward others in which one is struggling for their own selfish interest. This person will step on anyone they must and do anything they must to get where they want to be. They will leave behind them bruised and wounded lives. It is the price of their success in this world. They are prepared to pay any cost to get where they want to be.

I listened to a good example of this on a sports program a few days ago. A well-known young NFL football player was being interviewed. He was explaining to the interviewer how committed he was to being the best in the NFL. He had decided that in order to be the best he would have to forsake his family and give up every other distraction in his life. His selfish ambition had prompted him to divorce his wife and to forsake his children. He was willing to step over them in order to grasp for himself the fleeting honor that a good career in the NFL could bring him.

It is obvious that such an attitude is in conflict with the divine standard by which God measures life. God measures life by how we serve one another. He measures life by our

humility. Humility allows us to see the importance and acknowledge the importance of other persons. Humility allows us to become servants for other persons. Humility will move us to give ourselves in service to our fellowman.

In a book that recounts his experiences in the Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf makes an insightful statement about life in the military. He indicates that selfish ambition is one of the biggest problems encountered in the military. Men who are more concerned about their career than they are the accomplishment of the objective of the army will put everything in jeopardy. He says that the thing that saved him from being a victim of selfish ambition was his years at the military academy. Those who taught him at the military academy embedded in his mind a concept of service to his country. It was a commitment to service that prevented him from being victimized by selfish ambition.

So selfish ambition and jealousy are a giant step toward failure because they violate God's principles for life. How can you expect the blessing and favor of God upon your life if you are continually violating the principles that lead to success in life?

II. BECAUSE THEY ARE STRICTLY FROM THIS WORLD

One of the things that James emphasizes is the point of origin for this approach to life. He says, "Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil." He draws a contrast between the world above and the world around us. The world above is where God is enthroned and it is from there the true wisdom comes. The wisdom from above is embodied in the Lord Jesus and is written in the Holy Scriptures. The

world about us lives with a different set of values. Jealousy and selfish ambition comes to us as a way of life from this misguided world around us.

1. They are earthly.

The word that James uses in this passage that is translated earthly means just that. It is the word for earth. It means that this wisdom, this approach to life, belongs to this world, is marked by earthly principles, is devoted to an earthly object, and suits earthly minds. If this was the only world that there is, such wisdom might make sense. But since man's stay on the earth is a temporary stay, and then there comes a day of judgment, such wisdom is actually folly. When you put such wisdom in the light of eternity, it is obviously flawed. It will surely lead to personal ruin.

2. They are unspiritual.

I am using the word that is given in the New International Version, but I could have used other words. The Greek word is a common word in the New Testament that stands in contrast to that which is spiritual. The Greek word is built on the root of psyche from which we get words like psychology. It belongs to that which is the sensual, the natural. Some even translated it “animal”. It is that which comes from an unregenerate mind. It is the thinking of man apart from the influence of the Spirit of God.

Any life that is under the direction of the Holy Spirit will recognize jealousy and selfish ambition for what they are. It will see them as steps that will lead to ruin. It is an

unregenerate, unspiritual mind that will give approval and will chose jealousy and selfish ambition as a way of life.

3. They are devilish.

The NIV translates it simply "of the devil." It is of the devil in contrast to being of God. It is of hell rather than from heaven. You need to recognize that when you commit yourself to a path of jealousy and selfish ambition, you are following the path that the devil himself follows. The devil in his rebellion against God is driven by selfish ambition. He has determined that he will not be the servant of God, but rather he has chosen to make himself the god of the universe. He has chosen to follow a path that says: "no price is too great as long as I am number one." When you are misusing others for your own advantage, you are following a devilish path of life.

When you put the origin of these things in this light, it is obvious that they will lead to ruin. God is not going to place his blessings upon a life that is following the counsel of this world and rejecting the counsel of the Kingdom of God.

III. BECAUSE THEY WILL DESTROY EVERYTHING GOOD.

James very carefully sets forth the ultimate end of jealousy and selfish ambition: "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder in every evil practice."

1. They produce disharmony.

The word used by James that is translated "disorder" suggests just that. It goes with disturbance, unruliness, and is even used of an insurrection. Some translated it "commotion" and some translate it "tumult." The idea in the word is that everything is in a state of disarray. If you are going to follow jealousy and selfish ambition as a way of life, you might as well get accustomed to living in the midst of chaos. The whole of your life will be chaotic.

It is obvious that jealousy and selfish ambition will cause disorder in the home. There are not many families that can stand the test of jealousy and selfish ambition. Many a family has been utterly destroyed by a family member who had bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Could it be that your family is in jeopardy because you have been following such worldly wisdom?

They will also destroy a business. If you seek to build your business on jealousy and selfish ambition, your business will ultimately fail. It may know a measure of success for a while, but there will be a day of reckoning. Selfish ambition makes it impossible to build the kind of trust relationships that are necessary in order to have a successful organization. Jealousy will tear your organization apart. Even if some other business leader is the object of your jealousy, and your selfish ambition, your own business will miss the success that you seek.

Jealousy and selfish ambition can destroy a nation. It may well be that this is at the root of many of our problems in our national political scene today. Instead of having

statesmen who see themselves as the servants of the good of the country, we have a generation of politicians who are driven by selfish ambition. They judge every thing on the basis "will it keep me elected and will it create the possibility of me or my party occupying the White House." This determines their votes and their positions — not what is best for the country.

Based on this sure word from James, I can declare to you this morning that if you are following jealousy and selfish ambition, you are creating a chaotic life for yourself and for those who share life with you.

2. They produce hurtful practices.

James adds that other word that describes the outcome of jealousy and selfish ambition—"every evil practice." The word that James uses could be simply translated "every worthless practice." The word means something that is "good for nothing." Dr. Curtis Vaughn says it refers to "all kinds of vile deeds." Probably the best way to understand it is that it will be a deed that has no lasting value and will be destructive to others. You will be hurting people that you ought to be helping if you give way in your life to jealousy and selfish ambition.

Cannot all of us identify persons who have demonstrated the truth of this text?

We must not leave this text without presenting some kind of alternative. Is there a rightful alternative to living a life that is consumed by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition?

Obviously there is or James would never have written this passage. The Word of God does not point out the wrong road without indicating a better road. The better road presented in scripture is that of making the Lord Jesus Christ the center and Lord of your life, and to devote yourself to loving service of your fellowman. If you will give to Christ the rightful place in your life and make it the goal of your life to do as much good for as many people as you can for the glory of God in the days of life that God gives you, you will have found the path to success.

I want to stand this morning and wave a red flag in your face. I want you to consider the philosophy of life that you have chosen for yourself. Have you chosen to live for self alone? Have you chosen to make jealousy and selfish ambition a part of your life? If you have chosen that, then I appeal to you this morning is to turn from it. That is the sure road to temporal and eternal destruction! God has made the Wisdom for Life available to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Put your life under His lordship today.