

Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 2011
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Godly Wisdom
James 3:18-18

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 17 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. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

Life constantly lays choices before us. Many are mundane: If we say “yes” to flounder at a restaurant, we also say “no” to chicken and beef. To order pie is to reject crème brulee. To marry one woman is, as the vows say, to forsake every other woman. To say “yes” to parenthood is to say “no” to a simpler life. Taken together, these choices and others set our direction for life.

That is true spiritually too. We face choices, paths for life. Jesus says there is a broad road that leads to destruction and a narrow road that leads to life (Matt 7:13-27). James says there are two kinds of wisdom: one from the earth, one from heaven.

The two ways in context

James has spoken of choices and paths before. James 1:26-27 contrasts the person who "considers himself religious" with the one who has "pure and faultless" religion. He presents choices. Will we assist needy brothers, or will we talk about assisting them (2:1-26)? Will we tame our tongue or let it be a destroying fire (3:1-12)?

Of course, we can't simply choose to have a pure religion. There is evil within us that lights the tongue's fires (3:1-6). We can't quench those fires by a mere act of will. We can't simply decide to tame the tongue. One minute we bless God, the next we curse men. One minute, we tell our wife, "I love you so much." The next we exaggerate a petty offense by saying, "You're always late and I look bad" (3:7-12).

That is why we need the gospel, why we need to be born from above by the word of truth (1:18, 3:15). We cannot simply choose the way of wisdom. We are unable to choose the right path and follow it every time. James develops this in four steps.

- 3:1-12: James tells teachers they cannot control their tongues.
- 3:13-18: James asks, "Who is wise among you?" If we're wise, we will be free from jealousy, strife, and ambition and will live in peace.
- 4:1-6: But peace is a rare commodity. Our passions cause fights and quarrels.
- 4:7-10: Therefore, James concludes, "Submit yourselves to God.... Humble yourselves before the Lord." If we confess our sins, God will lift us up.

James 3:13-18 continues the indictment of human sin. He says his people desire, kill and covet. Envy has a central place.

- If you harbor bitter **envy** and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it... (3:14).
- Where you have **envy** and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (3:16).
- Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us **envies** intensely (4:5)?

Envy is the enemy of true faith and the opposite of grace. Envy wants to grasp rather than to give. Envy sees its needs and desires, not the needs of others. Envy thinks other people should care for themselves. Left to ourselves, we will live for ourselves and envy what others have.

Yet God does not leave us to ourselves. He presents two ways of life. We should choose the way of wisdom, yet we don't have the capacity to do so. So, by grace, God's wisdom comes down to us (3:15, 17).

The way of wisdom (3:13)

Anyone who is wise and understanding shows it by his good life, by deeds that reflect wisdom. And true wisdom is gentle, meek, humble. Such wisdom is "from above" – a gift of God (3:17). Faith that comes from heaven is the source of wisdom. God gives us the humility and self control so we can resist sin. Our progress is partial, yet by God's grace, we do progress.

If we are wise, we show it for years. Good deeds become customs, habits, a lifestyle. He asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" He will show it two ways: by a beautiful **lifestyle** and by **deeds** done in the gentleness of wisdom.

A beautiful lifestyle (3:13b)

The New Testament commands believers to imitate someone about thirty times. About half tell us to imitate God (Eph 4:32, 5:1; Phil 2:3-8; Mt 10:24-25, 20:25-28). And about half command us to imitate a Christian leader - Paul, Timothy or an elder (1 Cor 4:16; 1 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 5:3; Heb 6:12, 13:7). We therefore should seek good examples.

A person who is a good example invites us to a beautiful life. Consciously or not, people constantly look for models. Parents of newborn babies watch parents of sweet toddlers. Parents of twelve-year-olds observe parents of teenagers. Sixty-year-olds look to friends who have retired well. We think, "I want to be like that."

Christian living is more than obedience to sets of rules. Yet many Christians think: "I do certain things that pagans do not. I read the Bible and pray. I also avoid things that pagans do. I don't get drunk, curse, take drugs..." Some Christians think, "If I do the right thing, God will be pleased. So I need to know the rules." God is pleased when we obey his law, but the Christian life is more than law.

The Christian life includes "good deeds" and obedience. But it's more. We also bear the fruit of the Spirit. We are "transformed by the renewal of the mind" (Gal 5, Rom 12). When the Spirit works in us, when we yield to the Spirit as he speaks to us when we read the Bible, a beautiful life can happen, almost invisible to us.

This leads to the happy announcement Jesus makes on judgment day. He will bless his people saying, "Come, take your inheritance.... For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink..." The righteous will ask, "When?" because they will not remember it (Matt 25:34-39).

We don't remember, don't notice, what becomes our routine kindness. When loving kindness flows from a renewed heart, not from conscious efforts to keep rules, it creates the beautiful lifestyle James describes (3:13). The wise show wisdom and inspire us by modeling righteousness – and reflect Jesus' character.

A man whom I'll call John does this for his friends. As an immature Christian working for the State Department in South America, he met and married a bright, attractive local woman. She went to church and read the Bible, but never professed faith in Jesus. John knew he should marry a fellow believer, but he convinced himself that she would come to faith after they married.

She did not. Over the years, he became leader in his church, a man of prayer and a teacher. But the more he grew, the more she rejected the faith. She eventually became a committed atheist. She despised her husband's faith and it sometimes seems that she despises him. But he loves her! He patiently endures her scorn and faithfully cares for her. If any man became impatient with his wife's petty flaws, John's very life corrects them. He has a wise and beautiful life.

This capacity to love is wisdom from above. It inspires us to seek wisdom for ourselves and to live by it.

Deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom (3:13, 18)

Wisdom is beautiful. It also manifests humility (New International Version (NIV)), meekness (English Standard Version (ESV)), or gentleness (Reformed Standard Version (RSV)). We think of humility and meekness as personality traits, but they are more. A gentle person need not be feminine and a humble person need not be shy or retiring. A gentle man can be bold and tough.

We can have a gentle manner even when we boldly set wrongs right. Paul says church leaders must be gentle as they correct sin (Gal 6:1). Again, some people object to Christian teaching. When that happens, "He must gently instruct [those who oppose him] in the hope that God will grant them repentance" (2 Tim 2:24-25). "Instruct" is a strong word. It means to correct or chasten. Yet gentle instruction can win the day. As the saying goes, no one wins an argument.

The issue is not the strength of a personality, but its direction. The Bible says gentle people live a certain way: They are patient, not demanding. They are slow to take offense. Peace follows them wherever they go (Jas 3:18).

Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play major league baseball, showed this blend of strength, self-control, and a meek refusal to assert rights. Robinson had other options as a professional athlete. He was better at football, but pro football was already integrated. He chose to help integrate the principal sport of his day, baseball.

Robinson was a fiery man, a man of deep convictions. Ordinarily, he freely expressed those convictions, but for his first two years with the Dodgers, he kept silent, whatever abuse players heaped on him. He intended to prove that his race had the mental and athletic toughness to compete. He had to be strong and gentle.

Robinson played second base for the Dodgers. Pee Wee Reese, a popular all-star shortstop, played beside him. One day, players from another team fired racist epithets at Robinson for hours. Reese, a Southern man, faced a choice. Would he pretend he heard nothing? Shout back at the other team? It's customary for baseball players to toss a ball around between innings. As the Dodgers did this, Reese

walked over to Robinson, draped his arm around his shoulder, and smiled. The tormenters fell silent. That gentle patience proved the strength of Robinson and Reese, made peace and silenced the racists.

How can you be strong, yet gentle?

Showing folly (3:14-16)

James says envy and selfish ambition are "unspiritual, of the devil" (3:14-15). Galatians 5 says envy and selfish ambition are the opposite of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:19-23). Paul's "works of the flesh" feature social sins such as hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy. The fruit of the Spirit brings social healing - peace, patience, kindness, goodness and gentleness (5:20-23).

James calls the way of life marked by envy and ambition "wisdom" because envy and ambition do have a perverted logic. If there is no God, then we should care for ourselves and grasp whatever we can, however we can, even if we have to take it from others. We can see this logic in Numbers:

God chose Moses to lead Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, as you know. As soon as his confrontation with Pharaoh ended with success, the people of Israel doubled his distress with rebellion, doubts, and demands. And as soon as that ended, lesser leaders decided they wanted Moses' seat. A man named Korah "became insolent and rose up against Moses" and gathered 250 Israelite men, all community leaders, to his cause. They confronted Moses and Aaron and said, "The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" (Num. 16:2-3). The voice of envy asks, "Are you any better than we are?" After Moses finished all the hardest work, Korah's band thought they were just as good. God answered that, better men or not, He had chosen them.

Every favored leader – from Moses and David to Jesus to the athletes, politicians, business leaders, and entertainers today– suffers envy. Envy is a self-destructive disease that wants whatever others have, if they *seem* to be stronger, smarter, prettier, wealthier, more cool, more powerful, more *anything*.

But there is godless wisdom in this, in asking, "Is he any better? Does he deserve more?" The unspiritual logic: "I have to look out for my interests - no one else will. I must get everything I deserve – and more." If there is no god, such thinking seems wise. But James says, "Where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (3:16).

How true. Envy is an ulcer, a gnawing pain we suffer because someone has something we do not. No matter what the envious have, they are miserable because someone seems to have more. What torment! How it leads to a host of evils: boasting, quarreling, grasping, criticism. Envy makes us rejoice when others fall. It banishes love and breeds restlessness.

So, we all want to shun envy. But how can we stop fixing our eyes on what we want. How do we break envy's strange grip on the soul? The biblical principle of providence can break that grip. Faith teaches us to say, "God has given me the talents I have, great or small. He has given me my place in life. Whatever my lot, I know God will care for me and I can serve him faithfully." Such faith can create peace.

Note: the Bible condemns selfish ambition, but blesses godly aspiration. It says we should aspire to a productive life, to please the Lord, even to fulfill our callings: Paul aspired to preach the gospel in frontier lands (1 Ths 4:11; 2 Cor 5:9; Rom 15:20). So it is fine to have goals or aspirations. Everyone who has energy and a taste for life has ambitions. The Lord wants them to be godly, so we find peace.

Wisdom from above (3:17-18)

James also describes wisdom from heaven and its fruit. "Like true faith, true wisdom is identified by the life it produces."¹ When James says God's wisdom is "full of good fruit" he means it shows results, good deeds. But he focuses even more on character traits. Wisdom from heaven is *purity* – innocent and blameless. But James also contrasts the wisdom of God and the world.

- God's wisdom loves peace – the opposite of strife and discord.
- God's wisdom is considerate. The Greek: gentle, reasonable, fair-minded, willing to yield, not quick to demand. Jesus was considerate (2 Cor 10:1), slow to fight, forbearing. (Tit 3:2). Worldly wisdom makes demands, brings disorder.
- "Submissive" can be translated "open to reason." It means open to persuasion, willing to get along, to obey others. Willing to defer where appropriate.
- Together, these virtues create peace and cooperation - the opposite of the fights caused by uncontrolled desires (4:1-2).

Finally, James says God's wisdom is "full of mercy and good fruit." Spiritual virtues produce results. Take Jesus. He is merciful, therefore he showed kindness to people who didn't deserve it. When he saw people hungry or crippled, he acted – he fed and healed (Mt 9:27, 15:22; Mk 5:19; Lk 18:38). He commands us to show mercy too (Matt 18:33, Luke 10:37). What then is your fruit? Your course of life?

In 3:17, the word translated “impartial” may mean “unwavering”. Both are virtues. It's good to be fair, impartial. And it's good to show unwavering loyalty to God, as he says later (4:7-8). The picture is clear. A church that is peace-loving, considerate, merciful, unwavering and sincere will be healthy, unified and fruitful. They bring peace, unity, and righteousness to God's family (3:18).

Everyone flourishes. Clamor, conflict, and competition bring out the worst in us. Proverbs says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1). Even when things go wrong, gentleness and peace win the day.

Paul says, "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome; but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim. 2:24-25). This is the way we win family and friends when they stray. And if we are open to reason (3:17), we will be ready to listen when we have strayed (cf. 5:19-20). The harvest is righteousness for us, one by one, and as a body.

God's wisdom creates good fruit

James 3 has two big lessons. First, we need to follow God's wisdom, not the world's. Second, when we do follow God's wisdom, it creates good fruit. I want to offer two vignettes that illustrate the need to find the right path and bear fruit.

The right path: When I was seven years old, I got rheumatic fever, a disease that can cause permanent heart damage. To prevent that, I was put on total bed rest - no running, no playing, from March to September. It was torment; when it was over I forced my brother to play baseball with me till Thanksgiving. But for six months, I poured my love of sports into watching sports on TV. But I acquired a strange addiction to certain teams that made me feel I had to watch their games. One day, a wise man saw me watching football on a gorgeous fall day. What are you doing inside, he asked, when you could be

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outside, playing? Great question – a question from someone I respected, someone who played. What shall we do: watch or play?

Teddy Roosevelt addressed this very question: "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is no effort without error and shortcomings." But the man who actually strives to do the deed "knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion. [He] spends himself in a worthy cause. At the best [he] knows in the end the triumph of high achievement. At the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly."²

I believe this is biblical wisdom. Our very passage says "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." And, "the wisdom that comes from heaven is... full of good fruit" – results (3:13, 17).

James blesses action again and again. James 1:22 says we should be "Doers of the word and not hearers only." He also said, "Anyone who [judges] his brother is not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it" (4:11). If you are sitting back and living the life of the critic, you are not active, doing things as you should. James blesses all of you who are doing things, trying, however imperfectly, to serve and obey. God blesses you and I want to bless all of you, too.

And if you have an idea, try to implement it yourself. Don't foist it on someone else saying, "Well, I'm a visionary, not an administrator." Try it yourself, or get help.

My second vignette touches the need to choose the right path. Every generation has its defining moment. For one generation: "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" For another, "Where were you on 9/11." For Generation X, born 1965-1980, Susan Gregory Thomas says it could be: "When did your parents get divorced?" The divorce rate peaked in the 70s. Custody battles, disappearing parents, ruined lives were common. Many of them vowed, "Whatever happens, we're never going to get divorced." Thomas described what happened when her type took that vow:

"Before we get married, we like to know what our daily relationship with a partner will be like. Are we good roommates? I believed that I had married my best friend as fervently as I believed that I'd never get divorced. No marital scenario... could become so bleak as to compel me to torture my children via divorce. We were together for nearly eight years before we got married... Statistics show that divorce rates are 48% higher for those who have lived together previously, [but] we paid no heed. Paying no heed is the theme."

And cohabitation wasn't the chief problem. Her main goal in marriage was to provide a great home for her children – not to love her husband. Of child care, she says, "The thought of placing her in someone else's care sent waves of white fear whipping up my spine."

² (Citizenship in a Republic, 1910).

Life was all about her children: "To allow our own marriages to end in divorce is to live out our worst childhood fears. It is to inflict the unthinkable on what we most love: our children. It is like slashing open our own wounds and turning the knife on our babies." She called her husband her "best friend." Her premise: "Kids come first," therefore no divorce. But they soon became roommates. "We rarely spoke, except about logistics: and hadn't slept in the same room for years.

But that was OK: "I was grateful that my babies had a perfect father, for our family meals, for the stability of our home... But then, one evening, I found myself... miserable, in tears, telling my husband that we were like siblings who couldn't stand each other." Her husband said he felt they had never really been "a couple" and they soon divorced.

What went wrong? First, Susan spent her energy reacting to her parents' errors instead of finding the right path. She pursued a noble goal with earthly wisdom from her peers, from their reactions to past mistakes. She never found God's wisdom – that children are loved best when mother and father love each other most. That's already in Genesis 2.

What about you? Are you seeking God's wisdom – seeking His Spirit, His truth in the Bible? Looking for friends with beautiful lives and imitating them? Or pursuing worldly wisdom – envy and ambition? Are you seeking God's path? Are you acting on what you see, to create good fruit? And when you fail, then what?

I pray that you seek his grace and mercy, shown above all through Jesus, the God-man, who came for us, to teach and to model. Yes, and when we fail to forgive, if we but ask. Humble yourself before him and he will lift you up.