

What does Christian wisdom look like?

Text: James 3:13-18 for 9/23/2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

How familiar are you with the New Testament book of James? This letter James wrote can be hard to read at times. There are many people, including Martin Luther, who do not like James' writing. These people feel James focuses too much on God's law. Yet as James wrote this letter he had a very specific purpose in mind. First, James writes about doing what God's Word tells us to do: keeping control of our tongues and taking care of widows and orphans. Next, James writes about not showing favoritism. He says we should treat all people the same, and that our faith should display itself in good deeds toward others. In today's reading James talks about wisdom and living a good life.

What is James' point in all of this? James is trying to do is show us what a Christian's life looks like. Notice, James is talking about Christians, people who already believe and trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior. James is *not* talking about how a person comes to faith. He is writing to people who already have faith. What James is trying to do is show us how faith displays itself in a person's life. Faith is a living and active thing, and faith makes its presence known by what it does.

So as God speaks to us through the words of his disciple James, God is letting us know that Christian faith will display wisdom. So what we want to try and understand from this letter of James' is:

Theme: What does Christian wisdom look like?

- I. It is not envious and selfish.
- II. It is humble.

In this portion of his letter James starts out by asking us a question. He asks, **“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”** (v. 13). James is letting us know that Christian wisdom displays itself in humility. James uses his question and response to get us to look more closely at ourselves and ask, “Am I wise? Do I live in the humility that comes from Godly wisdom?”

But before we can even answer that question, James immediately turns around and gives us a reality check. He says, **“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth”** (v. 14). James is saying to us, “Look in your hearts. Is there envy there?” Envy: That painful awareness of the advantage someone over you. Envy is when we see our opponent's athletic ability, and we wish we could be as good as they are. It's when we recognize our co-worker's skill and realize they are more likely to get that promotion than us, so we long to have their skill. Envy is when we see what our neighbor has – money, good health, lots of nice possessions – and then we look at our own situation and realize we don't have any of those things! All we have is the food on the table and clothes on our backs! When we see the advantages others have over us in this world it makes us bitter; it makes us angry. Perhaps even angry at God. We might think, “God, since I'm one of your believers why didn't you bless me with those things?”

All the while this is happening Satan is right there fueling that envy. He fills our minds with thoughts of how God is holding out on us. You can almost hear him: “How come God didn't give you that kind of athletic ability? He gave it to others, but not to you!” “Why didn't God give you that kind of skill to do your job? Doesn't he think you're good enough; doesn't he think you can handle it?”, “Look at everything that person has: Money, good health, power, respect. Why won't God let you have those things? Maybe it's because God just doesn't care.”

As Satan spews his poison, all too often we listen to him. That bitter envy the devil churns up in our hearts turns into ambition, selfish ambition. We get sick and tired of others having all of these things that we don't have. We become determined to do whatever it takes to get what “those people” have, even if it means setting aside God's truth, or at the very least trying to find ways to get around that truth. But that's not Christian wisdom, is it? No, James tells us, **Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice** (vs. 15, 16).

When we allow envy to burn and selfish ambition to grow in our hearts, then we are no better than

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Jesus' disciples arguing amongst themselves as they walked along the road (*see Mark 9:33-37*). They argued as to who was the greatest because no one wanted the others to have an advantage over them. Their selfish ambition led them into disorder and evil practices; practices that were not God pleasing.

When we give in to envy and selfishness we are not only damaging our relationship with God, but we are destroying the peace he wants us to have. On our own we cannot fix what we have damaged or rebuild what we have destroyed. That work can only be done by the power of the Almighty God himself. This is why we need Jesus. For all the times we are envious and selfish, Jesus was selfless, willingly caring for the needs of others. When we long to be first, Jesus makes himself last. And when we damaged our relationship with God and destroyed our peace with God because of our sin, Jesus fixed that relationship with some wood and a couple of nails; with his blood and his perfect, sinless life. By Christ's death we win over sin. By his resurrection we are given the ultimate advantage: the advantage over death because in Jesus' resurrection we receive eternal life. Christian wisdom, what does look like? It's not envious and selfish, but instead it looks to Jesus.

As Christ's followers want to look to him; he saved us, he rescued us from death and hell. It is out of gratitude for that rescue we want to model ourselves after our Savior. But to do that we need to know what Jesus is like. If we want to know what Jesus is like we simply need to read what he says about himself. Jesus said, **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve"** (Mark 10:45a). Jesus also said, **"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart"** (Matthew 11:29). So what does Christian wisdom look like? Christian wisdom is humble, like Jesus.

That humility displays itself in a special way. As James wrote, **"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"** (v. 13). The "good life" that James speaks of is a life that is pleasing to God. That life is "good" because it does things in Christian humility. And in the Gospel reading for today Jesus himself tells us what that humility looks like. Jesus said, **"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all"** (Mark 9:35). God pleasing Christian wisdom is always looking outward. It looks first to serve God, and as it does, it looks to serve others by always puts their needs first.

Now our sinful nature wants to question how that can be possible. Our sinful self cries out, "Who is going to take care of me? Who is going to take care of my needs?" As Christians we know the answer to those questions. It's God! God takes care of *all* of our needs! He provides for all our physical needs, giving us food, clothing and shelter. He gives us talents and skills to help provide for ourselves. He gives us pensions, retirement savings, and Social Security to continue providing for us in the future. And God has generously provided for our spiritual needs, giving us the complete forgiveness of all of our sins in his Son, Jesus. When it comes to providing for you God holds nothing back: God provides you with saving faith, and through that faith he gives you eternal life. It is as the Apostle Paul said to the Romans, **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"** (Romans 8:32). Since God has taken care of our all of needs, we can focus on caring for the needs of others. Using Jesus as our example we strive to care for others using the Christian wisdom God has given us.

James gives us a little more detail as to what that wisdom looks like. He says, **"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure"** (v. 17a). It is pure because it comes from the pure Word of God. We do not want that heavenly wisdom to be polluted by envy, selfish ambition, or any other worldly "wisdom." Instead, with God's help we work to keep that wisdom pure and free from sin.

James goes on to say that this heavenly wisdom is **"peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere"** (v. 17b). We can sum up this list of words with one word: peace. Christian wisdom works to bring about peace, especially peace between people and God. The people in this world may, at times, appear to have peace. Yet whatever peace they have in this world is going to end when their life ends. But if a person dies and is not right with God they are going have eternal despair and torment, not eternal peace.

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Using the heavenly wisdom given to us we can share God's peace with the world. We can show the world that peace by living in the way James describes here. We can be peace-loving by being considerate of others, putting their needs before our own. We can be full of mercy, showing others the same mercy and forgiveness God has shown to us in Christ. We can also be impartial, not playing favorites or discriminating against others. Instead we can treat all people with the same love and respect Jesus had for people. And we can be sincere. We do not need to hide behind a mask of false holiness or fake humility. Instead we can let people see what the self-sacrificing love of Jesus really looks like. We can show them what Christian wisdom looks like. It is humble, just as Christ himself was humble.

So think again about the first question James asked us, **“Who is wise and understanding among you?”** By the power of Christ may all of us display what Christian wisdom looks like. Display that wisdom in your life, not with envy or selfishness, but in Christ like humility. Let us live a life of peace and gratitude to the one who rescued us from death and hell. May our hearts and minds always be filled with the humility and love of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.