

“Faith and Wisdom”

James 3:13-18

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(Genuine Christianity; humility)

When Jesus was here on earth, the people he continually had the most difficulty with, were those who thought they knew the right things and did the right things and were therefore okay with God.

Destitute and desperate people responded to Jesus far differently than did the wealthy, the learned and the self-righteous.

The blind man and the adulterous woman reacted very differently to Jesus than did the rich young ruler and the Pharisees.

It's a well worn quote, but the old evangelist Vance Havner used to say, “You can't get people saved until you get them lost.”

I would add, paraphrasing Jesus, from Matthew 9, “It is only when you realize you are sick that you will call for a doctor.”

(Matthew 9:12-13)

In our text today, James is again going to show us our need for a doctor.

Before I studied James as intently as I have in recent weeks, I thought of the book as practical application of Christian theology.

I thought we would learn how to endure suffering, how to guard our tongues, how to rightly treat the poor, and, among still other things, how to pray.

Those are important issues but I have learned that James is going deeper than that.

But I didn't realize how **much** deeper James would go.

James intends to challenge our very understanding of what true Christianity is.

And as he does so, he raises our awareness of how desperately we need a doctor – the Great Physician, Jesus – to heal our souls.

I feel like this is the same song and we are now singing the third verse.

Three texts, three weeks, in a row, James challenges us.

The text before us today, as with the texts of the past two weeks, raises the question, "Am I a real Christian?"

The prophets of the Old Testament often challenged those who claimed to belong to God, to think again.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 2, takes considerable time demonstrating that many who call themselves God's people, are not.

Here, James brings the same challenge.

Two weeks ago we learned that if a person's faith doesn't result in changed actions, he or she hasn't been truly saved.

James 2:14,26 "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ...Faith without deeds is dead."

Consistent with the rest of the NT, James knows that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But also consistent with the rest of the NT, as we have pointed out so often, James knows that when God saves a person, it will result in a life that is changing.

As someone said it, "We are saved by faith not works, but faith that saves, works."

The specific illustration that James used in that 2nd chapter was about how we treat the poor and disadvantaged.

If our salvation doesn't result in a change in the way we treat people, it is not real.

Last week we learned that if a person's faith doesn't result in a change in our tongues, our speech, he or she hasn't been truly saved.

James says the way we talk reveals who we truly are.

James 3:12 "Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

On the same subject, he had already startled us with these words back in chapter 1:26, “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and **his religion is worthless.**”

It seems possible to me that James is proceeding from the outside inward.

He first spoke of our actions (faith and works), next he spoke of our speech (faith and words), and now in this next text he will speak of our very hearts (faith and wisdom).

Paul wrote something similar in 1 Corinthians 13:1&3 “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal... If I give all I possess to the poor...but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Right actions and even right words are possible, but true Christianity goes even deeper; it goes to the very heart.

Isaiah spoke negatively to the same issue: Isaiah 29:13 “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.”

Their religious actions were technically correct but their hearts were unchanged.

Please stand in honor of God’s Word and listen to James speak of this innermost evidence of genuine Christianity – a changed heart.

He calls it true wisdom.

James 3:13-18 “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.”

I want you to see why I think heart and wisdom are related in this text and maybe even used nearly synonymously.

In verse 13 James asks who is the wise person? Who has wisdom?

Notice that James doesn't give a one-sentence definition of wisdom but he does describe it: He "show(s) it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

If James had said only that "he shows it by his good life, by deeds...", I think he would have said no more than he had already said in chapter two about faith and works.

But James goes deeper than the deeds; he goes to the heart behind the deeds when he writes, "by the deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

To understand this I think we have to have a fuller understanding of wisdom as the Bible uses that term.

It is tempting to think of wisdom superficially merely as great knowledge. We think of really smart people.

We might better understand wisdom as the ability to apply great knowledge in the right way; a person who makes smart decisions.

Bill Gates or Warren Buffet might be examples.

We might still better understand wisdom as the ability to apply great knowledge in great ways (for the good of others).

Again Warren Buffett might come to mind as we remember that he has given 85% of his \$40Billion net worth to the Gates Foundation to help people in need.

But the Bible gives wisdom an even greater definition.

Wisdom is the ability to apply great knowledge in great ways **for the glory of God.**

Biblical wisdom is **anchored** not in the head but in the heart, in allegiance to God.

Psalm 111:10 "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

One author wrote, “Having a proper respect for God as God, a proper regard for God as God is basic to a proper perspective on life. And when we have that perspective on life, we are able to live life skillfully; we are able to live life as God meant it to be lived. (That perspective) purges away our sinful delusions and opens our eyes to what is truly important in life.” Grover Gunn <http://www.grovergunn.net/andrew/anscr.htm#59jam>

Real wisdom is a changed heart toward God; James calls it humility. This wisdom, this humble heart, means a proper perspective on God and thus a proper perspective on ourselves.

And that means our intentions change and our motivations change:
 Matthew 6:33 “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness
 Matthew 22:37 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

Now in verses 15-18 James is going to contrast two wisdoms – a false wisdom of the world and the true wisdom from God.

I would paraphrase that to say he is going to show us two hearts – the unchanged heart of an unsaved person and the changed and changing heart of one who truly is a Christian.

He will contrast them in terms of where they come from, what they look like, and what they result in.

Origin	15-16 not from heaven earthly unspiritual of the devil	17-18 from above
Character	envy selfish ambition	pure peace-loving considerate submissive mercy fruit impartial sincerre
Results	disorder every evil practice	harvest of righteousness.

(Alec Motyer, James, 134)

In verses 15-16 he is describing a non-Christian and an un-Christian heart: 3:15-16 “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.”

James is here describing the “wisdom” that isn’t real wisdom.

Notice he’s describing the heart – envy, selfish ambition - the intentions and motivations of the heart.

And James uses very strong words to indicate the origin of such a heart:

- Earthly – not from God, but out of the natural, unsaved heart
- It is unspiritual – In Jude 19 and 1 Corinthians 2:14 this describes a non-Christian – one without the Spirit of God.
- It is of the devil – its origin is demonic.

These words are most consistent with one who is not truly a Christian.

And what is the fruit of such worldly wisdom, a heart anchored only in itself?

James says it is bitter envy and selfish ambition.

James is talking about the root of our words and our actions

Again, I remind you, these are attitudes of the heart.

One author describes it this way: “This kind of envy seeks the best for oneself, regardless of what might be good for another person, always wishing for others to have less than oneself, whether with possessions or with opportunities. In a group setting, “bitter jealousy” may manifest “a fierce desire to promote one’s own opinion to the exclusion of those of others.” (Blomberg, 216)

We hear it in our own thoughts:

- “I wish I had thought of that!”
- “Do you understand I **am** the one who thought of that?”
- “Do you know it was **my** idea?”
- “Jim’s getting the credit when it was my idea and my work.
- “It’s okay if they get some credit, maybe even that they get equal credit, but not more credit or at the very least not that they get credit and I don’t even get mentioned.

- “Do you realize I gave that money to you or to the church?”

And “selfish ambition” is very similar in meaning to “envy;” it is a deep desire to have one’s own way for ego’s sake or personal gain.

- It happens in a family where one attempts to get others to agree with him or her against another who holds a different opinion.
- It happens in the neighborhood where one homeowner is attempting to line up other neighbors to confront yet another.
- It happens in a Sunday school class or small group when the group divides over what to study next or when to hold the meetings.
- It happens at work when we are trying to get our idea promoted in the department or company.

We size up the opposition, we determine to have our way, we line up our supporters and we make our move.

And in every situation we are willing to sacrifice relationships, to turn away from those who disagree, to cut them off – all for the sake of being right.

And James further warns, saying, “do not boast about it or deny the truth.”

Don’t claim to have real wisdom, real Christianity, and thereby deny the truth of what real Christianity is.

I’m reminded of James 2:19 “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that...”

Real Christianity is not creed for creed sake, it is creed for God’s sake and for others’ sake – it is relationships.

God so loved the “world,” reconciling “us” to himself, that where he is we may be also.

If our Christianity isn’t resulting in changing heart of allegiance to God and his purposes in the world, it isn’t real Christianity.

In Romans 2 where Paul describes the very religious person who isn’t saved he says, ²³“You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

Don't claim to be a Christian if you are living a self-centered existence.

And in verse 16, James says that a self-centered heart will result in all kinds of problems.

Let me illustrate that.

When Paul was speaking of business and social commitments he said don't be unequally yoked – don't enter in legal or social contracts with an unbeliever.

The problem is even if they claim to be Christians but aren't they do not have the same Holy Spirit in them overcoming bitter envy and selfish ambition.

That's why it is so imperative that a Christian marries only another Christian – so you have the Spirit of God working in your spouse just as he is working in you.

If left to your spouse's spirit alone it will be envy and selfish ambition that eventually takes over resulting in disorder and every evil practice.

It is also true in the church.

We depend on each other to encourage, to teach, to discipline, to help.

But when the church is filled with people in whom the Spirit does not dwell, the "glue" of love and unity are gone, and it is replaced by the self-centeredness described in 15 and then anything can and usually does happen.

In every church there are pretenders – pretending to be Christians when they are not.

There are also those who are self-deceived – thinking they are Christians when they are not.

James wants us to know that real Christianity results in something.

If you are a pretender or you have been deceiving yourself, hear James now and repent asking Gods' grace to truly save you.

Listen to his plea for you in chapter four: James 4:8-10 “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”

In contrast to a false wisdom, a false heart, when we read verses 17-18 we find James describing the opposite – a wisdom from above, a heart anchored in allegiance to God, a heart that has changed and is changing.

James 3:17-18 “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.

The word “pure” seems to be the general heading described more fully by the characteristics that follow.

James says (this) “wisdom...is **first of all** pure; **then...**”

And again notice these are all attitudes, intentions and motivations of the heart.

To be “pure” is to be innocent, morally blameless.

This person is not just trying to be regular in church and not use vulgar language, but is committed to following Christ’s example of obedience to the will of God.

As we already noted, “pure” is now defined by seven words or phrases.

The construction of the sentence in Greek suggests three groups.

- The first is made up of three: peace loving, considerate, submissive
- The second group is: full of mercy and good fruit
- The last couplet are: impartial and sincere.

“Peace loving.” I remember early in my ministry at SGC – there were theological threats to the unity of this church and in my readiness to take on theological error mixed with a strong desire to be proved “right,” I wanted to do battle.

Wiser heads on the elder board kept urging peace and unity. I, at times, thought they were too willing to compromise truth but with Godly peace and loving wisdom they realized that unity was also crucial.

This isn't peace at any cost, but a heart that beats with Jesus' concern for unity.

Someone wrote, "Let's say you've just had a Christian friend uncharacteristically share with you some gossip that, if you were to share, would really bring division in a family or in the church. And you decide that (you're) not going to pass that on. That piece of gossip that (you) just heard is going to die with (you). It's not going anywhere else. That is a peace-promoting Christian." Ligon Duncan

<http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/James/04bjames.htm>

Coupled with this love for peace are two other words: "considerate" and "submissive."

"Considerate" means gentle, non-combative, willing to yield to others.

This person doesn't demand a strict interpretation of everything, he gives room, doesn't always have to stand up for his rights, but yields to other and allows for change...

This is not weak or soft but open to others' ideas and particularly open to the person – He doesn't quickly dismiss or break off relationships.

"Submissive," likewise is not weak or easily run over but a willingness to defer to others and their ideas.

This is a teachable, even gladly corrected person.

The second set of words: "Full of mercy and good fruit," speaks both of a heart of compassion but also of the result of that compassion.

We saw this in James 2:8-13 when James spoke of us seeing a brother in need.

Lastly, James describes this wisdom, this changed heart as "impartial" and "sincere."

I think the NASB translation gets at the meaning of these words more directly, "unwavering without hypocrisy."

They are undivided in their loyalty to God and what you see is what they truly are – they are not merely playing a part; they are committed to God.

James ends his description by speaking of the results of this kind of wisdom. “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”

Those who have the characteristics of v17 are peacemakers – they promote peace among people.

The result is that righteousness flourishes.

Righteousness here is not justification as in Romans 3-4, but righteousness as godly living.

The Phillips translation may capture it best: "And the wise are peacemakers who go on quietly sowing for a harvest of righteousness-in other people and in themselves."

Do the words of verse 17 describe our hearts?

Do they describe the overarching purposes of our lives, the motivations that drive our actions and words?

Oh, we may live under enough social pressure that we conform to good religious practices and we may have enough self-discipline that we usually curb our tongues, but are our hearts changing?

When I read James’ description of godly wisdom, of a pure heart, of real Christianity I cannot help but think of Jesus.

Without doubt, he is the quintessential example of verses 17-18.

For just a couple of minutes watch him with me.

When John the Baptist was executed the Bible says in Matthew 14:13-14 “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”

What did Jesus need? I think he was grieving. I also think he was tired. I think he needed some space (as we call it).

But the text goes on to say, “The crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”

Tired, grieving, needing alone time, what did Jesus do?
And where did that ministry come from? Was there
resentment? Obligation?

No, it flowed from a heart of compassion.

And we see it over and over again – toward a blind man, a leper, a woman sick for 12 years, and countless others.

Watch him and hear him again:

The rabbis were strict teachers, intolerant disciplinarians, often harsh in their penalties.

Jesus said in Matthew 23:4-5 “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ “Everything they do is done for men to see.”

But Jesus said of himself in Matthew 11:29 “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

That is what James calls “considerate, submissive, and merciful.”

See him washing his disciples’ feet.

See him again, this time with a woman caught in adultery, circled by angry, accusing, vindictive leaders.

Jesus rebuked those leaders and then we see his challenging but gentle, considerate response to the woman.

John 8:9-11 “At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

See him yet again with Peter.

Peter had denied the Lord and was filled with remorse and repented.

Later in Galilee when Jesus appeared to the disciples he spoke specifically to Peter.

With no felt need to rebuke, to correct, or to make a point, but with gentleness and patience, Jesus asked Peter, “do you love me?”

When Peter responded, Jesus repeated what he had said to Peter three years earlier, “Follow me.”

Can you imagine how Peter felt? Such grace!

See him still one more time, on the cross:

Luke 23:33-34 “When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

1 Peter 2:23 “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

That’s what I want to be, not just act like but be like!

I know that I have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

I know God has begun his work in me.

But I still see, oh so much, envy and selfish ambition.

Those old patterns of thinking and acting are still too much with me.

I want to be rid of those attitudes, those motives, those intentions.

In Jesus, and by his grace, I see the possibilities of a changed heart.

Listen to an old hymn but this time let’s hear it not only for the one seeking initial salvation; let’s hear it for ourselves:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,

from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin **the double cure**;
save from wrath and **make me pure**.

If you are truly trusting Jesus, by his grace he has done the former (saved from wrath) and by his grace he is doing the latter.

Yes, Christian, we are responsible to use the means of grace, the Word, worship, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and others.

But in all of that we realize that unless God acts, we will remain unchanged.

And so we always cry out:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to the cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly;
wash me, Savior, or I die.

Or in more contemporary, if less substantial, words:

Change my heart O God
Make it ever true
Change my heart O God
May I be like You.

If that is your desire, I want you to pray with me, a prayer of confession and petition.