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James 3:13-18

Seventh Message

Andrew Drake

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THE TALE OF TWO WISDOMS

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

The passage we will be reflecting on today has had a tremendous impact on my life. It has helped shape the way I live my life and view my ministry. I am the youngest of four children, and in my childhood years I was known as the short kid who often mumbled when he talked. Neither quality helped boost my self-esteem. I often felt I had to prove myself to get respect from my siblings, affection from my parents and attention from my friends.

Though I have improved in my ability to speak in front of a large group, I still wrestle with a great deal of insecurity. Unfortunately, I bring these insecurities with me into my job as pastor. I struggle with them even more now that I am entering into a new role and new responsibilities within our church, and a renewed sense that I have to prove myself all over again. Though I've been a pastor for almost 20 years, I've never quite felt like I had the "right stuff." I'm not a great orator or a learned theologian. I often feel like the weak link of a very gifted and experienced pastoral staff. Yet this text gives me great hope on how God has created my strengths and weaknesses for his purposes.

Last week, in James 3:1-12, we looked at the power of our tongue, what it does and what it reveals. We saw that our words reveal what is stored in our heart. If the source is pure, the outflow will be pure; if the source is bitter, the outflow will be bitter.

In our text today, James contrasts these two sources available to us, the wisdom from below and the wisdom from above. Each is unique, and leads to very different results. The character, quality and longevity of the fruit of our lives depend on the source we allow to pour into our heart and mind.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:13-18 TNIV)

Here James describes the proper criteria for evaluating authentic wisdom.

The criteria for evaluating authentic wisdom James 3:13

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (3:13)

James begins by issuing a challenge: Which of you claims to be wise? He has one criterion for evaluating wisdom. If it is the real thing, then the result will be a "good life," demonstrated by "deeds done in humility."

The phrase "good life" is better translated "beautiful life," while the word for "humility" is often translated as "gentleness" or "meekness." It is an attribute that involves a proper understanding of our place before God, and a corresponding lack of arrogance in our relationships with each other. So we might better read this verse, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their beautiful life, by deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom." A life lived wisely is beautiful to behold; it is gentle and humble in nature.

Of all the possible attributes Jesus could have used to describe himself he chose just two, gentleness and humility: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light" (Matt 11:28-30).

Like true faith (2:18), true wisdom is identified by the quality of life it produces. If we claim to be wise and understanding, it will show up in our character and our actions. A beautiful life brings about good deeds that come from a humble heart.

Notice that James does not elaborate on the good "deeds" that give evidence of authentic faith and wisdom. He has already mentioned the importance of loving our neighbor and caring for orphans and widows in their distress. His concern here is more with the gentle spirit in which these deeds are done, the positive effect it has on our relationship with others. Peter said something similar, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet 2:12).

"Who is wise among you?" is a question aimed directly at those of us here in Silicon Valley who are proud of how much we know, who think we are particularly intelligent and clever and have degrees on our wall and possessions in our garage to prove it. I've seen the damaging effects of pursuing this kind of wisdom. I have counseled high school students who are suffering because they have been driven by their parents to seek after knowledge and academic excellence at all costs. These students do indeed grow in knowledge, but that kind of knowledge does not translate into

a wise and beautiful life. Their choices in life betray the kind of wisdom they pursue.

Through the Internet we have a world of knowledge at our fingertips. We are a society drowning in information, yet starving for wisdom. There is a big difference between being well-informed and being wise. James says we don't find out if someone is wise by discovering how much he knows or by adding up how much he has. We discover if they are wise by watching them live and observing the way they treat others.

At my desk I keep a quote from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) that has been a meaningful reminder to me of what James is saying: "There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge, that is curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others, that is vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve, that is love."

Jesus demonstrated that kind of servant-hearted love to his disciples. As they were arguing over which of them was the greatest, Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, demonstrated for them the radical nature of what greatness in the kingdom of God looks like. He modeled for them a beautiful life of gentle wisdom by taking the role of a servant and washing their feet. His closing remarks to them were, "I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:16-17).

Jesus demonstrated authentic wisdom. Without gentleness and humility there is no wisdom. James now contrasts wisdom from above with its counterfeit from below.

The Wisdom from Below James 3:14-16

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (3:14-16)

James makes three contrasts between the wisdom from below and the wisdom from above. Each is identifiable by its origin, its attributes and its outcome.

The wisdom from below is "earthly, unspiritual, demonic." This kind of wisdom may seem attractive, yielding short-term success, but James uses the strongest possible language in condemning it. It has as its origin the world, the flesh and the devil.

This wisdom from below is as ancient as humanity itself. It was the wisdom offered by the serpent to Adam and Eve in the garden: "be your own god, advance yourself, take whatever you want." It is the kind of wisdom that permeates our society and easily rises up within us. It is the same message we hear in advertising: "Obey your thirst," "Just do it," "Have it your way." This kind of wisdom encourages us to view ourselves as the center of the universe, making self-fulfillment and self-promotion our highest calling. Imagine the shock Jesus' words were to Peter when, after he took Jesus aside and rebuked his suggestion that he go to the cross, the Lord said to him "Get behind me Satan!" Peter fell victim to the wisdom from below.

The attributes of wisdom from below

The attributes of "wisdom from below" are "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition." The wisdom from below seeks to gain influence over others through the avenue of ambition, and when this ambition is thwarted, bitter envy is the result. Worldly knowledge and ambition can be counter-productive by bolstering our pride.

Listen to what C.S. Lewis said about pride: "Pride is essentially competitive...Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest."¹ This is the wisdom from below.

True wisdom is characterized by humility and gentleness. If we claim to have wisdom but instead harbor pride, envy and ambition in our heart, then we are living a lie and denying the truth.

The outcome of wisdom from below

What is the outcome of this wisdom from below? James says wherever and whenever individuals are interested only in promoting their selfish ambitions, then "disorder and every evil practice" will be the ultimate result. Where bitterness and envy reign, people lash out with criticism. They hurt one another and relationships deteriorate. Wisdom from below leads to discontentment and division in our relationships with others. It is the antithesis of peace.

We have a sense of the chaos and discord James is talking about if we imagine an orchestra with each instrumentalist playing a solo all at the same time. That is the kind of disharmony that wisdom from below produces.

Authentic wisdom is characterized by a beautiful life filled with gentleness and humility. In contrast, this "earthly, unspiritual, demonic" wisdom is characterized by selfishness and leads to disorder and the practice of every kind of evil. The verdict is in. The wisdom of the world is not a good source from which we should drink. It is nothing we should allow to pour into our heart.

James now turns his attention to the fruit of the wisdom from above.

The wisdom from above 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (3:17-18)

Here James describes the sort of people we will be if we possess the wisdom from above. There is no mention of what we must do to gain wisdom, because true wisdom cannot be achieved, earned or bought. It is not the result of our effort, intellect or education. This kind of wisdom does not even come from experience or age. As someone once said, "Age does not bring you wisdom; age brings you wrinkles."

Authentic wisdom comes from one and only one source: it is a gift from our Heavenly Father above. We gain this kind of wisdom by asking for it, receiving it and welcoming it into our heart. This wisdom comes from having our life deeply touched and transformed by Jesus Christ. As we cultivate the life of the Spirit who indwells us by feeding and meditating on his word, we will bear the fruit of his nature – his wisdom.

In this text James reveals what a wise and beautiful life, fed by the Spirit, will look like. This list of seven attributes is similar to other descriptions of the fruits of the Spirit mentioned by Paul in Galatians and Corinthians, But what is unique to James is the prerequisite first step required by wisdom before we give our attention to anything else. If we neglect the first attribute, we do damage to the rest.

The first and foremost attribute of beautiful and gentle wisdom is “purity.” We exhibit purity when we “Hate what is evil and cling to what is good” (Romans 12:9). Purity can be interpreted in a cold and puritanical sense, but this word is not about strictness, severity or a distaste for joy and pleasure. It carries the sense of having moral and spiritual integrity; someone who doesn’t think of himself first but instead is single-minded, not double-minded in his devotion to the Lord. This is why purity is first. It is not just one quality among others but the key to them all.

The next attribute is “peace-loving.” There is a difference between “peace-loving” and “peace-keeping.” There are many unhealthy ways to relational peace, but “peace-loving” is not “peace at any cost.” Many of us are all too willing to sacrifice purity for the sake of peace. We deny the truth of a relationship, stuffing it down until resentment and bitterness well up. But the wisdom from above is “first pure, then peaceable.” So we are called to go to our brother or sister and confront the issue and “speak the truth in love.” Instead of disorder and every evil thing, those who are “peace-loving” enjoy an inward peace with God that contributes toward and seeks after harmonious relationships.

“Considerate” is a word that was used in the ancient world to describe fine old wine. We are considerate when we are mellow, agreeable and easy to be with. We will not be quick to anger or harsh with others; instead we will show kindness and generosity.

“Submissiveness” does not suggest weakness or inferiority. We are submissive when we eagerly listen to the thoughts, opinions, needs and desires of others. We show submissiveness when we do not insist on our own way but are willing to yield to the preference and promotion of others. This is the attribute expressed in Philippians 2:3-4, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

A “merciful” person empathizes with the limitations and failures of others and handles them with sensitivity and compassion. James couples mercy with “good fruits,” because mercy can be misunderstood as merely an emotional feeling. But it is much more than that. It is compassion in action.

David Roper describes mercy this way: “It understands the heartache of a lonely, cold marriage, or a rebel child, and weeps for the hardness of the world. It knows the pain of physical ail-

ment and overwhelming debt, the scars of neglect and humiliation, the silences of God. It absorbs the weakness and failure of others – even irritability and anger – and returns love and patience as a gift.”²

An “impartial” person is not prejudicial and does not discriminate against others. We are impartial when we refuse to play favorites and instead treat all people as neighbors to be loved. A “sincere” person is someone who is genuine, with no hypocrisy or pretense, one who is the same publicly and privately.

In this regard, I think of Dave Dravecky. Dave was a very successful pitcher for the San Francisco Giants baseball team and was quite open about his Christian faith. After seven years in the major leagues, he had to have his arm and shoulder amputated due to cancer. In the midst of this personal tragedy he was a very strong witness for God. A few years ago, I heard him being interviewed on a local sports radio show. The host asked Dave if he was bitter about losing his arm, resulting in the end of his professional baseball career. Dave responded, “As a follower of Christ I have come to measure success not in the height of my achievements, but in the depth of my relationships.” It was a great demonstration to me of a man whose life is genuine and sincere. His wisdom obviously comes from above.

The outcome of wisdom from above is a community of “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” Righteousness does not grow in an environment of bitter envy or selfish ambition, but in the atmosphere of peace. James is speaking to our community. How very important we are to each other to manifest righteousness. Out of the soil of our peaceful unity grows the whole community life that is pleasing to God.

People who possess the wisdom from above have a significant impact on others because they are continually sowing seeds of peace wherever they go. By their actions and words they bring about peace and point the way toward reconciliation with God, reaping a harvest of righteousness.

Last week, I shared with you a story about how several years ago I hurt the feelings of a newcomer to the high school group. I apologized to her afterwards, but she never came back. Well, I have a similar story, but this one is much more recent. At the beginning of the last school year, there was another girl who came to visit our youth group on a Sunday morning. My words and actions to her that morning were unkind and led her to tears.

In a flash I thought, “Oh no, I’ve done it again. This girl will never come back.” I apologized to her afterwards, and instead of leaving it at that, we talked it out for quite a long time. Though it was an opportunity for a great deal of strife, especially on her part, our words toward each other were gentle and compassionate. Seeds of peace were sown that day. Much to my joy she returned the next week, and the week after that. She came for the entire year and participated in our senior graduation banquet. On my final day as a high school pastor, much to my surprise and joy, she presented me with a gift. She is a talented artist, and her gift was an excellent drawing of me with a huge smile.

I display that drawing proudly on my desk. It is a symbol to me of her beautiful life and gentle wisdom toward me. I can’t help but be amazed at how things have come full circle between

us. Though our relationship began in turmoil, there is now harmony. Instead of anger there is joy; instead of bitterness we enjoy peace.

The question James lays out for us this morning is this: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” This may be a difficult question to answer, but what if I ask it this way: What is the quality of your relationships? Are they characterized by gentleness, purity and peace? Is there evidence of submissiveness, mercy, impartiality and sincerity?

As we ponder our relationships, maybe the Lord is encouraging us to take the difficult but loving steps of being honest with our spouse, our child, a friend or co-worker. For some it may mean we need to confess our envy or bitterness against them and ask for their forgiveness. For others it may mean approaching someone who has hurt us and gently reveal the pain and damage he or she has caused. Humility, gentleness, purity: these are the ways in which the seeds of peace are sown, producing a bountiful harvest of righteousness.

Though I may continue to struggle with my insecurities, this passage is a wonderful reminder that it is not my position as a pastor or my ability to preach or my theological insight that has a lasting impact on those around me; it is the presence of Christ within me. When I am weak and dependent upon him, he brings forth the beautiful fruit of his Spirit, that others might grow in righteousness and glorify our Father in heaven.

We may never have a degree, a job, a home, a spouse or a child, but if we possess the wisdom from above, we never need to worry about having a lasting impact in the lives of others. Through Christ we are able to sow seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness that lasts forever. “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place” (2 Cor 2:14).

Heavenly Father, we confess that our lives are too often characterized by the wisdom of the world. We ask your forgiveness, and thank you for the gift of mercy and grace given to us through your son Jesus Christ. Father, please take our heart that is filled with envy, ambition and selfishness and transform it. Fill us with your Spirit, that our life and our church community will overflow with gentle wisdom, humility, purity and peace. Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Collier Books, 1952), 109.

² David H. Roper, *Growing Slowly Wise. Building a Faith that Works* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2000), 114.

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