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James 3:13-18

Eighth Message

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WHO IS WISE AMONG YOU?

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

What are the symbols of importance in our culture today, the things that make us feel significant and leave a good impression? Most of us would say things like a good college degree, a significant title, a nice business card, a Rolex watch, a cellular phone, a vacation home, a shirt with a horse emblem, a new car, a lot of money.

This leads to a second question: Have you ever been influenced by, or have you influenced anyone as a direct result of possessing any of these things? Has the attainment of things, of prestige or prominence ever helped you to share the gospel, offer a meal to a hungry person, spend time with a child, have a meaningful conversation with your daughter, or helped you comfort someone dying of cancer? It is possible to spend a lifetime pursuing symbols, degrees and titles, but miss the whole point of life.

We all want to live meaningful lives, and I believe this desire is God-given. We all want to live significantly and leave a legacy that will survive us. If even one person at our funeral said we had made an impact for good in his life, we would feel we had made a significant contribution.

Today we come to a passage from the New Testament letter of James that helps us answer this question, How can we attain true significance in life? For Christians, this is one of the most important passages that helps us learn how God intends the church to function.

James begins by posing a question to his readers. Chapter 3, verse 13:

Who among you is wise and understanding? (James 3:13a NASB)

Remember that James was writing to the aliens of the Diaspora, exiled Jews who were suffering severe trials and afflictions. Trials have a way of stripping away our carefully built veneers, our well-planned facades. They leave us vulnerable and exposed, unsettled and confused, disappointed and despairing, angry and resentful. This book is about how to respond to the pressures of life. We have mentioned some of our more typical responses to trials. In our last study, we saw that one response we might be tempted to make is to seek importance and prominence, to try to hang around with the rich and famous in an effort to appear significant to our peers.

In the body of Christ, one symbol of success, and a title of significance, is being a teacher of the Scriptures. But James has a warning here: "Let not many of you become teachers" (3:1). Not many are to become teachers, says James, because they will incur a harsher judgment. Also, teachers must use speech—and the tongue, of course, is a major stumbling block for them, indeed for everyone. We might think that teachers are filled with wisdom and understanding, so we might strive to become teachers, but James warns that if we think we influence this world through our speech, then we are very wrong. Our speech can be powerful, and it can offer many benefits, but it can cause great destruction, too. Speech, therefore, is not the primary way to influence and significance.

If our primary means of gaining influence is not through words, then, James asks, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" The word "wisdom," used four times in these verses, is the key term in the text. James wants us to know that wisdom, not speech, is the key to significance.

Living a meaningful life is a desire that burns in the hearts of people in every generation. In the '60's and '70's, the youth of our nation flung off traditional values. In a search for truth, they became hippies and staged love-ins. This was the time when many of the so called "baby boomers" came to Christ. In the '80's, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. College graduates, who were to become known as "yuppies," flocked to corporate America, looking for significance in the start-up companies that offered the best stock options. In the '90's, young people are looking for meaning in community and authentic relationships. "Generation X" is looking for quality, not quantity.

No matter which generation we were raised in, however, we have to ask what kind of investment will bring the most meaning to our lives over the next ten, twenty, thirty, forty or fifty years. In the midst of the pressures that erode faith and promote self-exaltation, God wants us to be people who will have influence for his kingdom, to live lives that count for something. And God has some very definite plans for how we accomplish that. That is why James asks: "Who is wise and understanding among us?"

James answers his own question by saying (13b):

Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. (3:13b)

The person who is wise and understanding is the one whose faith is fleshed out by actions, the one whose deeds match his words, whose character backs up his title. James is saying, in effect, "Let not many become teachers, but let many do good works." This is the theme that keeps resurfacing in this book. In the midst of trials that can leave us confused, angry and vengeful, we are to become "doers" of the word rather than "hearers" only. We are to care for orphans and widows, remain unstained by the world, show love to the poor, and have a faith that works. We don't perform good works to gain salvation or earn approval; we do them because we are already the approved and beloved sons and daughters of our Father. If our actions do not back up what we have to say, if our lifestyles do not mesh with the image we have established, if our conduct does not match our titles, then our speech loses its power to influence others and robs us of the sense of significance we were meant to experience.

James gives two qualifiers that should describe our deeds and actions. First, they should be characterized by "good behavior." This would be better translated, "beautiful conduct." The word "good" here is not just referring to moral good, but to actions that are well done and beautiful to behold.

The second qualifier is “gentleness of wisdom.” “Wisdom” is the ability to live well; “gentleness” speaks of humility (it is one of the fruits of the Spirit). Jesus said that the gentle are blessed and will inherit the earth. “Gentleness of wisdom” is the ability to respond to pressure and conflict with grace and character, with strength under control. This is what Jesus modeled so well.

The person who is wise and understanding doesn't just talk; he acts, and his actions are colored with gentleness and beauty.

People who demonstrate works with good behavior and wise gentleness are creative artists in the way they approach life. They do things that are attractive and beautiful, things that catch our attention. All of us are drawn to an act of compassion. We marvel when love is shown to an enemy. We are touched by a hug given to someone who is dying. We smile when we see someone playing with a child. We are awed by the actions of a saint, just as we are awed by the creative powers of a painter, or the beauty of a sunset. These are the deeds of people who are displaying the work of the Creator.

This design for significant living is not new; it has been around for a long time. It has always been the plan for how Israel, and the church, are to influence the world, as the words of Deuteronomy prove:

“See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” (Deut 4:5-6)

When Christians live this way, people look at the church and say, “These people are different; they are beautiful, gentle and wise. How can I become like them?” And this is what allows believers to say, in response, “Now that you have seen my actions, let me tell you the story of Jesus.” This is what attracted me to Christ. A college friend who was a Christian talked to me about the Bible. But it wasn't what he said that had the greatest influence over me; it was what he did as I watched him live day to day. When he was undergoing difficult times, I could not discount the reality that God was active in his life. He had something that I did not have, and I was drawn to his God.

An old lawyer once said of John Viannay: “An extraordinary thing happened to me today: I saw Christ in a man.” That is what it means to be wise and understanding.

Most of us agree with these sentiments, and we long to live that way, but it is difficult to put this into practice in our everyday lives. That is because this truth runs counter to the culture we live in. We fantasize about how we should look and act, and different voices tell us what to do and how to do it. We are deceived to think we can gain influence overnight. Then when we face a trial, we try we run from the pain, grasping for something that will be life-giving.

If we are to make this truth real in our lives, we must understand more deeply this notion of wise living.

Now James goes on now to say that there are two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom from below, and the wisdom from above. Verses 14-18:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is

first pure, then peaceful, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (3:14-18)

The wisdom from below, says James, is characterized by “jealousy and selfish ambition.” These are the “deeds of darkness” that Paul talks about in Romans 13. Our jealousy leads us to compare ourselves with others; our “selfish ambition,” our self-exaltation, makes us want to rise above others. The word is used in contemporary literature of self-seeking political pursuit of an office by unfair means—a significant point on this, the eve of the New Hampshire primary.

Jealousy and selfish ambition are two aspects of pride, one of the deadliest of sins. Here is what C. S. Lewis had to say 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.

Through jealousy and selfish ambition we try to gain influence and significance. But these things lie against the truth. They speak louder than words, and therefore nullify anything we have to say, even if we speak God's word.

According to James, this kind of wisdom is “earthly, natural, demonic.” It is from the earth, and therefore is neither true nor eternal. It is temporary, and it decays. It is natural, and therefore it does not satisfy spiritual hunger. It is demonic in nature. It will deceive you through its lies and will seek to take your life.

But this is the kind of wisdom that we hear on every side today, isn't it? We see it on the television; the popular magazines are filled with it: “The end justifies the means.” “Sow your oats while you are young.” “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” “You deserve a break today.” “Come to Harrahs, come to life.” “Just do it.” “Master the possibilities.” “We are adults, nobody will get hurt.” This is the kind of wisdom that permeates our society. It is earthly, natural, and demonic. It is characterized by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And the results of this kind of wisdom are “disorder and every evil thing.” It leads to discontent, restlessness, division and turmoil. Essentially, the wisdom from below causes breakdown and division in the community. People are hurt, and relationships deteriorate.

Oscar Wilde describes in these words the effects of the wisdom from below in his own life:

The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease...Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber, one has some day to cry aloud from the house-top. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.

The prophet Isaiah said: “Woe to those who are wise and clever in their own eyes.”

Next, James contrasts the wisdom from below with the wisdom from above. This is the kind of wisdom that will help us to be wise and understanding. James gives a list of adjectives to describe it. First, this wisdom is “pure,” or holy. Purity replaces “earthly, natural, demonic.” And a pure heart is a prerequisite to doing anything. This kind of wisdom then is:

- pure, restful (not confusing and disorderly)
- gentle, yielding (not brawling)
- obedient, compliant (not disobedient and defensive)
- full of mercy, compassion (not self-seeking)
- full of good fruit (not rotten fruit)
- unwavering (not doubting)
- genuine, real, sincere (not hypocritical).

The words of James describe a godly character, in stark contrast to one that demonstrates “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.” Notice that the majority of the words James uses to describe the wisdom from above relates to how people live and relate in community (the rest have to do with spiritual maturity). Godly character is the very definition of wisdom. The one who displays this kind of character is wise and understanding. It isn’t what you say, but who you are and what you do that speaks loudest.

The result of gaining real wisdom, the wisdom from above, is the fruit of righteousness, sown in community. Verse 18 is an amazing statement. Literally, it reads: “The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by the ones doing peace.” The ones who practice peace sow seeds that germinate and grow and bear the fruits of righteousness. Peace is in contrast to “disorder and every evil thing.” It speaks of healthy community and healthy relationships. If we want to have real significance, this is what God wants for us—the fruit of righteousness. It is godly character that has the greatest impact in life. James is saying let not many become teachers, but let many gain wisdom through the godly character that is demonstrated in what we do.

Character speaks louder than words. Our influence does not depend on the symbols that society holds dear. It doesn’t matter where we live, what kind of job we have or what kind of car we drive; whether we are the president of a company or a ditch digger; whether we are movie star or a housewife. It is godly character that counts, not title or position. As others observe how you respond to situations, they will wonder what it is about you that makes you different. They will consider you to be wise and understanding. The measure of a man or woman is the people we touch, not the trophies of our accomplishments.

An excellent illustration of this truth is the recent movie *Mr. Holland’s Opus*. It is story of a man who sought to leave a legacy. He wanted to compose and write music, but instead gave himself to being a teacher for thirty years. His dreams were always frustrated, but in the end he had an influence in people’s lives that went beyond his wildest dreams. His music became the lives that he touched.

I clipped this quote about the character of our first President, George Washington, from an issue of *Time* magazine:

Washington knew no foreign languages (Thomas Jefferson spoke or read five). Washington never traveled to Europe, while Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Jefferson all spent years there. He was not an accomplished public speaker. His military achieve-

ments were judged for their perseverance rather than their brilliance... Writers who journey through the accounts of his life almost always confess some bafflement about why he was such a great figure in his time and remains so in ours... Washington was a good man but not a saint, a competent soldier but not great, thoughtful but not brilliant like Alexander Hamilton. He was respectable administrator but certainly not a genius... The sum of his rather normal parts added up to an exceptional figure. George Washington had character... His heart and mind were shaped by his family, his land, his community and the small events that touched him every day. Those were the normal experiences. They were added to his natural endowments. Only one power can fully fathom such a formula—God.

How do we gain this kind of character and wisdom? It comes through brokenness. Trials produce character. Afflictions and sufferings produce diamonds, pearls and rubies. It is only through brokenness that God’s character is born and made visible in us. Brokenness allows us to be influential more than any degree or title. Brokenness makes us real. Our hearts are opened up, sometimes forced open, so that we might receive the grace of God. People will listen to us and they will hunger for the grace that God bestows upon us in our brokenness.

Second, character comes through investment. The way to influence is to drive a stake in the ground and look to the long haul. Start investing now, sowing seeds whose fruit is righteousness, both in your own life and in the lives of others. It doesn’t matter whether you have the perfect job, the perfect home or the perfect children, whether you are married or single, rich or poor. Plant yourself and make choices every day to influence a generation through the character that God is building in you. We will never have any influence over people if we dart here and there and never plant ourselves, or if we are waiting for everything to fall into place before we begin.

And third, let us not forget that this kind of wisdom, this kind of character comes from Jesus. It is not learned in the world or in the classroom. It comes from having our lives deeply touched by Jesus. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” said John. This is the Word that takes up residence in our hearts. We can’t learn this kind of wisdom from an audio tape or from memorizing a set of answers. It comes from God, who indwells people, and they become his wisdom.

Ray Stedman had more influence over Peninsula Bible Church than any other man. Ray was a wonderfully gifted and talented pastor and preacher. He taught God’s word in countries all over the world. He sat in the White House. He could have become king of any Christian circle. And yet he lived simply and purely. He became a spiritual father to many who are here this morning. In fact, most of the staffs at PBC North and South are part of Ray Stedman’s Opus.

Chuck Swindoll is one of many who came under Ray’s influence. A few years ago, Chuck arranged to fly up from Southern California, accompanied by several young men he was training, to have dinner with Ray. It one of the last times he ever talked to Ray. Later, Chuck would write of that evening:

In a day of tarnished leaders, fallen heroes, busy fathers, frantic coaches, arrogant authority figures, and eggheaded profs, we need mentors like never before. Such rare finds are guides, not gods. They are approachable and caring souls who help us negotiate our way through life’s labyrinth without shouting or dictating. Mentors know how to stretch us without insulting us, affirm us

without flattering us, make us think without requiring their answers in return, release us without abandoning us. They're always right there, even though they may be a thousand miles away. They become invisible partners, whispering hope and reproofs on the journey toward excellence. As we said good-bye to Ray, I walked a little slower. I thought about the things he had taught me without directly instructing me and about the courage he had given me without deliberately exhorting me. I wondered how it had happened. I wondered why I had been so privileged to have had my "face" reflected in his "water" or my "iron" sharpened by his "iron." A nostalgic knot formed in my throat...I found myself wanting to run back to his car and tell him again how much I love and admire him. But it was late, and after all I'm a 55-year-old man. A husband. A father. A grandfather. A pastor. To some, a leader, and perhaps to a few, maybe even a hero. But as I stood there alone in the cold night air, I suddenly realized what I wanted to be most when I grow up.

Who do you want to be when you grow up? What kind of wisdom do you want to be known for? Let us not forget that the kind of wisdom that results in godly character comes only from God, through Jesus.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
I ever with Thee, and Thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son,
Thou with me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

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