

Be a Peacemaker

James 3:13-18 (NIV)

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. 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, demonic. 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 reap a harvest of righteousness.

James wrote his letter “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1) encouraging them to show their faith by what they do. At this particular section of the letter, he seems to be aiming at those who wish to be teachers of God, which many of them do. As teachers of God, they are tempted to claim themselves to be wiser and more understanding than others. So James guides them to understand that Christians should show their wisdom and understanding “by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” (verse 13) This is in contrast of being teachers with selfish ambition in their hearts.

What would that kind of selfish ambition in a teacher of God look like? It would be putting themselves above their students as they try to show off their knowledge, making fun of those who don’t “get it” like he does, and putting down those who challenge him or contradict him. Selfish ambition would lead the teacher to raise himself over his students, to make his lessons about himself and showboating his knowledge rather than seeking to make sure that his hearers were learning and growing in their knowledge of God.

Although you may not desire to be a teacher of God, do you have any selfish ambition in your heart? (As if any of us would ever actively admit that, right?) Sadly, because we all are inherently sinful, we are also inherently selfish. It’s our natural desire and inclination to view the world and everyone around us as those who can benefit us, those who should make our lives better. Why? Because me first. I take care of me. I’ll maybe look after you next. I’m most important.

From that selfish ambition, you also find “disorder and every evil practice,” (verse 16) James says. Since I am predisposed to consider myself first above everyone else, that means that I will try to mold situations and manipulate people to get what I want. I may do it in a seemingly humble way of stating one of my problems hoping that it will prompt the other person to want to do something for me. I may ask very timidly, “You don’t want to help me with this, do you?” And if they say “no,” then I will give them a guilt trip by lamenting all the bad things that will happen if no one does this for me. I may skip the nice asking and instead jump to loudly, forcefully demanding that someone do something for me, putting them down if they don’t.

Out of selfish ambition, we walk over people to get what we want for ourselves, possibly crushing fellow believers in doing so. This is not loving our neighbor; this is being a cross to them. These actions are not wisdom from heaven, from God. This is earthly wisdom, unspiritual wisdom, demonic wisdom that seeks to put down other people and walk over them so that I get what I want.

James corrects his hearers from pursuing such earthly wisdom. He writes, “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.” (verse 13) What do these deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom from heaven look like? “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.” (verse 17)

Wisdom from heaven, from God, is pure. This means that it is holy, that no sin or sinful desires are attached to it. It is peace-loving, considerate, and submissive meaning that our deeds pursue peace, that we would not demand our own way but seek the good of the other person instead of only ourselves. This wisdom curbs our words that instead of using our tongue to make war, to put people on the defensive, to threaten or accuse them, we pursue peace, working to calm nerves and tension. This wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit. Deeds done in the wisdom from heaven do not treat people as they deserve to be treated. That’s mercy. This person may have it coming to them that I crush them with words, that I seek to make war with them by what I say and do, but mercy says that I do the exact opposite. Earthly wisdom speaks contentious words to escalate the situation. but wisdom from heaven takes a step back and tries to de-escalate it. Wisdom from heaven is impartial, not showing favoritism, as we heard James tell us last week that we would not chose to show special favor and attention to some people at church while relegating others as not worthy of my time. Lastly, James tells us that wisdom from heaven is sincere, that it is genuine, not phony, not hypocritical. Say what you mean and mean what you say because it is so easy to be fake and say what people want to hear. Only God and his wisdom from above can produce such attitudes and actions within me.

Wisdom from above makes peace and leads me to understand that this is not about me or serving myself; it's about the other people - my brothers and sisters in Christ – just as Moses showed us today in our first Bible reading. Moses' older brother and sister began to talk against Moses. Their point of contention: Moses' wife. She was not an Israelite (but she was a believer). Miriam and Aaron thought that they were better than Moses for this reason, superior to him. So, they should be the leaders of the Israelites, of God's people. I know that if this were me, I would immediately want to jump to defend my wife and myself and turned this talking into a shouting match because you don't mess with my wife and I won't stand to have you unjustly and wrongly criticize me. But Moses doesn't shout. He doesn't even speak. No, it's the LORD who steps in and defends Moses, who calls out Miriam's and Aaron's sin, and who punishes Miriam by making leprosy break out on her skin.

At this point, again, if I were Moses, the temptation would be to rub this in to Miriam's and Aaron's face. See what you get for bad-mouthing me and my wife, for being contentious people who make war instead of peace among your fellow believers. Aaron pleads to Moses to have him intercede to God for Miriam. Instead of Moses saying that she got what she deserved, he turns around pleads for the one who defiantly said she was better than him. Moses prayed, "Please, God, heal her!" (Numbers 12:13) That indeed is a humble man who put away his selfish ambition to sincerely intercede for the very person who was sinning against him. Moses was a peacemaker.

For the teachers that James wrote to, they had their selfish ambition put in check realizing that it was not about them as teachers but it was about their students and what they learned. How could they teach to build them up and build up this body of believers in the peace of Christ? With this attitude, they now served as peacemakers. God calls us to the same. In all we say and do, we strive to build up the other person. We are God's peacemakers when we do this.

Sadly, we know that the selfish ambition inside of us leaps at the chance to seize a "me first" moment and so we display the earthly, unspiritual, and demonic wisdom that makes war instead of the wisdom from heaven that makes peace. We are not enough on our own to be peacemakers. We need wisdom from above.

Christ is true wisdom that comes down from heaven. You saw it in our Gospel reading today. Christ is pure. We know Jesus was and is without sin, and he was also humble about it. The disciples were arguing on the road about who is the greatest, but he did not step in to boast about his sinlessness, that he was obviously greater than all of them because he's the Son of God and God himself. He did not treat his disciples as they deserved to be treated following that argument of selfish ambition, but he instead showed them mercy by teaching them how the greatest person is the one who humbly serves and will even make himself last. Christ is peace-loving and considerate as he will not take up arms against his enemies who will kill him, and by doing so he submits to God the Father's will that he would suffer and die for your sins and my sins – our selfish ambitions. Christ is doing this not for a select group of people showing favoritism, but he submits to sacrifice himself for the whole world making his salvation completely impartial. On top of that, he shows that both his adult disciples and the little children are just as important to him as he scoops a child up in his arms. Christ is sincere when he says to all those listening, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37)

Christ not only epitomized what it means to be a peacemaker. He is also the true wisdom come down from heaven. He showed that wisdom to us by his good life, a life exemplified by deeds done in humility. He lived the wisdom from heaven that we so often fail to live. He did this for us in our place, keeping the law where we broke it. By what Christ has done, he has made us holy. Jesus made peace between us and God.

Having been made holy by Christ, by his perfect wisdom, we reflect that wisdom with deeds done in humility. We use this wisdom that God has given us to make peace, not war, especially with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Whenever we talk to a fellow believer or talk about them, consider them over yourself. It doesn't matter what they have done. Like Moses, respond in a humble way that sincerely prays for them. Stop yourself from putting yourself first, from being purposefully contentious, from pitting believers against each other. Don't insist on your way if God doesn't insist upon it. Build bridges between you and others. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Be a peacemaker. And when you fail to sow peace, be quick to ask for forgiveness.

Sow that peace among your brothers and sisters in Christ. In this way, we will build each other up as we wait for Christ to take us to our heavenly home, reaping a harvest of righteousness. Amen.