

## *Work of Peace and the Need for Wisdom*

James 3:13-18

5/3/2020

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We turn now to God's word this morning as we continue in this series on the work of peace and the power of speech. This is the third version, or the third in this series on the work of peace and the power of speech as we find ourselves in the middle of the letter of James. As we now continue in this portion of James in chapter 3, which formed the backbone of my early walk with Christ, I am continually amazed how many see this book as a disparate collection of many different statements. But as we have spent time in it, I hope that you have been able to see the way in which he has continued to weave these themes that come together in and throughout the book. And one of the themes that he began with in the book, he now continues. And it is in the subject of wisdom. And now he is wedding together the life of wisdom with a life of responding in obedience and what that actually looks like as we seek to follow Jesus in the way of faith.

But before we go further, I want to take this opportunity to echo something that Dr. Koch mentioned earlier in the service. Simply one of the best ways and the only way that I know that the people of God can truly be changed in the way that we speak will not come simply by finding new habits or willing it to be so because he's already told us that no man can tame the tongue. In fact, it is only the Lord who can tame that tongue. But how does the Lord tame our speech? He tames our speech by taming our hearts. And the way that He does that is through His word. It is not through mysticism. It is not through magic. It is only through reading the word. And the word which Dr. Koch used earlier is this word of meditation.

Now, what we mean by meditation is a very biblical concept of meditation not the Eastern sense of meditation which is emptying yourself and opening yourself up to what the universe might provide. I think that that is not only unwise, but I don't think it will fulfill that which we desire. But the meditation that the scriptures tell us to is more like a mental marinade, a heart marinade of giving ourselves to the word and allowing it to burrow deep in our hearts, spending time reading it, memorizing it, but also applying it. That can be done out loud. It can be quietly. It can be done with others. It can be done alone.

Let me strongly encourage you as we are in the middle of this letter to take an opportunity to read this word, to find portions of it that the Spirit leads you to, and to spend time in that word. Do so today. Find time throughout this period of the pandemic when we find ourselves in very different schedules to marinate on God's word. And so I encourage you to find a place in His word where He can feed your soul because I can assure you, not by my promise but by the promise of God, that when we give ourselves to the word and allow ourselves to marinate in it, it will change our hearts. And it most certainly will change our speech.

And that is what we turn to today in James 3:13-18. Hear now God's word.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Father, I turn to your word this morning. And I cannot help in my own heart to leap for joy because what is given to us here, what is offered to us here is a rich life of wisdom that is characterized by things that we truly long for, a life marked by peace and humility, shaped by love, led by the light of wisdom that is from above, and that will produce a rich harvest, a harvest of righteousness not self-righteousness, not righteousness designed or defined by the world, but righteousness that is defined by your word which tells us that the Spirit gives forth the fruit of the Spirit. And all of that is contained in this one word which cannot truly contain everything but that points us to you which is the love of God. The love of God contains within itself all righteousness, all joy, all peace. Lord, may you pour this out on your church. I pray for you to pour it out on our people here at CPC and on the ministry here, and not just here but on all the churches that seek to walk in faith and humility to preach the gospel including the PCA and also across denominational lines. Lord, we ask, pour out your grace and the beauty and bounty of your love, the righteousness that comes from your love, on your church universal. And may all praise and honor and glory be given unto you. Now, I pray that you would bless your people. Teach your people. Feed your people. And help the teacher as we look at your word today. In Jesus's name. Amen.

This morning as we turn together in this word in these verses, I want you to see that what James is describing first is the way of wisdom in verse 13, then wisdom and the world in verses 14 through 16, and then finally wisdom from above in verses 17 to 18. In some sense, James ends where he begins. It's in the middle that he's describing for us what we ought to be careful of. So the way of wisdom, wisdom in the world, and wisdom from above.

Let's turn together first to the way of wisdom. He says it very clearly here, two things that come from the way of wisdom. First off, the kind of wisdom that is from above, the kind of wisdom which James has been talking about even from the beginning of his letter when he says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God. And God, who hears our prayers," he says, "he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." And when he ask Him, we should not doubt but ask God as a child asks their father openly, honestly. Lord, give me this wisdom. And the Lord will give generously. What is this wisdom? It is a wisdom which leads us to greater dependence on Him. It also leads us in the way of the gospel and what that looks like in the life of the believer. And he says the way of wisdom in verse 13 is, "By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."

A couple of things that he says there. He says first that this way of wisdom is demonstrated in good works. Well, he's already told us what these good works look like earlier on as we've gathered together in this portion of the book of James. Immediately before this, as we've been in this book for the last few weeks, James spoke of the nature of the tongue, the way in which we speak to one another, even the way in which we respond to one another, even the way in which we seek to create peace and reconciliation with one another is an example of what it looks like to live wisely with good works. It is also those who give themselves to the works of love and the works of good fruits where we seek to not only provide for ourselves but to provide for others.

And something else that James says here is we do these good works "in the meekness of wisdom." What he means is that this life of wisdom in doing good works produces an attractive humility, meaning these were good works that we do unto one another. We do so not to gain attention from others, but we do so in humility. The word here is "meekness." It's this idea of humility or a form of gentleness where what we're doing is instead of seeking glory for ourselves that we seek to care for another. And the attention is not drawn to us. We seek for the attention to be put on someone else and their needs.

And what happens when we seek to do good works not trying to parade it before others but rather to offer our lives up, our hands, our minds, our hearts, we seek to offer them up to the Lord that they might be done unto Him. This is what Paul talks about. He says when we do things, we do all things unto the Lord whether they are extraordinary or they're merely mundane.

So many of you over this last number of weeks have been making masks for one another and for those in need in our community, such as our first responders. Many of you have been responding to

those in giving gifts, small gifts that you've been making by your own hands to give to the children that have been born or are going to be born in our community over the next several months and weeks. You've offered up meals. You've been gathering together and offering up prayers for one another. You've been baking things for one another. You've been writing letters and emails and texts to one another. It doesn't have to be extraordinary. And, in fact, most of life is not made up of extraordinary events, but rather the day in and day out mundane sameness of everyday small acts of kindness that is not done to bring attention but to provide for others as we have been provided for.

You see, what's interesting is "By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom" finds its ultimate pattern in the logic and in the beauty of who Jesus is. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. And what we find in Jesus, the ultimate redeemer and savior, is one who took in the personal and private parts of His life to do and to seek and love and provide for others, not drawing attention to Himself but caring for others and giving glory to the Father. What we find here is the same, that we seek and follow the way of Jesus by seeking to do good works that the glory might be given to the Father and that the good of the work might be a blessing to another.

This is what wisdom looks like for James. But then he pivots. He pivots, and he's calling the church to this kind of life of wisdom. But he also understands that this is happening in the context of a world that doesn't operate on this kind of life. So in verses 14 to 16, James changes when he says the following. "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."

So what's interesting is just as this way of wisdom demonstrates itself in good works and in humility, the wisdom in the world actually doesn't look like good works and humility, but it does something different. The wisdom in the world is demonstrated, it says here, in disordered works. It's not that the world isn't busy. It is very much busy. But it is busy through disordered works. In other words, instead of putting the other person first, disordered works puts the self, puts me, as more important than the other. And what it actually is describing here is a way of life which actually turns everything which he has just said in verse 13 upside down. And the reason why it's disordered works is because it comes out of a heart which has a disordered set of loves. As he describes here, it is selfish ambition. The problem is not that ambition is bad, but when ambition is sought purely for self-glory, seeking our own good, then it becomes selfish.

In fact, what is being described here, actually this past week, was described perfectly in the op-ed article by David Brooks who is also a convert to Christianity. When he describes our present situation in the midst of this pandemic, he says, "What we often see experiencing in the world during this time, we experience two kinds, two groups. We experience those who are weavers and those who are rippers." And what he suggests here when he writes this article is that what he calls "rippers" are those who seek this opportunity to drive division. In fact, he says in this article the following.

"The rippers seem to see everything through the prism of a war, either a war in culture or a war in politics. Whether rippers are on the left or rippers are on the right, it seems that they find meaning out of life in trying to polarize and drive division between people."

And he says this is happening in a situation where what we're seeing is the majority of people are actually wanting to unite to care for each other in acts of love and service, but rather the rippers get all the attention because it seems to be a circus that seems so easy to pay attention to.

He continues. He says, "They've created a polarization industry that is loathe to admit that what people want is unity." And he says, "There has been such a polarization over the past decades" that has actually not been about disagreeing with each other more, because we've always disagreed, but rather it has led us to want to hate one another more. And so what he's suggesting is, and he quotes a study from a group called Beyond Conflict, that whether you're on the left or on the right, there is substantially more

effort to exaggerate the other side and how much we disagree with them. In other words, what Brooks is describing here is the wisdom of the world that's demonstrated in disordered works that seeks to divide, that seeks with jealousy to say, you shouldn't be experiencing that. You do not deserve that. And so I'm going to rip you down. I'm going to tear you up. I'm going to exaggerate the things that I disagree with you on, and I'm going to polarize the circumstance or the relationships.

And what happens when these disordered works take root is, instead of producing an attractive humility that wisdom from above creates, this produces corrosive division. This corrosive division creates an environment where the reservoir of trust is dried up completely, and we become more and more polarized. And, in fact, we treat one another in increasingly dehumanizing ways.

One cannot look at this passage where James is describing the wisdom of the world and see it as anything other than dehumanizing when we allow ourselves to either be party to someone else's jealousy, or we allow our own jealousy to take root, or when we only criticize the selfish ambition with those we disagree with but we're willing to give shelter to the selfish ambition to those that we do agree with. We take party in this disordered love when we only criticize the vile practices of those who we can't imagine we would ever find any agreement with, but yet we support or take party to or we're quiet at the vile practices of those we might agree with.

What happens in this corrosive division is that we no longer see each other as being created in the image of God, and all we want to do is go to war. This is not wisdom from the gospel. This is wisdom from the world that seeks to build lines and keep everybody clearly marked out in lines that we like and lines that we don't, and they should never meet. Or they only will meet if the other side is willing to lay down their weapons.

My friends, just as James has said before, I think it bears repeating again, brothers and sisters in Christ, this should not be the case for the Christian. It's not that we point out to the world and say the problem is out there. We must first admit in humility that the same dehumanizing wisdom from the world can so easily seep into the heart of the church and into the heart of the Christian. We must take an honest assessment of our own hearts and ask the question, have we allowed the wisdom of the world to shape the way we see others? Are we allowing the gospel to reshape our hearts not to be milk toast gentle walk-all-over-me sort of paradigm of being a Christian, which is not what the Bible calls for, but rather to have the tenacity and courage to look at the gospel and be honest about what it says about our own hearts and our own disordered loves, offering them up to the Lord, and asking him for forgiveness when we've allowed the wisdom of the world to shape how we view other people including those we disagree with? And say Lord, forgive me. Help me to live by this wisdom that doesn't produce disorder and corrosive division but rather is attractive in its humility and attractive not to me but attractive to you.

Friends, I will tell you that at the end of February, many of you know that we had been experiencing eight weeks of a tremendous amount of trial. So many of us were experiencing the exhaustion of grief. We already felt weak. I know I did. I was exhausted at the end of February. And as I looked out on the months ahead, I saw so much that was going to happen that looked so encouraging and exciting, and yet I was also exhausted. And then the coronavirus hit, and we had to change the way we were doing life here as a church, and I was reenergized. Every day for the first two and a half weeks, I woke up every morning. I was still doing my same practices. I was making my coffee. I would read a little bit of scripture. But then I would turn on my air pods and I would listen to my favorite news podcast.

And after about two and a half weeks of that, I was exhausted again. And I believe the Lord, by His Holy Spirit, nudged me and started answering some of your prayers, which I know some of you were praying. And the Lord began to feed my soul, and I turned all of that off. And I saw how much my own heart was being shaped not by the wisdom that pleases God but wisdom of the world. I could see in my own heart the way in which I have allowed division in my own heart. And so I turned it off. And I'm

grateful that I did. And I haven't turned it back on. And I've just given myself during this time to God's word in a renewed way.

While this time has been difficult for all of us, I know that I've been more close to my emotions than I ever have been. And yet, the Lord has caused me by His Spirit to slow down, to marinate in His word, and not to be caught up in the dumpster fire of social media. I'm not casting on judgment on anybody who's involved in social media, but I know my heart can't take any more. And so I needed to find that place. And in that place, I have found such a refuge in His word, such a powerful moving of His Holy Spirit, and such a source of wisdom that has allowed me to sleep better, to be quiet before the Lord, and to listen to Him.

Friends, I invite you to hear the nudge of the Holy Spirit if He is speaking to you now. If you need to turn off your devices, if you need to disconnect from the dumpster fire of social media or the news or the corrosive division within our culture, not pointing fingers at it but seeing how easily we can be drawn into it, I encourage you to hear the movement of the Spirit to turn those things off and to give yourselves to marinate into the truth and beauty from wisdom from above. It doesn't make us weak. In fact, I think it takes the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit to be courageous enough to say, Lord, here I am. And the Spirit will do that.

But before I turn to this final point, I want to tell you a story that I found during this time. This story is retold by Pastor Scott Sauls in his book *Jesus Outside the Lines*. It is a perfect example of exactly what's happening in our culture. It's happening right at the heart of the culture on so many levels. And the rippers in culture both on the left and on the right seized on this story and saw an opportunity to drive division. And even after the story was over, even the rippers did not want to hear the story which was told which was written about. If perhaps you have not heard it, I hope you can hear this today as not only an example of what James is calling us to but a way that invites all of us.

This story is about Dan Cathy who is the CEO President of Chick-Fil-A. Let me read to you this story briefly. Scott Sauls writes,

"I believe that Dan Cathy had been listening to the words of scripture. He's the President of Chick-Fil-A and is a Christian who was thrust into the public eye after answering a reporter's question about his beliefs regarding gay marriage. Cathy, wanting to be true to his understanding of what scripture says about the issue, stated simply that he believes marriage is designed for a man and a woman. What followed was an organized and highly publicized protest against him, his commitment to the Bible, and his business which was boycotted by many.

"In response to the boycott, scores of Cathy's supporters rallied for Chick-Fil-A appreciation day buying millions of chicken sandwiches in a show of solidarity, a protest against the protest. Dan Cathy did not personally affirm or join the protest in any way. Yet, instead, he quietly reached out to his strongest critic who was a gay activist Shane Windmeyer who eventually shared these words in an essay which he submitted to the *Huffington Post*.

"Shane Windmeyer, one of Dan Cathy's greatest critics, wrote the following. 'It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another. We see this as failure to listen and to learn in our governments, in our communities, and in our families. Dan Cathy and I would together try to do better than each of us had experienced before. Never once did Dan or anyone from Chick-Fil-A ask for campus pride to stop protesting Chick-Fil-A. On the contrary, Dan listened intently to our concerns. He sought first to understand and not to be understood. Dan and I shared respectful enduring

communication and built trust. His demeanor has always been one of kindness and openness. Dan expressed regret and genuine sadness when he heard of people being treated unkindly in the name of Chick-Fil-A. But he offered no apologies for his genuine beliefs about marriage. Deep disagreement and no apologies for what he believes, love, respect, listening, and friendship all at the same time."

Friends, this is exactly what James is calling us to. We're not called in the humility of wisdom to apologize for our deeply held theological views. But what he's calling us to do is to live wisely and in humility with them to understand before we try to make sure we're being understood, to seek to offer out the hope of the gospel with love, respect, listening, and friendship all at the same time, and to avoid the lies and dehumanizing lies and division that is happening in the world around us.

And so James then turns to these final verses, and he calls us then to wisdom from above. And in verses 17 and 18, he describes what demonstrated good character looks like, a demonstrated good character. And he describes several points here including integrity, or purity, peacemaking, gentleness, being full of mercy, good fruits, impartial, and sincere.

So what is he pointing out? Just quickly, when he's talking about purity, he's talking about a life of wisdom that has integrity, meaning you're the same in private as you are in public. You're the same during the lockdown as you are when we're free to roam the streets and go with our friends and go back to work. That you're a person who is given to peacemaking which requires a tremendous amount of grit, grit to acknowledge your own sin and need for forgiveness, but also it takes a lot of grit and tenacity to be willing to go to someone else with whom you need to make peace by acknowledging how they've hurt you. That requires a lot of wisdom, and it requires a lot of courage.

But also, to be gentle requires tenacity. Why? Because it takes tenacity to focus on the truth of our own sin but also the truth and the greater power of God's grace to learn how to respond to others in gentleness. You see, God's word tells us it is God's gentleness that leads us to repentance. So that means in living gently with one another requires tenacity to understand just how deeply sinful we are. And when we understand how deeply sinful we are and the gentleness we've been shown, then that is what motivates and empowers our ability to be gentle with one another even when we don't feel like it. To be full of mercy means we're learning and growing to be empathic. It requires us to take an opportunity to think how we have been shown mercy in ways that are particular to us and particular to our needs. And so how can I look out for the needs of others?

I was reminded of this over the last several weeks when a utility worker in a small town in Georgia saw that there was a grandmother who wasn't able to be visited by her children or her grandchildren. But it was her birthday, and he heard about it. And he was working across the street. He's a faithful member of his church and a member of the choir. On that day, he went over and he sang "Happy Birthday" to this grandmother whom he did not know. He learned what their family called her, and he sang "Happy Birthday" to her. And when they asked him why he did it, he said, "Anytime that I have an opportunity to share the love of the gospel, I want to do that." He saw the need of another, of a complete stranger, and he sang a song. That takes great empathy.

But this is what wisdom from above does. It makes us see and helps us to see the needs of others. But also, the giving of good fruits and good works, what marks the giving person is a person who consistently seeks to give both small and large ways. It's not just at birthdays or at Christmas. It's an opportunity to give in small ways every day. But it takes the eyes of the wisdom from above to help us to see how we can give to one another in small ways.

But finally, what James describes here is the good character which is marked and shaped by being impartial and sincere. I believe the wisdom from above as we allow it to change our hearts and our minds and our tongues, it enables us to be a safe place for others, where others can come to us in the midst of their difficulty, and they can find a place where there is no judgment, where they have someone whose

ears are connected from a heart of love, whose response is not going to be, "Well, at least," or, "Your situation could be so much worse." But in fact, all they do is they're able to listen and then they simply offer prayer, or a word of encouragement, or simply just still silence in being with their friend or their loved one.

The wisdom from above makes us as a people as we allow it to change us, a people of integrity, and peacemaking, and gentle, full of mercy, eager to do good works, impartial, and sincere. And I believe what James is describing here is the list of the fruit of the Spirit. This is what I believe the Spirit does as the wisdom from above poured out on all flesh, poured out on the church. And those who believe and pray and depend upon the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit that works in us to demonstrate a good character.

And what he then describes is such a beautiful thing, "And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." I am reminded of this over and over again when I see others take the hard step of going to another and asking for forgiveness. And when forgiveness is offered, relationship can flourish. Love can flourish. Grace can flourish. Mercy can flourish. And that's what the scriptures call a harvest of righteousness. And when there is a harvest of righteousness, there is joy. There is such a deep and abiding joy, such a deep and abiding peace that nothing, nothing can ever take it away from us, no circumstance, no difficulty, because we know that our joy is deeply rooted in the one who has us in the palms of His hands. And our heavenly Father gives us wisdom from above. And anyone who lacks it, let him ask for it, and He will give with great generosity, without impartiality.

This is the way of peace. And this is what the Spirit does. This is what God wants to do in you today. May the Lord give you courage. May He give you grace to ask Him for this kind of wisdom. And may it change the way we respond to one another verbally, virtually, in person, on social media, not drawing lines, but an open invitation to understand and to love, fueled, empowered, tamed by the love of God in Christ that the Spirit may give us a new way of life. May the Lord do this in you today, and may He bless you today. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this, your word. We thank you for the way in which you want to feed us and change us. We thank you, Lord, how you want this to be a time not when everything outside of us might take a reset, but each of us can take this opportunity to reset and say, O Lord, may you by your Spirit feed me. May you by your Spirit speak to me. May you by your Spirit give me this wisdom from above. And may it transform our hearts, our loves, our words, our actions. And may you to the glory of your name produce a harvest of righteousness. And may the church of Jesus Christ and may all those who call upon the name of the Lord rid ourselves of petty jealousies, of selfish ambition, fits of rage, words that hurt and wound. But may we be a people who are transformed in our minds and holding captive all thoughts to the glory of Christ, and may your Spirit tame our hearts and our loves to make us a peace offering to those around us, a sweet aroma of humility that you may receive all the glory and that we might enjoy a deep-rooted peace with you. In Jesus's name. Amen.