

Sermon Notes – September 23, 2018

James 3:13-4:3

**“Two Kinds of Wisdom/Friendship with the World”
Jonathan Worrall**

So, last week my father led worship, and this Sunday, I’m leading worship. He chose to reflect upon a passage from James, and so am I. I assure you, that is merely coincidence. We didn’t plan that. But, at least there is continuity. Last week, we heard how James was concerned with the power of words and the effect that they have on others. This week, James speaks of wisdom.

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” (James 3:13) At first glance, this seems like James is asking a simple and straight forward question; “Who is wise and understanding among you?” According to the commentaries, this is not so much a question as it is a challenge. James is challenging those who think that they are wise, that they have all the answers. James is confronting those with hidden agendas; the self-serving, the deceitful. James’ goal, the commentaries argue, was to show these people what wisdom truly is.

“Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” (James 3:13). There is much that has been written about the “good life.” Biblical Scholars have written a great deal about that phrase, the “good life.” Some have written extensively on the biblical meaning of a “good life,” and how it has changed over the years. Speaking in generalities, when people speak of the “good life” in our modern, Western society, it bears little resemblance to the “good life” that James was referring to. In my experience, the occasions in which I have heard people remark upon the “good life,” they are speaking of the desire or pursuit for material things and comfort: a big house, expensive cars, extravagant clothes, a well to high paying job, vacations around the world, to be financially secure so that they can help their children through school.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not criticizing this; I having nothing against someone who works hard and honestly to fulfill these ends. I'm a broke university student. I wouldn't mind having a piece of that "good life."

The "good life" that James was describing, was one that all of us, as people of the church, are aware of. He was writing about living a good moral life. I took many philosophy courses in my undergraduate degree. The first philosopher that I encountered was Socrates. Socrates beautifully stated that, "**The really important thing is not to live, but to live well. And to live well meant, along with more enjoyable things in life, to live according to your principles.**" Ultimately, both Socrates and James are concerned with the same thing. Having strong ethics, morals, and principles. This is what we as followers of Christ must aspire to.

James then proceeds to take aim at those who possess the wrong kind of wisdom. "**But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.**" (James 3:14-16). Sounds like the Donald Trump presidency.

Admittedly, we all have succumbed to envy occasionally. I know that I have. Well, sometimes. Okay, more often than I'd like or care to admit. For example, and I'm sure others can relate to this; I am envious of those of my friends who can eat whatever they want, when ever they want, and never gain a pound. I was always envious of my fellow students that wouldn't bother to study for the exam, and still manage to get an excellent grade. Some times, getting a higher grade than me; the one who studied. This type of envy is only natural; it's a universal experience.

Which is why I think that James clearly specified "**bitter envy and selfish ambition.**" It isn't the **envy** and **ambition** that James is concerned with. It is the *bitter* and *selfish* that James is warning against.

James is focused on why we do the things that we do. Are our actions self-serving? Are we the only ones that reap the benefits of our actions? Most importantly, do these actions harm others? As a church, as a society, we need to be aware of our actions and the affect it will have on others. Not just those in our immediate vicinity, but locally, nationally, and globally. And not just in the present, but for the future as well. We need to practice the second kind of wisdom that James mentions. As John Donne famously stated, “no man is an island.” We need each other, we rely upon each other. There are over seven billion people on the planet, and all of us are connected. Like a ripple in the ocean, our actions will affect others.

James elaborates upon this second kind of wisdom, as the, “**wisdom from above,**” which is, “**first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.**” (James 3:17) During the week of orientation at St. Andrew’s, my fellow students and I were privileged to have a medicine man come in and perform a smudging ceremony. One of the comments he made which really stuck with me, was that, his people believed that, “where there is common-sense, there is the presence of the Creator.” This latter kind of wisdom that James refers to, I feel, is common-sense; we can feel the presence of God (the Creator) in these words.

James writes powerfully about the source of conflict. He attributes the cause of conflict to the “**cravings that are at war**” within us. I don’t know about any of you, but I can definitely relate to that. We have often heard this struggle defined as one that occurs between our “wants” and “needs.” This division has always given me grief. Like, the comic Dylan Moran remarked, “I’m indecisive and impatient. I don’t know what I want, but I want it right *now!*”

So, wants and needs. The frequently used example, the one that my teacher always used in school, is that we need food and shelter. And that we want candy, but we don’t *need* candy. This relates to my second issue with wants and needs. I’ve always had a problem with this

division, because there are innumerable occasions in our lives where something is both a want and a need. Like me with candy. We want and need to be loved. We want and need money. We want and need shelter. And undoubtedly, today, some of you may both want and need me to wrap this up.

However, there is a more pressing issue. I realize that for many, including myself, the main issue is that the wants always seem to be more powerful and overwhelming than the needs. And that I think is our greatest struggle; the cravings that are constantly at war within us. Temptation is a driving force in this struggle. As Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything except temptation." All of us face temptation daily. We try to resist it and sometimes we fail. Failure to resist temptation is normal; it's part of the human condition. What is important is, that as vexing as this internal struggle is, we still continue this struggle. To use the old adage, what do you do when you fall off of the horse? You get back up. We don't give up. And how do we continue on in this struggle? Well, James, has an answer for that as well.

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." (James 4:7-8)

Submission before God. Admitting that we are powerless to control our lives. While, I'm sure that there are differences in belief regarding the existence of the devil. I feel in this instance it is better to think of the devil as something that resides in each of us. It's the little devil on our shoulder. It's the Mr. Hyde to our Dr. Jekyll. It's those dark or negative thoughts that we know not to listen to, but sometimes fall prey to.

Sometimes it's a voice that is harshly criticizing us, highlighting our faults and our mistakes. Or it's a feeling driving us to do something we know we shouldn't. Other times, it's a negative thought about someone or something. It's something that we all have to deal with. But as I said the last time I was here before you, we don't go through this alone. Whether we like it or not, we have been accepted. If there is a

devil on our shoulder, then there is also an angel on our other shoulder. There is light in the darkness.

Live a life in which we support one another and do good deeds, not just within the church, but out in the world where we strive for social justice, just as Christ did. For when we live this good life that James mentions, not only are we living the good life, but we are the embodiment of the instruction from the divine. As Christ said, **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)**

AMEN.