

Sermon for September 30, 2012 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost

James 3:13-18

Theme: Heavenly Wisdom . . .

- 1) *Is not demonstrated through fanaticism and selfish ambition*
- 2) *But is pure, meek and loving in all its actions.*

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his 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, of the devil. 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 raise a harvest of righteousness.

How we act flows directly from who we are and what we believe. So let me ask you: do your actions show that your heart is filled with godly wisdom?

With St. James as our guide, let us learn that **heavenly wisdom** 1) *is not demonstrated through fanaticism and selfish ambition*, 2) *but is pure, meek and loving in all its actions.*

Part One: Heavenly wisdom . . . is not demonstrated through fanaticism and selfish ambition

Our sermon text begins: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

It seems that the congregations St. James wrote this letter to had a problem with certain Christians assuming that they knew it all – so much so that they could teach others – when in fact they knew very little. I can sympathize with St. James, because this “know-it-all” temptation is certainly alive and well today. I think about the delinquent member who, when encouraged to come to worship, says: “I don’t need Church. All I need is God. I can worship him all on my own.” (Compare such knowledge with what the Scriptures say: “*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* [Hebrews 10:25]) I think of the Christian who, when encouraged to participate in Bible class, says: “I went to Christian day school. I don’t need to go to Bible class because I studied it all when I was a kid. (Compare such knowledge to Dr. Martin Luther, who said: “*For God’s sake I beg such lazy bellies or arrogant saints to be persuaded and believe that they are truly, truly not so learned or such great doctors as they imagine! They should never assume that they have finished learning the parts of the catechism or know it well enough in all points, even though they think that they know it ever so well.*”)

Anyway, I think you get the picture that people assume they have knowledge – more than enough knowledge – when actually they possess very little to none. And why would I say that? Because godly wisdom and understanding will show itself in the life of a Christian. How? Not they way you might think. Just because a person could possibly speak for hours about God, and wow you with his knowledge of the Bible – this does not mean he possesses proper understanding and faith in God’s Word. No, if you want to find the person who understands God’s Word – who is filled with the Spirit and rejoices in the righteousness Jesus won for him, than look for the person who lives a good, godly life – to the glory of God the Father – and shows *humility that comes from wisdom.*

A more precise translation of “humility that comes from wisdom” would be “the meekness of wisdom.” In other words, godly wisdom shows itself when a person is willing to submit to others out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). True godly wisdom shows itself in the quiet and sincere love the Christian shows God and others.

What is godly wisdom and where does it come from? Proverbs 9:10 states: “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.* (Proverbs 9:10) Divine wisdom is a work of the Holy Spirit in

the heart of believer, and it begins with the realization that we are completely sinful. There is no good in us. We are selfish and evil. In countless ways we sin against God and deserve his wrath and anger.

It is only a heart that comes to this realization through the working of God's Law that is ready to receive the good news (the Gospel) of forgiveness. God loved us so much, that he decided to save us. And how did he do that? By placing all our sins on the back of his Son and having Jesus go to the cross to suffer and die for them. When Jesus announced from the cross, "It is finished," he declared to the world that all our sins have been paid for in full. We are reconciled to God.

Divine wisdom comes from the fear of the LORD – standing in awe and respect of God because of how holy, mighty and loving he is. We are not worth anything, and yet God himself saved us. Considering who LORD is and how He saved us we now approach life differently. Our lives are not all about us, but about Christ and how we can glorify him before others.

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, of the devil.

The words translated in our text as "bitter envy" are literally "bitter or sharp zeal." They carry the sense of fanaticism – of being willing to argue and condemn for the sake of arguing and condemning. They have the idea of being zealous for something – but not in a godly way.

For example: Christians know that homosexuality is a sin, but that does not give us the right to purposely hurt homosexuals with our words and actions. Or here is another: by the grace of God, we have the Gospel in its purity. But this does not mean that we should go around and brag about how much better **we** are than others. These actions - even if they are in defense or support of the Gospel - are not godly. They are worldly and of the devil - stemming from human emotions and ideas of greatness.

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. When Christians get fanatical - using hurtful words and actions to defend and spread the Gospel - they glorify the devil and not God. When they brag and boast about how great they are compared to others - this does not glorify Christ but self. And where these things are allowed to exist, there Christ will not be.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: before we too quickly think, "Thank goodness this does not apply to me," let us repentantly consider how this does apply to us. How quick are we to tell another person something bad about someone else? How quick are we to insult others or put them down – even in just a joking way? How quick are we to think we know more than our neighbor - to pride ourselves in our doctrine or Christian life instead of thanking God in humility these blessings? How quick are we to judge others instead of following Luther's advice to "take their words and actions in the kindest possible way?"

I don't know about you, but when I consider the selfishness and arrogance lurking in my heart, it makes me pray: "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!" And do you know what? This is exactly where God wants us: humbly bowing before him, confessing our sins and our need for him. And do you know what else? He freely forgives us for the sake of Christ. As far as the east is from the west - so far has he removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:12). And the knowledge of this forgiveness moves us to express proper "meekness of wisdom."

Part Two: *Heavenly wisdom is . . . pure, meek and loving in all its actions*

St. James describes this "meekness of wisdom" when he writes: *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure.* It is real and genuine. It does not have an ulterior motive – when it helps, it helps because it really wants to. *Then peace-loving,* it hates discord. It does not want tempers to flare and people to become sinfully angry and so it works towards peace. How? By being *considerate* – by listening to others and being willing to serve them with the same respect we ourselves would like to have. Heavenly wisdom is, *submissive*, even when the persons we are dealing with are in the wrong. It does not focus on being right but reflects Christ's love. It is *full of mercy* willing to forgive and love others – even when they wrong us and are impenitent. It is full of *good fruit* - working in all things to benefit our neighbor eternally.

Finally, James describes the wisdom from heaven as *impartial* and *sincere*. Heavenly wisdom does not judge you on the basis of your race, sex, income level, political leanings, looks, abilities or past sins. When heavenly wisdom looks at a person, it sees a soul for whom Jesus died and acts accordingly.

Having read this description, can any of us claim that we have pure, divine wisdom? In and of ourselves - no. But here is something else to consider: A certain Lutheran scholar commented on this verse: "*[These] seven adjectives sound like a description of the Christ of the gospels, who is "the wisdom of God."*" (Concordia Self-Study Commentary) How true his statement is! Jesus is the fulfillment of all these attributes. Jesus himself is the divine wisdom of God. And here is something else to consider: when we look to Christ in faith for forgiveness, we are covered with his righteousness. God reckons all the things Jesus did to our account - as if we did them! And on top of this, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit upon us so as to enable us to express these fruits of divine wisdom in our lives. Why?

Because *peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness*. As we live our lives in meekness out of reverence for Christ, God is glorified. People begin to see we are different. And as they ask us why we act the way we do, we are able to tell them the good news of Christ. That message alone is able to work faith and righteousness in a person's heart - and it does.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, heavenly wisdom *is not demonstrated through fanaticism and selfish ambition, but is pure, meek and loving in all its actions*. May the LORD grant us all a spirit of fear toward him, and meekness towards others - springing forth from a repentant and trusting heart that rejoices in the forgiveness Christ won for us. Amen.