

Two Wisdom Samples from James August 30, 2020

This is our last lesson for the book of James, and for the quarter's focus on Wisdom. Here we have two separate passages, one from Chapter 3 and the other from Chapter 5, from among many different "lessons" James includes in his epistle.

In the first passage, James 3:13-18, immediately follows that of last week, which warns against the sins of the tongue. But, the connection is rather vague, and perhaps more associated with warnings to "those who teach" than the tongue specifically. As in most of James, there is a focus on works. The issue is, what kind of works.

James 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

"Wise" and "understanding" are nearly synonyms in Greek as in English. In the King James "meekness" is used instead of "gentleness", but the meanings have diverged since then, so "gentleness" is better, conveying a sense of patience even in the presence of faults in one's neighbors. The contrast (in this diatribe style) is with envy and selfish ambition. This kind of self-centeredness is "devilish", which in modern English might better be "demonic", since the reference isn't specifically to Satan. James then gives a list of consequences to each type of wisdom. From the demonic, disorder and wickedness, with the various kinds of wickedness not detailed out. In contrast, wisdom from above is pure (unmixed with evil), peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits (with these further fruits unspecified). Lists of good and bad attributes were frequently used in Greek discourse, and you can find Paul making comparable lists of good and bad things, as in Romans 1:29-33 (for bad things) and Philippians 4:8 (good things – one of Rev. Zanicky's favorite verses).

The culminating thought is that one must seek righteousness not only within ones self (“in your heart”) but also in relation to others. Verse 18 is reminiscent of the beatitude, **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matt 5:9)** So, how does one live out this wisdom from above? The lesson book author cites President Carter, who in retirement worked humbly for Habitat for Humanity and has sought to live the life of a peacemaker. His is probably as exemplary a post-presidential career as there has been. In contrast, how many people of power, even after they leave the scene (one way or another), are bitter, seeking to continue to attack or defend themselves over issues that no longer really matter? Even though James is focused on works, he too recognizes that these come from the heart. Where do we put our faith, in the things of God, or the things of the world?

The second passage follows Chapter 4 where James admonishes his readers against wrongful desires (4:1-10), says to speak no evil (11,12) and warns against sinful self-confidence (13-16). Chapter 5 begins with condemnation of the rich (5:1-6). The second lesson book passage immediately follows, connected by a “Therefore” in verse 7. So, to set the context, perhaps you might want to go back to read 1-6. But, the “Therefore” may actually apply better to ALL the material in the epistle, as James wraps up at the end.

James 5:7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You must also be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Indeed we call blessed those who show endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

The NRSV substitutes “beloved” for “brethren” (as KJV, RSV) in verse 7. “Brethren” is more accurate and includes sisters, of course. The word “beloved” conjures to our minds the language of I John, which is addressed to “my little children” with a fatherly love of the elder John. I think the NRSV changed this to make it gender neutral, losing an important aspect of the word’s meaning. James, though a teacher, is still relating to the Christians to whom he writes as a brother, which is consistent with his message. He is showing humility as a teacher.

James counsels patience. He uses the analogy of the farmer, whose yield is in large measure out of his hands – it depends on weather. Yet, there are patterns to the rains, and the wise farmer has planted at the right times to give the best chance of return. Of course, the modern farmer has tools such as irrigation that can play a part, but agriculture is still a profession where, more than most, one is at the mercy of the weather.

The “grumbling” of verse 9 isn’t against the “oppressor”, it’s against each other. It isn’t just a characteristic of the modern world that people rail against the vulnerable while remaining silent against the powerful. If one must grumble, it is easy to find fault in someone else who is less powerful, than the powerful leader that allowed the situation to develop. It is against this kind of grumbling James warns. It’s another take on last week’s lesson on the tongue.

It is odd that James uses the prophets as his example of suffering and patience, when there is the example of Jesus himself who would seemingly come to mind for early Christians. As the writer of the Interpreter’s Bible exegesis, Burton Scott Easton, writes: “How could a Christian writer seeking examples of steadfastness content himself with O.T. prophets and Job, ignoring completely the supreme model of the sufferings and steadfastness of Christ? ... While the writer of Hebrews in his ch.11 likewise draws elaborately on the O.T. in his long list of the heroes of faith, it all leads up to the Christian climax in “Jesus the pioneer and perfecter” (Heb. 12:2) One may also note the contrast between vss. 10-11 and I Pet 2:18-24. The only possible conclusion is that the present section in James was originally written not by a Christian but a Jew; the Christian editor has simply taken over the work of his Jewish predecessor unaltered.” (The Interpreter’s Bible, Vol 12, pp. 67-68)

Whether that hypothesis is the case or not, the wisdom here is undeniable. Patience rather than anger and retaliation are what is counseled. To use the Job analogy, recall his wife’s advice: “**Curse God, and die.**” (Job 2:9) The answer Job ultimately received from God may not have been what he wanted to hear, but it was an answer he would have missed had he not shown the patient wisdom he was known for. In his references to the prophets, James is likely not only thinking of what is in the Old Testament, but also Jewish traditions concerning the prophets. Some of these are described in Hebrews 11:35-38, which describes maltreatment of prophets not found in the Hebrew scriptures.

What James does not address here is that while suffering patiently may be appropriate in the presence of wrongs done to us, it is not necessarily the right response to wrongs done to others. When we seek to defend ourselves, our words and actions can seem self-serving, even when our cause is right. When we seek to defend others, especially when bringing on danger or cost to ourselves, that is a different matter. We are not self-serving, and indeed we are showing our regard for that other, the least of those in our wider family, and for Jesus's mission to seek justice for the oppressed. Not every cause must be your cause. But there is power in speaking on behalf of others, and if that brings consequences, yes, as James would say, those costs must be borne with patience.

The danger, of course, is that someone would generalize that their view of the right is genuinely authoritative, and that anyone opposed is evil. In that way lies danger. Jesus was tempted by the devil with earthly power. As reigning sovereign, Jesus would have had the power to impose righteousness by law and by force. Jesus knew that was not God's way or God's will. So many of the horrors of history have been in the name of supposed good: Fascism was to make government operate efficiently. Communism was supposed to give power to the workers. Theocracies supposedly govern in the name of God. Yet the horrors perpetrated by these regimes have been a devastation. We must be alert for high sounding words hiding as a cloak the desires of "envy, and selfish ambition." We need wisdom.

Prayer: *"Wise and Gracious God, continue to shine your light on the path before us, enabling us to see what matters most and act on that knowledge in your name. Amen."*

I will not be at First Presbyterian Church On this Sunday, August 30, because I will be at Grace Chapel in Bear Creek for the service there. Please give me your prayers for this occasion. As I write this, I'm still wrestling with what I am to say. I trust that God will be with me, but I must say that I'm not feeling as bold and confident as I'd like to be!