

Wisdom from Above is Sincere

James 3:13-17

Pastor Thomas Becker

It's so good to worship the Lord together. Thank you, worship team, for leading us in that. I love that song. We're basically singing what the psalmist wrote. He sought the Lord in the desert in a time of danger, a time of trial. And the Lord heard, and He answered. And based on what he had seen and knew of the Lord, he knew that for the next trial he could trust Him as well. And we certainly go through deserts, and we go through trials, and our God will never fail.

One of the things that we talk about is that we want to be like Jesus. And that's very scriptural. In fact, jumping off of that theme of trials, Paul says part of the reason that we can trust the Lord in time of trial is that we know He is working a good purpose in us. And that good purpose is to conform us more and more to the character; the beautiful, perfect character of His Son Jesus Christ. So we want to be like Jesus. And that means that we indeed rejoice in times of difficulty. One of the things that I want to be like Jesus in is wisdom. That is a regular prayer of mine. It's just astounding how our Savior, as He walked this earth, had the right word at the right time. Was able to answer questions that give answers that penetrated to the heart of the issue and addressed people where they were. That challenged those who needed to be challenged and showed compassion to those who needed to be shown compassion. We want, we need, the wisdom of Jesus Christ.

Well, as you know, because we've been going through it, James has a lot to say to us about wisdom. And he's calling us to be wary of the kind of wisdom that looks good to the world, that seems to make sense because it pushes us forward, it gets us ahead. But it is not the wisdom of Jesus Christ, and it is not Christ-honoring wisdom. And when it is manifest among the family of God, it actually has destructive power. The other kind of wisdom is counterintuitive, but it looks like Jesus. And so if we want to be more like Jesus, we need to be able to discern between these two kinds of wisdom.

We see this in James 3:13-18. We've spent a few weeks in verse 17, and after this morning we'll move on from there. Let's read this together. James 3:13-18: "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. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

The Holy Spirit, leading James in writing these words, wants to cultivate the character of Jesus Christ in us and the wisdom of Jesus Christ in us. And he led James to very carefully construct this hymn to wisdom, this description of wisdom in its various facets and all of its beauty. He starts out with that concept of wisdom being pure, and then linguistically and poetically, he groups words together.

Peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, and now impartial and sincere. These two words are actually--in English they kind of look very different. In James's writing, they are very similar in how they read and in how they sound, united with alliteration and rhyme and sharing a common root. And so these are concepts that go very closely together for James, and we do well to understand them.

1. Definitions

a. Impartial

So the first thing I want to do this morning is just spend a few minutes talking about what those words mean. The words that are translated for us as wisdom being impartial and sincere. Now, if you've been with us for the last nine months, you've heard about impartiality. James has a lot to say about impartiality, and particularly at the beginning of chapter two we talked about not showing partiality. Remember the illustration of a rich person who comes in to worship, and everybody kind of fawns over them. “Oh, wow, look who's here!” And show them the best seat up front and give them special attention. Meanwhile, a poorer brother or sister comes in to worship and they are debased. They are put in a corner. They're not simply ignored, they're actually humiliated, publicly humiliated, simply based on what is seen on the outside. And James says “No!” No partiality, no receiving people based on how they look on the outside. It's not appropriate for the family of God.

Now, one of the things we talked about then, and need to mention again here, is that that word is actually a little complicated to translate. Because James uses it in different ways it has different nuances of meaning. In chapter one, this same word appears, talking about wavering or being ambivalent in our faith. In fact, he's talking about praying for wisdom. So often when we pray for wisdom, we have a decision to make, right? “Lord, I need to make this decision. Give me wisdom.” And then James says, “Believe. Don't doubt. Don't waver in unbelief,” as you are praying and asking the Lord for wisdom.

Now I believe these verses--this is kind of an aside--give us a corrective in our prayer for wisdom. Praying for wisdom is not just about when I need to make an important decision. In this hymn to wisdom James doesn't say anything about making decisions. He's talking about our character, and about how we relate to each other, and how we look at ourselves. And walking daily in wisdom that is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. That's the wisdom that we lack. That's the wisdom that we need to pray for.

But the point here is that that same word of wavering or of being ambivalent is used in different contexts and in different ways. In chapter one, it's used about doubting. In chapter two, it's used about partiality. To understand what's going on at the root, or at the fundamental meaning of this word, we do well to remember that James is very concerned about double-mindedness. He's very concerned about thinking one thing and doing another. Acting one way and talking a different way. And so the concept of double-mindedness comes out throughout the book. It comes out as we've already said, in praying for wisdom. And then instead of trusting, doubting. It comes out when we hear the word, but merely listen and don't do the word.

Remember that later in chapter one it comes out in how we relate to others. Being double-minded in relation to those who are rich versus those who are poor or showing partiality in other ways. It comes out in relation to faith that is a lot of talk, but lacks deeds. In relation to speech that in one instance is praising, and another instance is cursing. It comes out in relation to money: are we devoted to God or are we devoted to our money? So he's constantly challenging us in our thinking not to be double-minded. And he's calling us away from this wavering, from this ambivalence. Wisdom is not wavering and ambivalent.

So here, most likely, he's talking about this general understanding of wisdom not being double-minded, but especially, of course, he's talking about relationships. All of these words about wisdom have to do with how we relate to people and how we relate to ourselves. And so he doesn't want us to show partiality. Wisdom does not waver in those relationships. Impartiality could be described as stability. Consistency in our opinions and actions. And in particular here in our relationships. Not relating one way to some people and a different way to other people.

b. Sincere

It's very closely related to the next word, which is sincere. A literal translation of this word would be "unhypocritical." So I'm going to ask you to make a leap of logic as we put these words together. I'm going to invent a new word. Just want you to see how closely these words are related for James. So sincere is "unhypocritical." Impartial would be

“unambicritical.” Now, that's not a word. Ambicritical isn't really an English word. But think about it. “Ambi” = going one way or the other. “Critical” = judging, thinking in two different ways. If you break down the words here they are that closely connected. Impartial and sincere in English are so far apart. Unhypocritical and unambicritical are very closely related. So what does it mean to be sincere, not to be hypocritical?

1) What sincerity doesn't look like

First of all, we have to get the idea that the image here is being under a mask. To be hypocritical is to live behind a mask. It can be a mask that we want the public to see. It can be a mask that we actually look at a mirror and see ourselves through that mask. It is acting or pretending to be something that we are not. Now masks are fun to wear, right? If you go to a party. We've got a holiday coming up. Some people are going to celebrate, put on masks, pretend to be Batman, right? And that's a lot of fun until somebody starts to say, “I'm Batman. Look at me.” And actually wants you to believe that. You're bordering on dangerous when you live behind that mask and want people to believe the mask instead of what you really are. And you've already crossed the line into dangerous when you begin to believe it yourself.

James says, don't live behind the masks. Don't deceive yourselves. In fact, he mentioned it earlier in this passage. Hey, if you're full of bitter ambition and selfish envy, don't lie about it. Acknowledge it. Recognize it. Jesus had a lot to say about hypocrisy, about the insincerity of the religious leaders of his day. And so we're going to read together Matthew 23:27-28. This is actually in a section where he pronounces seven woes upon the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. This particular one really cuts to the issue. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

As James would learn from his older brother Jesus, hypocrisy comes out in all kinds of ways. When Jesus talks with His followers in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew six and seven, He has a lot to say about hypocrisy. And he points out that it's seen particularly often in several different areas. One would be the matter of giving. The teachers of the law, the religious leaders, the Pharisees of the day, loved to give in public and make sure that everybody saw because it built them up. “Oh, wow, what a sacrificial individual they are. What a generous person they are.” Jesus goes on to talk about hypocrisy being seen in the exercise of spiritual disciplines. This can come out in the exercise of any of the spiritual disciplines. Jesus talks particularly about prayer and fasting. When those who are fasting dress in grubby clothes and they have a long face. “Oh, why are you so tired today?” “Well,

I've been fasting for a week. But God's good." Or praying. Praying to be seen, to be respected, to be honored. Whether it's for the power of the prayers, of the sincerity of the prayers, the length of the prayers, or the repetition of the prayers. And Jesus says, go into your closet and pray. And when you give, don't even let your right hand know what your left is doing. And when you fast, take a shower, put on clean clothes, go out and go about your business because your Father in heaven is the one who sees that.

Then, moving into chapter seven, He has very strong words in a third area of hypocrisy, and that is that of judging others. Two people have a speck in their eye. Now, if you've got a speck in your eye, it looks like a beam, right? But instead of taking care of the speck in your own eye, you go over to the other person and say, "Hey, you got a speck in your eye. Really need to deal with that." And Jesus says, no, no, no, no. Look, first in yourself. The judgmentalism of hypocrisy looks at others while failing to look at oneself.

2) What sincerity looks like

So both of these words are very closely related in how we look at others and how we look at ourselves. What does it mean, then, to be sincere? What does it mean to be unhypocritical as James and as the other authors of Scripture would describe it? It is to be genuine, to be transparent. To be honest with myself and to be honest in how I project myself to others. There are two particular areas in which Paul and Peter and James call us to sincerity, and one is love. Love must be sincere, the apostle Paul says. And that means clinging to what is good, unconditionally loving the good. And that means hating everything that is evil, not allowing our love for God to be tainted by love for the world. Interestingly, Peter says that our faith leads to sincere brotherly and sisterly love. You know, what you share out there in the gathering area, as you're having a cup of coffee and enjoying fellowship with each other. But then he says that that sort of sincere love leads into a deeper love, the sacrificial love that Jesus wants to produce in us.

So love must be sincere, and faith must be sincere. Paul talks about that in particular with his younger disciple, Timothy. And he emphasizes that he knows that Timothy's faith is the real thing. He's not just going through the motions. As James would say, he's not just talking about faith without living out faith. It was seen in his grandmother. It was seen in his mother. And it is seen in Timothy as well. Faith that is the real thing. Totally trusting in Jesus. Totally depending on Jesus. Totally given over to Jesus. So love is sincere and faith is sincere. And if we want to live like Jesus and walk in His wisdom, then our love and faith must be sincere. Both of these words have to do, again, with how we look at things, how we evaluate things. How we evaluate other people, how we evaluate ourselves, and how we want other people to evaluate us. And so we are called to impartiality, and we are called to sincerity.

2. Jesus' sincerity

We see this so much in Jesus's life, and it is so beautiful to see His transparency. Jesus didn't live behind a mask. When Jesus was frustrated at a lack of faith, He said, "How long must I put up with you?" When Jesus was grieved by the lack of faith in Jerusalem, He wept as He rode towards that city. When Jesus was righteously angry, He acted in a godly way. When Jesus was dreading the cross, He didn't hide it from those who were closest to Him. He said to that inner circle of disciples, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow. Can't you please pray with Me for an hour?" He didn't have to hide. There was no shame. Bless the Lord, on His part there was no sin. But there was still all of human experience exactly as we experience it. And He let it be known, and He let it be seen.

We see this in Jesus's love, in His relationships with others. His love for the least. How he sat down at a well with this woman who had been five times divorced and now was living with another man and showed her true worship in spirit and truth. Or when another one was caught in adultery, how He actually got down on the ground, drawing in the soil. We don't even know what it was that He was drawing, but He got down with her and lifted her up. We see it in who He associated with. He was known as a friend of sinners and of the worst of sinners. He went to the tax collector's house, the most despised person in first century Israel, the tax collector. He went into the house to fellowship with them and brought joy with Him. We see it when He touched the lepers and made them clean. Jesus loved the least and was extravagant in demonstrating that love.

On the other hand, it's very clear that He was no respecter of persons. He was either indifferent or silent in dealing with political powers. And in dealing with religious, corrupt religious powers, He was outspoken in His rebuke, drawing their wrath, not their favor. No respecter of persons. Completely transparent and demonstrating His love through His forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Was the manifestation of the reality of the love in His heart. And that same love is demonstrated to you and me. We come today to celebrate, to remember the death of Jesus Christ. Not because He had to. But because He loved us while we were still His enemies. Because He lived out what was in His heart. Because He was willing to follow that to the full extent. "Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the very end." He loved us all the way to the cross. So that's Jesus' example of impartiality and sincerity.

3. Peter's bad example

We have another example in Scripture, one that is also worth looking at, and that is the example of Peter. Peter was a good first-century Hebrew. He knew the law. He followed the

law. He knew the difference between clean and unclean. He would never touch the unclean, and he would do his very best to keep himself clean. Part of that involved never visiting, and never eating with, a Gentile. But here he is praying and he receives a vision: "Get up Peter, kill and eat," with all kinds of impure animals being laid before him. And he's like, "No, Lord, never. I would never eat those things." And Jesus says, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." Then, alongside a vision, a word of prophecy. Some messengers come from Cornelius the Gentile and say, "We were told to come here and find you and bring you to Cornelius." And Peter's beginning to get the idea. So he actually goes to Cornelius' household. He violates all of the norms, all of the traditions, walks into the house of someone who is unclean, fellowships with them. And as soon as he begins speaking the gospel, the Holy Spirit comes down. And Peter says, "Now I know that God does not show favoritism. That He is welcoming the Gentile world into the Gospel." No difference between people, offering salvation to all.

But not long after--we don't know the exact timeline but not long after--when Peter is in the presence of some Gentiles and certain probably powerful Jewish believers come, he withdraws from the Gentile fellowship in order to look respectable to those brothers who have come to see what was going on. He disassociated from the one group out of a desire to please another group. This is what Paul has to say about it. Galatians chapter two, Cephas another word for Peter. Galatians 2:11-14: "When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas [the son of encouragement] was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

And then Paul went on to talk about how the gospel was freely available to all, and salvation made available to all. Peter threw the Gentile believers under the bus out of deference for the powerful. He did exactly the opposite of impartiality and sincerity. He tried to look good by doing one thing with one group and another thing with a different group. And as far as we know--and we'll actually be talking about a little more next week--he repented of this and became a strong advocate for the Gentile believers. I point out this example because I think it's important for us to see. I mean, this is Peter. This is the rock on whom Jesus is going to build the Church. This is the one who stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, and thousands believed, and it was so easy for him to fall into this partiality and insincerity.

Real Christians are sometimes guilty of duplicity and hypocrisy. What stands out as the difference between a Peter, and a Pharisee whom Jesus addressed and condemned? The difference is what you are cultivating and how you respond. Hypocrisy is a conscious, willful contrast between outward appearance and an inward secret life. A conscious, willful contrast between outward appearance and an inward secret life. And when Peter was confronted with that, he turned. He changed. He became an advocate in the very area of weakness. Paul, on the other hand, talks about false teachers in the last days who have an appearance of devotion, but their conscience is seared. There is no conviction. There is no response. There is no change.

Brothers and sisters, we will fall. Until the day when we see Jesus and are actually made like him in His perfections, we will fall. It can be insincerity. It can be all the rest of these wonderful virtues in James 3:17. Purity, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, good fruit. We will fail. How do we respond?

Living sincerely

1) Self-examination

How can we live more like Jesus? Four things in living this out like Jesus did. One thing is to listen to his words about self-examination. “You hypocrite. Deal first with the mote in your own eye.” Self-examination versus judging others. Not denying the truth about ourselves, instead looking deeply into ourselves before looking deeply into others. Do you want to have fun sometime? Take this list in James 3:17 and begin to think about your brothers and sisters in Christ. I can just see James doing it. “Man, those guys who hung out with Jesus. Peter was such a hypocrite. James and John, they were so hot-headed, always putting themselves forward as well. Judas Iscariot, wow, I don't even need to say anything about it.” Thinking about all of them, right? No. First think about yourself. That is beginning to take off the mask. The mask with which we deceive ourselves and seek to deceive others.

2) transparency

Next, exercise transparency. We have so many masks. What is your mask? Is it a secret sin? Do you dread that you might be found out? Is it doubt? Is it long-nursed wounds? Fear? Inadequacy? What are we hiding behind that mask? Our Christian family, our small groups, our morning breakfasts, wherever it might be. Our Christian family is given to us to be a safe place in which we can practice confession. In which we can pray for each other. Release each other and support each other in the journey forward. We can't do it alone. We're not called to do it alone. We are called to self-examination. We are called to transparency.

3) humility

And then we are called to humility in relation to others. If we've really gotten to the root of our own issues, it's really hard to stand in proud, self-satisfied judgment over somebody else, right? As we walk with our brothers and sisters in humility, then we can grow more into the image of Jesus Christ.

4) heart-focused worship

And then the last one has specifically to do with discipleship. Discipleship that is focused only on doing the right things: making sure that you practice these disciplines, that you avoid these certain sins--you can kind of forget about others. But discipleship that is only focused on doing the right things cultivates masks and hypocrisy and false faith. It's why in our children's ministries, for example, we seek to show Jesus to our kids, not good moral lessons about being nice people, but Jesus. Discipleship that's focused on the heart. Because when it comes down to it, all of these characteristics that are described here are characteristics that must be the outflow of the heart. Not a face we wear for Sunday morning or some other occasion, but a nature which becomes manifest in our relationships and in all of our deeds. I want to be like Jesus. I know that you do too. And so we pray for wisdom and we seek to emulate His beautiful character, in particular in our impartiality and in our sincerity.

Lord Jesus. You are the only one who is worthy. You're worthy of praise and thanksgiving, of honor and glory. Not us, not James, not Peter. You alone. We lift You up this morning, to see You in Your beauty and in Your holiness. To honor You. And then to ask You, Lord, to pour out enough grace for today. To make us more like You. Lord, I pray that You would help us when we begin to see within ourselves these areas in which we fall short. To truly be transparent before You and before others. Allowing You to work transformation, grace, forgiveness, love, sanctification, by the power of Your Spirit. Lord, we come now to the table. Thank You that it all begins here with Your demonstration of love. While we were still sinners, while we were still at enmity with you. And so we honor You and we remember You, we celebrate together what You've done. In Jesus name, Amen.