

Wisdom from Above: The Peacemaker

James 3:13-18

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I don't know about you, but I have strong suspicions--and I certainly know for myself--that we live in a day and an age when we need peace, when we long for peace. Could be the last five years, could be the last 15, I don't know where you would put the date when we absolutely lost our ability for civil conversation. And when a sense of overriding stability disappeared. But we're actually raising the youngest generation in an environment in which people actually don't know how to talk with each other about controversial topics, don't know how to disagree with civility.

And we can be keeping in mind the public sphere, or social media, but it overflows. It overflows into the classroom. It overflows into the home. It overflows into youth activities and the younger age group. Of course it's evident in politics. Pretty much every sphere of life is diseased with a lack of peace. The church ought to be a place that is different. And a good question to ask ourselves is: "Is that so?" An interesting question to ask ourselves is not only "Is that so now?" but "Was the church any different even in the day that James was writing?"

So we are finishing up James chapter three this morning, and we're going to go back and read a little bit more than we have been, so that we can see the environment in which James is writing, starting in verse nine of James chapter three.

James 3:9-4:3: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters can a fig tree bear olives or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. 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 raise a harvest of righteousness. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel

and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

I posit to you this morning that it actually wasn't a whole lot different in James's day, and that's because the human heart is the same. And James is talking about issues of the heart that overflow in our conversation and in our relationships. And because we still struggle with the flesh, it is evident not only in the world but also in our homes and in our churches. In this passage that we've been reading together, James' primary emphasis is peace. A lack of peace that is seen in our use of the tongue. A lack of peace that as we go into chapter four we'll see in quarrels and fighting. And the presence of peace in wisdom. Wisdom being the embodiment of peace over and against the biting tongues, the envy and rivalry and quarreling and selfish ambition and divisiveness about which James had been talking.

And what he wants us to understand, what we want to emphasize this morning, is that peace is the soil out of which godliness grows. Peace is the soil out of which godliness grows. I would like you to imagine with me--and it is not too hard to imagine--a contentious congregational meeting. Now, we just had our congregational meeting. It was really funny, I got two comments afterwards from folks who hadn't been to a meeting at Cary Alliance Church before. One was “That was the most peaceful, beautiful spirit. I've never seen a congregational meeting like that before.” The other one was “That was pretty spicy!”

So I guess it depends upon your perspective in a lot of those things. But it is not hard to imagine a contentious congregational meeting. The one that I'm describing to you is actually historical. Leading up to this congregational meeting, there had been a previous very public confrontation, angry words, and the fallout from that public confrontation were ripples not only within that church, but within surrounding churches, because it was a powerful church that had some influence in the whole region of that area. And people taking sides and churches taking sides, such that the historian describes for us sharp dispute and debate taking place leading up to this meeting. The issue was doctrinal in nature, but like most disagreements, there are all kinds of undercurrents, and the undercurrents here were long held biases and prejudices, lots of history and lots of hurt leading up to a very tense meeting.

And at the beginning of this meeting, the first side that began to speak came out with a hardened position. Words like “The other people must do this.” “We require the following actions.” It was a precarious situation, not only for that church, but because this issue had to do with the heart of the gospel, had to do with the witness of the church. The faith of hundreds, even thousands could be shipwrecked by the outcome of that meeting. And so what was needed was a peacemaker.

1. The Work of the Peacemaker

James describes for us in verse 18 of chapter three the peacemaker who sows in peace and raises a harvest of righteousness. So before we talk about the outcome of that meeting, let's talk about the work of the peacemaker. The primary focus that James has in verse 18 is the harvest. It's the fruit, a harvest of righteousness. James actually places that in an emphatic position, the first words of the verse, as he uses the passive voice. The NIV is kind of like my ninth grade grammar teacher: doesn't like the passive voice. One of the things that I have learned is that a sentence written by a student in the passive voice needs to be corrected. A student should write a sentence in the active voice. So the NIV does that for us. But the literal translation, the one that most other translations adopt, is in the passive voice. "A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by the makers of peace."

a. A harvest of righteousness

James wants us to focus on a harvest of righteousness, and it's actually literally "the fruit that is righteousness." The harvest is righteousness. Throughout the book of James, he has drawn our focus to righteous living. He's drawn our focus to the kind of lifestyle that God desires to see in us. One of the strongest places is right here where he has outlined for us, remember? Disorder and every evil practice, selfish ambition, the use of the tongue that he has described, the divisiveness that exists leads to disorder and every evil practice. And instead, James wants us to live out the life of wisdom that is manifested in peace.

If you look back at chapter one, you see a similar dynamic. God desires us to live a righteous life. Therefore, get rid of anger. Get rid of moral filth. Get rid of the evil that is so prevalent so that you can live in godliness. And this has both personal implications for me and for you to live a godly life that is pleasing to God. But it has corporate implications as well. As he is talking to his church and as we exist as the body of Christ, that the fruit of righteousness would flourish among us. Would be evident in our discipleship, would be evident in our children's ministries and in our small groups, and our outreach into the community. James longs for a harvest of righteousness, and in the midst of this conflictful situation that he describes, his driving focus is a manifestation of God's righteousness among His people. Where does that harvest of righteousness come from? It comes out of the soil of peace. A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace.

b. The soil of peace

The thing that we understand about fruit is that it comes from a seed that is sown in productive soil. That's a pretty basic truth. I have a brown spot in my backyard. It's not just a spot, it's about as big as one of these corners here. And it doesn't matter what I do. The only thing that will grow there is dandelions and crabgrass. I'm absolutely serious. Three years

running, I've put down grass seed. This year I decide, you know what? I'm going to give up on the grass seed and plant clover because clover can grow anywhere, right? The clover didn't even grow. The soil is awful. I need to dig down. I need to do fundamental work if that soil is ever going to be productive.

Well, James knows that godliness grows out of productive soil and that the productive soil is peace. A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace. Throughout the New Testament, when you see the expression of something being in peace, it's talking about a state of being. It's talking about an environment in which we exist. Go in peace. So-and-so was sent in peace. A servant was released in peace. People can abide in peace. Things can exist in the state of peace. Peace is such an important concept throughout Scripture.

We've already mentioned in the last few weeks the concept of “shalom.” The state in which everything is right. That is what we came from before sin. That is what we are headed towards. It is what God is restoring for us. When everything is right, when our relationship with God is right, when our relationship with each other is right, our relationship with the world around us, with nature itself, is right. God is restoring that state for us, and we are called to live in that state. And it is out of a state of shalom that godliness is produced in our lives.

So then the question, of course, how's it going? Can we describe our homes? Can we describe our workplace? Can we describe our news feed, our social media interactions, the way we relate to each other in youth group, the way we relate to each other at church, the situation in our own heart and life. Is everything right? Do we have that state of peace out of which godliness grows? One of the commentators who had a significant impact as I was preparing this week is Alec Motyer. And he said, “A harmonious fellowship of believers is the soil out of which grows the whole life that is pleasing to God.” So you can see the theme for this morning in what he had to say.

c. The peacemaker

So we have a harvest of righteousness that is sown in peace by the makers of peace. And so a few words here about the peacemaker. We express it as a noun, as a person. The emphasis is actually the activity: a maker of peace. And it has to do with doing something, with creating something, with producing. We tend to limit in our own thinking this concept of the peacemaker to the matter of reconciliation. And so you have two sides that are at odds, and you have someone who helps to make peace in that conflict situation. That's something that we're emphasizing this morning as we talk about that church meeting that we're going to get back to.

But the idea of a maker of peace is more holistic than helping two parties to reconcile. It is exuding an atmosphere of peace. It is a lifestyle of words and activities in which peace is always present. Have you walked into that household where there is peace? Have you been in a conversation or a time of prayer in which peace reigned? Have you seen the individual who, even in the most tumultuous circumstances, is steady and spreads calm instead of chaos? A maker of peace is a person who demonstrates faith in a time of trial, steadiness when others are wavering, unity when divisiveness is rising, peace when everything in life seems to be tending towards chaos.

I'm reminded in this particular moment of the disciples in the boat as they are crossing the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus is asleep. And the wind and the waves come up, the storm is raging about them. The disciples are terrified, fear for their very lives, and they wake up this guy who's just sleeping and say, "Don't you care?" And he stands up. And in that whole situation, simply says, "Peace, be still." And the waves calm and the winds quiet, and the cries are silenced and the hearts are calmed. And Jesus calls us not only to specific situations where we put things together, but to a life of creating peace in our environments. Again: at home, in the workplace, in church, and everywhere in which we find ourselves.

2. Peace in the early church

So how do we see this peace that we've described--or really only begun to describe--at work in the early church? Because maybe some of you realize that the situation that I was describing to you was a situation in the early church in the book of Acts, the preliminary meeting in which there was the sharp dispute and angry words we talked about last week. It's when Peter is in Antioch with Paul, and some people who want every Christian to live according to Jewish law come up to Antioch, and Peter suddenly withdraws. He separates himself from fellowshiping with the non-Jewish believers, putting on a pretense for the sake of those who had come. And Paul confronts him directly and says, "What are you doing? You know that God has brought the Gentiles into the church. You know that he's creating one new body. Why are you hypocritically withdrawing yourselves and leading others astray?"

a. The Jerusalem Council

That wasn't just in the Antioch church. A teaching was spreading among the churches that anybody who was not Jewish and wanted to become a believer needed to submit to the whole Law of Moses. They needed basically to become Jewish before they could become Christian. And as the rumblings are spreading through the church, everybody gathers in Jerusalem. You have Acts chapter 15. We don't have the opportunity this morning to do a

whole sermon on Acts chapter 15. But as all the bigwigs and the representatives from the different churches gather, as everybody is there in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15, you have the Judaizing group first stand up and say the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to live according to the law of Moses. But then you have Peter and Paul. And so we've seen that Peter actually accepted that rebuke and correction. You have Peter and Paul who stand up and begin to describe what God has been doing among the Gentiles, and how He has poured out the Holy Spirit on the non-Jewish church and is clearly at work among them.

So on the one side, you have this very firm position. On the other side, you have evidence of God's working and then you have, after each has had the opportunity to speak, a wise leader, a moderator who stands up and says: God is clearly at work. We have heard these stories. What Peter and Paul have described actually lines up with Scripture. This is what the Scriptures say about God pouring out His Spirit on all people. At the same time we recognize that there are significant points in the Law of Moses that are practiced throughout the whole known believing world. So here is what we should do. And he proposes a compromise. He says there's some fundamental things about idolatry and sexual immorality and pagan practices that should not exist within our churches. But let's not place a burden that we ourselves haven't been able to bear, the burden of the whole law. This is an age of grace and of the gospel, and everyone agreed.

And the decision was recorded and a letter was sent out to report back to the churches the decision that had been made. And what was the fruit? What was the result? Acts 15:33 tells us that after spending some time there, the messengers who took that letter were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. And the gospel continued powerfully. And you and I, the majority of whom do not have Jewish backgrounds, are believers, know the gospel, belong to Jesus Christ because of the decision that was made in Jerusalem that day, that allowed the gospel to spread through the known world under the direction and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the one church that He had created through Jesus Christ.

Now, you might be interested to know that that wise moderator who stood up and brought that meeting to a place of order and unity and consensus, was James. The very same James who wrote these words. And the same Spirit Who worked through James in Acts chapter 15, breathes out these words not only to the churches of that day, but to our church as well. 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, and peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. James wants to tell us, the Holy Spirit through James is communicating to us that wisdom is embodied in peace versus the bitterness,

envy, divisiveness, and selfish ambition that was so prevalent in his day and in our day as well.

b. Elements of wisdom manifest in peacemaking

-Peace-loving

And in his work of peacemaking in Acts chapter 15, we can actually see several of the elements of wisdom that he wrote about at work. We could go through all of them, I just want to underscore four of them. The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all, peace-loving. James loved peace. He valued peace. He considered peace to be worth gathering everybody together and going through the hard labor of conducting that meeting in which there were such strong feelings and such diametrically opposing positions. He didn't simply pronounce peace. He was a maker of peace.

James knows the difference between fake peace and real peace. In James chapter two, he tells us about a person without clothes or daily food, who is at the church meeting, and somebody says to him, go in peace, be warm and well fed, but does absolutely nothing to create peace for that needy individual. That is a fake kind of peace: speaking it but doing nothing to create it. But then here in chapter three, he's talking about things that are actually really hard to do. The wisdom that he describes in daily practice is difficult, but in living it out, he's creating a peace that he loves and longs for because it is worth it.

-Considerate

So he's peace-loving. The decision that was made in Acts chapter 15 is the embodiment of considerate. You remember as we looked at that word considerate, we recognize that it is practicing compassionate forbearance towards the weaknesses of others. Not demanding the letter of the law or full justice, but practicing mercy or forbearance. Do you remember that phrase that we talked about in Acts 15? "Why would we place on the shoulders of the Gentiles a burden that we ourselves have not been able to bear?" Recognizing their own weakness and inability, out of consideration for the weakness and inability of their Gentile brothers and sisters, they came to a decision that was considerate. They didn't say we had to do it, they should have to do it as well. They didn't say the law demands it, it's only fair. How much mercy can we extend? How gracious and understanding can we be as we make this decision together?

-Submissive

And then submissive. If you remember, as we talked about that idea of submissive, it means given to agreeableness, given to compromise, subordinating what I think is important to what somebody else thinks is important. Well, how about the humbleness or

the humility and the agreeableness of the words that they wrote in their letter in Acts 15? “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to require anything beyond the following.” Completely emptied of I know what is right and I demand it. The words that the meeting started out with: the Gentiles must, they should be required; had turned into, I think this is what the Holy Spirit is telling us. This is what we ourselves have been able to agree upon. We have come to the following consensus. Nobody got exactly what they wanted. Everybody had to give something up, but they valued the progress of the gospel and the unity of the church more than they valued their particular position. They submitted to each other out of reverence for Christ.

-Impartial

And then, of course, impartial. The racial overtones of that argument hearken back to centuries of conflict and of hatred between Jew and Gentile and the decision that they made brought together the two into one body, rather than continuing the division between the two sides. In that situation, in whatever the situation is that James is addressing in chapter three of his book, in whatever situation we might live in these days, there is so much that tends toward division and disharmony. And James labored to keep the opposing sides together in Christ. The Holy Spirit through James turned a contentious situation characterized by defense of self can turn an entrenched partisanship into peaceable, productive relationships. Peace is the soil out of which godliness grows.

3. Being a Peacemaker

So what, then, does it mean in this context to be a peacemaker? Whole seminars are done on what it means to be a peacemaker, but looking at this context, let's talk for a minute about the process of sanctification and the practice of wisdom. We've seen a couple of examples of how James's peacemaking activity manifested the wisdom that he had described in the previous verse. I actually can't say it any better than that same commentator, Alec Motyer. So I have a very long quote that I'd like to read to you right now on the peaceable ways of wisdom. And as I read this, see if you can pick out those elements of wisdom: pure, peace, loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

“If peace is to be achieved, and if peace is to be kept, then there is the need to be gentle. Tolerantly, though not weakly accepting of the other person, graciously amenable, yielding whenever yielding is possible, rather than standing up for one's rights and reinforcing this, willing to yield. Not necessarily easily persuaded, but certainly ready to be persuaded. And also able to gain, that is, able to win the consent of others. And just as the mercy of God is

moved by our plight, so that His love finds free reign to pour grace on unworthy wretched sinners, so the wisdom from on high inculcates a spirit of mercy to the fullest. We live with one another in a full consciousness of others' neediness and helplessness. We are therefore ready to forgive as He has forgiven us, ready to welcome as He has welcomed us, ready to be to them in all things what He has proved Himself to us. Furthermore, all of this must come from the heart. This is not a face that we wear for the occasion, but a nature which we display in our deeds without a trace of partiality, meaning that we are not in two minds about it all, but single-minded in our pursuit of wisdom."

A. Sanctification and the practice of wisdom

There's so much there. That's why we've chosen to spend the last several weeks on it. And in seeking to live out the principles of James 3:17, in a life that cultivates peace, we should do the same things that we do in every aspect of our sanctification. First of all, pray. Daily submitting ourselves to the Holy Spirit, asking Him to fill us, to control us, and to live out within us these things that He has described. I highly recommend memorizing this hymn to wisdom. We're not going to be able to remember it in the moment if we don't have it hidden deeply in our hearts. Take the time to memorize James 3:17-18 and pray through it daily. Meditate on it. What does it mean to be pure? What does it mean to be peace-loving? What does it mean to be considerate and submissive? How can I have a life full of mercy and good fruit? How can I be impartial and sincere? Only as we memorize it, meditate on it, pray about it, constantly remind ourselves of it. Examine ourselves to see where our life contrasts with what we are preaching to ourselves. Calling ourselves to correction, being corrected by the Holy Spirit and by each other. His word is powerful to work sanctification in us. Let us submit ourselves to His Word, in prayer and in accountability. So that is a little bit about a personal cultivation of peace.

c. The active production of peace

And then an active pursuit of peace, cultivating shalom not only in our own hearts but in our relationships, valuing peace enough to overcome our reticence. So many of us, particularly in a southern culture, complicate it even more by who knows what kind of background. We flee from situations of disagreement rather than actively overcoming our reticence and cultivating peace. I personally am so grateful for a recent example of a brother who absolutely hated the situation that he was put in, but came in between and helped me and someone else to begin to recognize some issues and to come to peace. We don't want to do it. But we need to fight the inclinations against peacemaking for the sake of some sort of fake peace, and work together on the soil that produces godliness.

-This is not easy

And a couple of final thoughts in this regard I think you've already seen, I just want to emphasize it is not easy, and history tells us it is not easy. Acts chapter 15 is a beautiful story of the church coming together and making peace and a harvest of righteousness. And do you know how Acts chapter 15 ends? It ends with Paul and Barnabas disputing about John, Mark and their dispute becoming so sharp that they part ways, and it is only years down the road that that situation finally comes back together. Sometimes the godliness of believers can't make it work. It is not easy, but it is worth pursuing.

-This is very important

It is not easy, but it is important. I want to say that again, a harmonious fellowship of believers is the soil out of which grows the whole life that is pleasing to God. Discipleship happens in a peaceable place, and so it is worth pursuing in our homes, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, in our interactions with others, and in our church.

-This is lacking

But I think it's important to acknowledge that it is often lacking. We live in this culture in which it is so much easier just to gloss it over, rather than to deal with the issues that create the soil that leads to an abundant harvest of righteousness. We're going to spend some time on this this year. I don't know exactly what format it's going to be. I don't know if it's going to be a Sunday school class or a seminar, a sermon series, but we are going to spend some time on this as a church family learning something that is important, that is hard but is worth pursuing because we want to see that harvest of righteousness. The fundamentals are already here. Let's memorize that passage and pray that passage and live out that passage. But also look for opportunities to take the next steps. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the sufficiency of Your Word. That what You have given us by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit is all that we need for life and godliness. Thank You that within Your Word You described for us this very difficult situation that the Antiochian Church and the Jerusalem Church was going through. Thank You even that You gave us the example of Paul and Barnabas, and how hard it was for them to find peace, and how You eventually brought them back together. It helps us to know that this is not theoretical doctrine. That the study of Your word is about day-to-day living. It really is about a life that is pleasing to You, and a harvest of righteousness. Those are things that we long for. And so Lord, I pray that You would take these very feeble words, and then by the power of Your Holy Spirit, You would plant them deeply in our hearts and in our minds. And that we would be good soil, faithful, humble, listening to You. Do Your work in our own hearts, Lord. Bring repentance where it is needed. Manifest love where it is lacking. And oh, Heavenly Father,

bring a harvest, an abundant harvest, of righteousness for Your glory and for the sake of Your kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.