

James 3:13-18
The Meekness of Wisdom

People of God, In our passage today James is going to talk to us about Wisdom. He contrasts for us two kinds of wisdom: Earthly Wisdom, And Heavenly Wisdom.

Wisdom is given by God so that kings and rulers might govern and rule well according to the ways of God in Heaven.

Proverbs 8:15-16 says: *By wisdom kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by wisdom princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.*

Jesus Christ is the High King of Heaven and He rules over Heaven and Earth by His wisdom. But as members of His Church, we participate in that reign as well. The Church reigns with Jesus, and our ruling and reigning with him is going to change the world. We are told in fact to pray believing that God's kingdom comes to earth as it is in Heaven.

Now Jesus also told us that "It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." But many Christians are eager, and impatient to see the outward manifestations of that kingdom be revealed quicker than when God has chosen to reveal those changes. So they try to make God's kingdom come on Earth sooner through zealotry and political ambition.

The church has victoriously faced down the enemies of Christ over the past 2000 years. They keep trying to kill us,

they keep trying to eradicate us, but the church is still here. Every single one of Christ's enemies is being progressively put under his feet. With each passing generation, Christ defeats his enemies.

But sometimes Christians are tempted to stop looking to Christ as the object of their faith, and we instead get fixated on the enemies of Christ. In the name of expanding Christ's kingdom, in the name of implementing the righteousness of God on earth, and promoting the crown rights of King Jesus, Christians can end up focusing too much on what the enemy is doing instead, rather than patiently trusting what Christ is doing.

We see the horrible ways they are corrupting the children, destroying nature, subverting nations, persecuting Christians, corrupting the church, and ruining people's lives. And because we see stories of that, and we see more evidence of that than we see the imperceptible growth of the Christ's wise rule, our hearts become filled with bitter anger and wrath.

And so, we stop fighting the good fight the way Jesus taught us to fight. We end up becoming impatient, and we end up adopting the tactics of the world, the flesh, and the devil in order to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Being filled with bitter anger and wrath, impatience and zealotry we begin attack our enemies as they have been

attacking us. We get into a form of mimetic rivalry with the world, and end up looking exactly like them.

That is exactly what the Jews of Jesus' day did. Israel was filled with various political factions which were all striving for power and control of the kingdom over against Rome. There was the one group of Jews who were known as the Zealots. And they sought to gain power for Israel over against Rome through political violence. The main way they sought change was through assassins and insurrectionists. The Zealots were the people who were frequently at the center of much of the political chaos of the day.

But it wasn't only the Zealots who were well practiced in political violence. Even the Jewish establishment regularly engaged in acts of zealotry as well. In Acts 5:17, for example, we are told that *"the High Priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with zealotry, they arrested the apostles and put them in public prison."*

In Philippians 3:6 Paul speaks of himself before his conversion to Christ saying, *"as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church."*

Whenever the NT uses the word zeal, and zealotry it is referring to the kind of behavior that uses outward displays of violence and force in order to get political results.

This is the earthly wisdom that James warns about, which he says is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. It is Zealotry. Our English bibles have poorly translated it as jealousy, but in Greek it is the word is zeal, *zealos*.

The other word James uses to describe this earthly demonic wisdom is selfish ambition. This word is used throughout Aristotle's writings to describe political ambition – the narrow, partisan zeal of those people who are seeking power and control. It also derived from the word which means to work as a mercenary. Thus it is translated selfish ambition.

So James is warning his readers against the temptation of trying to selfishly and forcibly effect social change through the use of violence. He is warning them about trying to bring in the righteous kingdom of God on earth through aggressive, violent political scheming that characterized the Jews of his day. That form of Zealotry is unspiritual, and demonic.

And where zealotry and political ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. The word 'disorder' is used to describe the tumult of insurrection and riots which Jesus spoke of in Luke 21 to describe the violent signs that precede the destruction of Jerusalem. And these tumults refer specifically to the actions of the Zealots who fought

against the Romans, and which inevitably lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD.

James warns his readers about this kind of political zealotry and violent behavior precisely because that is the kind of activity some of the people in the church were engaged in. And why were they engaged in this kind of behavior?

Remember, James was written during the early persecution that arose after the stoning of Stephen. Christians were being dispersed from their homes, men and women were being killed, imprisoned, and tortured for the cause of Christ.

But instead of focusing their faith on Christ, instead of being patient and praying through the trials, praying for their enemies, the leaders began to focus more on the actions of the enemy. And when you focus more on what the enemy is doing, and stop focusing on Christ, bitter anger, and wrath will set in.

And apparently there were Pastors and teachers who were filled with bitter anger, zeal, fanaticism, and selfish political ambition, and they were using their tongues, preaching angry hate-filled bitter sermons and messages to incite the members of the churches to commit violence and murder against their persecutors.

This of course was the mindset of the Zealots. And this was the mindset of the Jewish establishment as it came to the

Christians. And this was increasingly becoming the mindset of the these early Christians who were tired of being persecuted, tired of being kicked out of their land. Tired of being falsely accused. They were grieved that their loved ones had been unjustly killed and imprisoned, and they had no practical ways to respond to their plight. They felt absolutely helpless. So they took to violence. They took to anger. They took to Zealotry.

So James writes his letter to rebukes these pastors for responding to their persecutions with the same kind of zealous tactics and behaviors which was being used by their persecutors.

Using violence and political rivalry and bitter zealotry is not how Christians are taught to reign with Christ on the earth. That is Earthly Wisdom. And James says it is unspiritual and demonic.

We are taught to respond to the reality of persecution and political exile in a different way. In the way of Heavenly Wisdom – which James calls the Meekness of Wisdom.

And yet one of the temptations, I think, which afflicts zealous young men today is to want to respond to the politics of the day, the politics that are against them, their families, their friends, their church, the whole created order, and their whole way of life, with a sense of zealous anger and violence.

Now some may think that my concern is unfounded, because we have not yet actually seen any violence from Christians. Yet. But I think that the political turmoil we are in today has filled the room with explosive fumes. And all it takes is just one spark to ignite whole thing and watch it all go Ka-Bloo-ey.

So, I think that Pastors and Teachers ought to be a bit more careful using their words in these treacherous waters. Thy need to steer the ship of the church with the rudder of the tongue away from anything that could be construed as encouraging Christians to commit acts of violence, for that will ship wreck the church.

I think that there is a real danger for angry disenfranchised Christians to take the bait and engage in political violence, all in the name of advancing the righteous kingdom of God. They are consumed with anger about the situation in which they find themselves, they are not looking to Christ, they are filling their hearts and minds with thoughts about the evil deeds of the wicked, and they can easily be tempted to take the bait and get violent. Don't take the bait.

And so, as we Christians find ourselves on the outside of political power and social influence in America, I want to warn you to not respond to this situation with worldly, unspiritual, and demonic wisdom, that calls for violence. I

want you to guard your hearts against the deceptive allure of anger. We need to be very careful about saying things that might encourage Christians to commit acts of violence in the name of the King Jesus. I might lose some cool points with some people here, but as I think more about it, a pastor who says that he wants to crush his enemies, is exactly the kind of rhetoric that James is warning us about. How easy do you think something like that could be interpreted by foolish ignorant and immature men to justify vigilante violence.

In 1994 a man named Paul Hill murdered an abortion doctor and his escort. Hill shot the two men in the face with a shot gun and killed them as he was standing outside of the abortion clinic. He believed that Christians were to forcibly put a stop to evil, even committing violence if necessary.

Recently another man who has a podcast that is growing in popularity wrote an article on why it is necessary and good for Christians to kill abortion doctors in order to stop the evil.

We must be careful not to give the Paul Hill's of this world the verbal ammunition they need to encourage them to commit acts of violence in the name of stopping evil.

Also, if we are not careful about the words we speak, they could be used by bad actors who commit an evil act and

blame it on the church because a pastor was caught saying something like, I want to crush my enemies. And then the church really comes under persecution, because we could be considered a terrorist organization.

And we must not say things that can give some enemy of the church the idea to commit a crime and then blame it on Christians.

We need to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

So, how are we to act when we find ourselves in this kind of position that the early church was in, when we are without earthly power and influence, when we are marginalized and oppressed, when we are persecuted and hated by all men for Christ's sake? The way we are supposed to act, and the way that we win, is by being peaceful and meek.

As James says, "By his good conduct let him show his good works in the meekness of wisdom." Meekness, remember, is waiting for God to act. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Meekness means not taking vengeance into your own hands, but patiently calling upon and waiting for God to act. Meekness is waiting for God to judge the wicked in His timing, and to bring relief to his poor righteous people.

This is what Jesus and James encourage us to be like in a day like ours which is becoming more increasingly like the days in which they lived. Let us demonstrate our good works in the meekness of wisdom.

Let us not give ourselves over to the sinful temptation to respond to evil with evil. Let us be careful to consider the potential consequences of using our tongues to say things like “I want to crush my enemies.”

We ought not be encouraged to physically harm people, as though we were civil magistrates who wield the sword. There is no room in the Church for Christian vigilantism. We are to be people who make peace, and who live in patient meekness, waiting for God to establish the kingdom according to his timing.

The righteousness of God’s kingdom that we long to see in the world, and which Christ promised to give us, does not come through bitter zealotry and political ambition. Rather, it comes through the meekness of wisdom and through sowing peace. As James says, “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

You cannot reap a harvest of righteousness by sowing violence, anger, bitter political rivalry and zealotry. It will not happen. Because what ends up happening is that the bitterness that you have in your hearts towards your

enemies ends up spilling over into your relationships with others.

Bitter rivalry does not stay in the box marked ‘politics.’ It creeps into everything else, and it will affect every single one of your relationships. Bitter zealotry and political rivalry makes us dehumanize others. We put other people into the category which allows us to not think of them as human, as not being worthy of mercy or grace. The political left has been talking about the political right in our nation like that for quite a while. And when we become fanatics for the cause, the cause becomes the most important thing. And people only ever get in the way of the cause.

In the movie Forrest Gump, Jenny brings Forrest to a Black Panther party, and her boyfriend Wesley ends up slapping Jenny in the face. Of course Forrest being the good man he is, comes to the rescue and beats up Wesley. The next day Wesley “apologizes” to Jenny for hitting her blaming his outburst on the Vietnam war and the lying son of a gun Johnson, referring to the President.

What this illustration is meant to show is that when you so focus on the evil deeds of your enemy, you end up dehumanizing them, because you become filled with fear about what you think the enemy will do. And fear turns

quickly into anger. And when fear gives way to anger you get turned into the very evil you think you are resisting.

Fear is the chief emotion the devil is occupied with, for when we are filled with fear, it is then we are most easily given to hatred, bitter zealotry, political rivalry, and selfish ambition that characterizes the demonic horde. And your demonic anger will spread like fire to everyone in your life, bringing destruction, misery, and wrath.

Why do you think the San Francisco Gay Men's choir made that video that told us Christians that they are coming for our children? Because the devil and the demonic want us to fear, so that we give ourselves over more easily to anger and bitter rivalry and zealotry.

But your wrath will not be satisfied only by targeting your political enemy. A person who is not governed by meekness, a person who does not make peace, will extend that demonic enmity and strife to their spouse, children, family, pastor, and fellow Christians.

Such a person, being filled with fear and anger of what will be if the enemy wins, gives their heart over to the demonic, and learns to love conflict for the sake of conflict. And all love becomes corrupt, and all enjoyment of the good is replaced by a demonic hatred and rebellion. Words are no longer spoken to give life, but words become tools which we use to tear people down.

People like this are quick to quarrel and fight and argue and sin against others. And they will also be quick to justify themselves and excuse their behavior like Wesley in Forrest Gump, blaming someone else for their problem, because they had allowed the evil of the enemy's sins to fill their heart more than the love of Jesus.

As Christians, we need to be extremely careful therefore about responding to the hostile political climate with angry rhetoric and angry hearts, focusing primarily on our enemies, instead of on Christ. Because it will consume everything in us. And like the forest that is set ablaze by such a small fire, our whole church can go up in an instant, if we give heed to the foolish and angry rhetoric of teachers who encourage us to crush our enemies.

As James says, ¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.* ¹⁵ *This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* ¹⁶ *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.* ¹⁷ *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.* ¹⁸ *And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Amen.*