

Sermon for November 13 2005

War and Peace

James 3.13-18

This morning we are taking time to Remember. We are remembering those who gave their lives in the wars of the twentieth century, with special consideration given to those who fought in World Wars One and Two and the Korean War. We are also remembering all those, who as members of the Canadian Armed Forces have served and continue to serve our country. Thirdly we are remembering all those who have suffered as civilians because of what they experienced in the throes of conflict. These are men, woman and children who experienced the death of loved ones, the fear of night bombs as they lived with the intense uncertainty of what tomorrow would bring.

These acts of remembrance are ones that we recall year by year. But they are not what I want to concentrate on this morning. I want us to remember how the events of the twentieth century illustrated in such a vivid way how great is the conflict between good and evil, war and peace, between the devil and God. Because of the brutality and sophistication of the crimes committed and because of the numbers of those who were treated so viciously, the question has been raised repeatedly "If God is loving how could he allow these atrocities to happen? If God is powerful, how come he seem so weak in the face of such malevolent states and leaders?"

As people have tried to make sense of where God has been in the face of such horror, conclusions reached have included:

- God is not loving
- God is not all powerful
- The Devil is all powerful
- There is no God
- There has to be some other explanation

This morning I want to focus on the other explanation by looking at a passage from James chapter three. These five verses help us to see that it is only in light of the conflict between:

evil and good,

the world, the flesh and the devil

on one hand, and

the kingdom of heaven, the Spirit and Jesus

on the other hand that we can understand how God was present in the

- Horror and hope
- Defeat and victory
- Fear and courage
- Selfishness and sacrifice

that marked these times of great challenge. These verses also give insight into how God is present with us in our current times of struggle between war and peace.

So let's turn to the passage now. It is a text that with an economy of words articulates with clarity what makes for war and what makes for peace. Let me read the passage again. As you hear it read notice how verses 14 - 16 speak of a way that can lead to war and verses 17 and 18 speak of a way that lead to peace.

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 first 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.

James begins at verse 13 by posing the question about how shall we live? Given the choice that presents itself to us daily we are invited to embody the life of one who chooses to sow peace. I like the way this verse is paraphrased in the Message:

13 Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts."

Here James wants us to think about the kind of reputation we are building. When people think about you, what kind of a person do they see? What will you be remembered for? In verses 17 and 18 he will list the virtues that can help us to live as those who are truly wise.

I find it worth noting that having said what he does in verse 13 that James doesn't launch into listing the seven virtues of verse 17. Why is this? I want to suggest it is because he knows that to live wisely is profoundly difficult. To live sowing peace is a challenge because those who live by the world's rules have a different mandate. Psalm 121 puts it like this:

5 I'm doomed to live in Meshech, cursed with a home in Kedar, 6 My whole life lived camping among quarreling neighbors. 7 I'm all for peace, but the minute I tell them so, they go to war!

What the Psalm and James both caution us to remember is to live wisely will be a great challenge. This is because we live in Meshech and Kedar. These were two territories in Old Testament times that surrounded Israel that could care less about God. As a result, even though the psalmist says he values peace, what they want is war.

As we look at verses 14-16 we see described the soul at war with God, which in turn leads to war, conflict and turmoil at the interpersonal and societal levels.

The warring soul is characterized by two phrases that are destructive to life and well being.

James refers to **bitter envy and selfish ambition**. - Bitter envy and selfish ambition are vices that seduce us to want our own way regardless of how it affects others. These vices stem from an acrid heart guided by covetousness bent on doing whatever it must to get its own way. In the process it does not care how bitter it makes the lives of others.

I have heard stories from people who have shared with me the horrors of having been sexually abused, starting at a very young age. Here are people who were the victims of adults who were determined to have their own way sexual perversions satisfied that they would do whatever it took to feed this lust and ambition. As a result these little ones had bitterness fill their lives at a time they were to learn what it means to trust. We can also think of the vulnerable victims of war who suffered at the hands of despots, who in forcing their own way made the lives of millions bitter.

Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition come from a heart that is centered on self.

Such people are boastful and arrogant, false against the truth. James is saying that when people live like this they are being boastful and arrogant towards God and his truth and so they have rejected true wisdom.

James identifies this so-called wisdom in 3 ways:

1. It is Earthly" - It is tied to this earth and the things associated with it. Paul contrasted the "**wisdom of the world**" (1 Cor. 1:20,21; 2:5,6) with the "**wisdom of God**" (1 Cor. 1:24; 2:7).

2. It is "Unspiritual or Natural" This adjective is used five times in the New Testament, always in reference to that which is in opposition to the spiritual (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; 15:44 [two times]; Jude 1:19). It is man or woman living apart from the work of God.

3. It is "Demonic" This wisdom is demonic in character; that is, it is the kind of wisdom demons have and is produced by them. In 3.6 James speaks of the influence of this demonic wisdom in how it governs the tongue.

"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

These closely parallel the three problem areas that are described as

- The World - Earthly
- The Flesh - Natural
- The Devil - Demonic

A heart filled with jealousy and ambition produces problems of many kinds. In verse 16 he uses one word **Disorder** as a catch all to describe this. The word not only means "disorder," but also "disturbance," "trouble," "instability." The self-centeredness of the person or state apart from God produces all kinds of turmoil and confusion. The adjective form of this noun was used in James 1:8 and 3:8.

James 1.8 he is a *double-minded man*, unstable in all he does.

James 3.8 but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of *deadly* poison.

James concludes that every evil thing is the by-product of this kind of wisdom. - Things which are worthless, bad, evil, and base are produced by this wisdom.

Instead of bringing people together, it drives them apart. Instead of producing peace, it produces strife. Instead of producing a fellowship, it produces a disruption in personal relationship. . . . It is a sobering thing to remember that the wisdom that that person possesses is devilish rather than divine, and that such a one is engaged on Satan's work and not on God's work" (Barclay).

It is only when we have James' perspective that we can begin to understand why the twentieth century was filled with such strife such conflict. A time when every evil thing resulted from people motivated by bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Having presented to us the wisdom that is from below, James concludes this chapter by turning to a consideration of the wisdom that is from above. True wisdom begins with, and centers in, God and His Son Jesus Christ: "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24).

The wisdom from above is a reference to the wisdom that God gives. This wisdom is generously given to all who ask as James has already established for us in chapter 1, verses 5 and 17.

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

So how does James describe the wisdom that is from above?

1. It is pure:

This wisdom is undefiled and free from the corruption that characterizes ungodly wisdom. It is free from selfishness and the determination to have one's own way. This describes both the condition of the heart and the manifestation of that condition in behavior. This is another quality of Christ produces in the heart and life of His children

By being listed **first**, this quality is set apart from those that follow. This is the foremost and basic characteristic of the wisdom that God gives. Proverbs 1-9 speak extensively of God's wisdom as pure. He is a passage from chapter 2.

10 For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. 11 Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. 12 Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, 13 who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways, 14 who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, 15 whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways. 16 It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words. (Proverbs 2.10-16).

2. It is Peaceable - The wisdom that God gives produces peace among people, not strife. Worldly wisdom brings disorder, strife and conflict (James 3.16). Where God's wisdom is operating, there is freedom from strife and conflict.

One writer noted that this means God's wisdom "never starts quarrels, strife, dissension, and turbulence." The Scripture puts strong emphasis on peace as a characteristic of the believer, not just personally, but also in all of his or her relationships.

This characteristic is of utmost importance and will be stressed again by James in verse 18.

3. It is Gentle: This word is somewhat difficult to translate into English. Some suggested meanings are: "considerate in the demands it makes upon others," "not insisting on strict rights," "willing to yield." The world places a strong emphasis on personal rights and the demanding of those rights. God's wisdom gives a willingness to yield our rights and give way to another.

4. It is Willing to Yield or Reasonable - In many ways, this word is similar in its emphasis to the preceding one. The preceding word often referred to someone in a superior position, while this word speaks of a person in an inferior position. The word carries the idea of "obedience" or "willing to yield." It is the opposite of obstinate or disobedient. God's wisdom gives a readiness to obey or yield to another.

5 It is full of mercy - The idea here goes beyond feelings to actions. This is compassion that moves a person to act or aid the other person. This is true even when the person in trouble has brought it upon himself. We serve a God who is rich in mercy (cf. Eph. 2:4; 1 Pet. 1:3). His mercy is to characterize us in our dealings with others as James 2:13 articulates clearly.

13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

5. It results in Good fruits - This may indicate either the actions that flow from mercy or the actions carried out in meeting the needs of the other person. This stands in sharp contrast to the wisdom of the world that produces every evil thing (v. 16).

6. It is Unwavering There is no vacillation or instability in the wisdom that God gives.

7. It is without hypocrisy - The wisdom that God gives produces sincerity and honesty. There is no attempt to play a role or pretend to be what we are not (cf. Rom. 12:9; 1 Pet. 1:22).

The picture that emerges here is that the wisdom which God gives is characterized by love for others. It involves taking the attention off of ourselves and placing it upon the other person.

In verse 18 James concludes by stating that righteousness is produced in an environment of peace by those who promote peace. The key idea in this verse is to contrast peace with the disorder mentioned in verse 16.

The seed that will produce righteousness in the life is sown in peace by those who are peacemakers. These are the ones who have wisdom from above. Peace does not exist in the context of hearts that are full of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

As sinful human beings we have hearts that are full of selfish ambition and the determination to have our own way. We are occupied with ourselves in pride and stubbornness.

Only God can change the heart and make us new on the inside. It is by faith in Jesus Christ and His death for our sins that we can have forgiveness and be given new hearts. As God's children we must be careful that we are not allowing the world to influence our thinking and conduct. The flesh always wants to emphasize self and selfish goals. And it is very powerful indeed. And it will often seem that it is more powerful than the wisdom of God.

This is why we are to consciously seek wisdom from God and submit ourselves to His Word so that we can function with wisdom from above. The result will be righteousness in the life and allow us to live as those who are choosing to sow peace as we produce a harvest of righteousness.