

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 30, 2012
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

James 3:13-18

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his 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, of the devil. 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.

There is a parable about two boys. The first boy was foolish and very selfish, while the other boy was wise and shared with everyone. The first boy had a bag of beautiful marbles in which he took great pride. However, he never let anyone play with these marbles; he wouldn't even play with them. The only time he took them out of the bag was to count them, admire them, or brag to others about them. He carried that bag of marbles with him wherever he went.

The second boy really wanted to have such a bag filled with marbles. So this boy worked hard and earned money, but only earned enough to buy the marble bag. He took special care of this bag and dreamed of the day it would contain marbles with which he could play and share with all his friends.

The selfish boy who didn't share also did not take very good care of the bag which held his precious marbles and one day it developed a hole in the bottom seam. He paid no attention and, one by one, the marbles fell out of the bag. Meanwhile the second boy began to find marble after beautiful marble lying unnoticed on the ground. He added them one by one and in no time at all he had a fine bag full of marbles. The boy played with the marbles and shared them with everyone and enjoyed them with many friends. He always took care of that special bag so he wouldn't lose any.

And what about the foolish boy? Because he was careless and so selfish, he lost all his marbles and was left holding the bag.

This parable is told to teach a simple lesson about selfishness and to maybe get a few laughs. Yet, selfishness is not a laughing matter. It is not a laughing matter because selfishness creates so many problems and it is evident all around us. Selfishness is not a laughing matter because it is a sin that I see all too often in myself. Selfishness is something that causes much trouble in the world, at the workplace, in our homes, and even in God's church. James writes: ***“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”*** That is why we so desperately need wisdom from above. We need the wisdom and understanding that only comes from the Holy Spirit. We need a faith in the Lord Jesus that expresses itself in love. As James makes these points so well may we listen to this Word of God and consider how:

Wisdom that comes from heaven brings selflessness not selfishness.

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” This question James asks is one that cuts right to the conscience. James wants these words to be personal for each one

who hears them. How is wisdom and understanding evident in your life? There are two very much different kinds of wisdom. There is the wisdom that says you have to do whatever you can and it doesn't matter who you have to step on or over to get to the top. After all, this is a dog eat dog world. It is all about me, myself and I, right? Winners are put on pedestals and losers are left in the dust. Bitter envy and selfish ambition come with the territory of trying to get ahead in the world. Pastor James has seen it far too often as people even boast about how they trample on others to get what they want.

Where does this wisdom, which really is not wisdom at all, come from? ***“Such wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.*** This kind of attitude and thinking comes from what is sometimes referred to as the unholy trinity. Such selfishness stems from the corrupt world, our own sinful flesh, and is of the evil one, the devil. All three teach us it is all about ourselves. This kind of wisdom brings disorder and every evil practice. Cheating and deceiving to gain a promotion, people lying and gossiping about others to try to make themselves look better, stealing and slander, fighting and fraud, mayhem and murder, are all sins that can result from such bitter envy and selfish ambition. Selfishness is sadly accepted as wisdom.

While the world says this is just the way it is, and our sinful flesh desires and keeps trying to get what it wants, and the devil keeps putting these kind of alluring temptations before our eyes, God tells this wisdom comes not from heaven but is sin. And again this is sin that I find too often in myself. I see it every time I put myself ahead of my own wife and children. I see it when I am more concerned about doing what I want instead of what God wants. I see this selfishness when I do not love my neighbors nearly as much as I love myself. This sin is evident any time we try to take advantage of another person. Think of how the devil can use selfishness to disrupt a church of believers who are supposed to be working together for a common good. ***“Who is wise and understanding among you?”***

Thankfully, there is another kind of wisdom. Who is wise and understanding? James writes: ***“Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”*** James says let those who are wise show it by how they live, by doing good. Let those who are wise show it by deeds done with humility or it could be translated gentleness or meekness that comes from this wisdom. That word has the idea of being a prince in a kingdom which all the power and rights, but is a prince who does not necessarily exercise all those rights. A word that comes to mind is selflessness, the opposite of selfishness.

I can't go on without mentioning here the most selfless one of all, the true wisdom that comes from heaven, our Savior Jesus. True selflessness is leaving a throne of heaven for a cradle bed. True selflessness is true God becoming a servant who comes to live under the law. Selflessness is seen in a perfect life that always put others first, in the One who was always serving instead of being served, in Jesus who never failed to love anyone as much as, even more than, He loved himself. Selflessness is the prince of heaven and earth willing to wear a crown of thorns instead of the crown of gold He deserved. The most amazing selflessness is seen as we look to Christ's cross. There Jesus took on Himself every bit of my sinful selfishness. That is why Jesus bleeds and dies there – to pay for my sin. Jesus, in the most selfless act of all, gives up His life to save yours and mine. Jesus never had a selfish me first attitude but instead served and served all the way

to the cross, all the way to hell and back just for us! Now we are princes and princesses who have every right and privilege in God's kingdom.

Consider Him who came from heaven for us as we now read these words. "***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.***" Dear friends, to be wise and understanding is to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus! This is wisdom which comes from heaven. Only the Holy Spirit can give us pure hearts – hearts that have no additives mixed into them – hearts that love with no ulterior motives. Only the Holy Spirit can work in us an attitude that gives in for the sake of others, that puts others ahead of ourselves, that even is willing to be stepped on once in a while, that is considerate, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Only God through His Word is able to give us true selflessness – a Christian attitude that is not a façade but real. When the Holy Spirit works such love, such an attitude, such selflessness in our lives will we not stick out in this world? James says we will. Will not others see this wisdom? James says they will.

We know and understand that our good lives and deeds do not earn us heaven nor can they save anyone else. Only Jesus did and does that! But we want to be selfless and not selfish, to love and serve and to have our lives attract others, because we have something to share with them far greater than a bag of marbles. We want others to have with us the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus. I want others to experience the peace and joy that I have. For God's grace in Christ loves me despite my selfishness. It does more than that – it forgives me all my sins of selfishness and teaches me true selflessness. Now that's wisdom from comes from heaven! What a wonderful feeling it is to know that in the end, because of Jesus, it will be only the devil left holding the bag. Amen.