

“Dying to the Obsessive Compulsive Love of Self”

James 3:13-18

May 31, 2020 – Evening Service

Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

James 3:13-18

“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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let's pray.

I. We love ourselves

A. We have the need to create an identity for ourselves.

Do you remember the first time you started caring about how you looked?

At some point in our childhood, we become aware of how we carry ourselves and how people see us. We realize that intelligence, behavior, and hygiene matter. We start to look at ourselves more and more in the mirror and begin to care about what we wear.

Slowly we start to realize that how we look and how we present ourselves matters. Our words, our education and the clothes we wear tell people a story about who we are.

So we begin to adjust ourselves to the image we want to look like and the image we want to present of ourselves.

Even today it is true of us. If you have had to move to online work and Zoom video conference calls, you have probably noticed that prominent on the screen is an image of you. Zoom knows that we want to know how we look to those that are looking at us. And though we can turn that feature off, few of us will. We value seeing ourselves and we care about how we look for other people.

And we are not only concerned about our appearance. We are also very invested in our identity – in who we are. We want people to think we are wise and understanding. The last thing we want to be seen as is a fool.

One of the problems with our obsessions with ourselves is that we can become all consumed with our effort to make ourselves the ideal person that we want to be. We can spend hours improving ourselves so that we look better and better.

According to a report in 2016 from Research and Markets, the U.S. self-help industry has grown to a \$9.9 billion dollar industry. Apparently, we are actually pretty obsessed with bettering ourselves and being great. We want to be seen as wise and understanding, and we boast about how intelligent we are.

But God is clear about what he thinks about boasting in self.

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man **boast in his wisdom**, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, **24 but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.**” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

The Lord calls us to boast in him, and in who he is. This is what he delights in.

James is also aware of the human tendency to want to frame one's self in the best light possible, and so he explains in vv. 13-15 of this passage that wisdom isn't something that you can fake. It is far deeper than words or actions. When you boast in your wisdom and abilities, you are demonstrating that your wisdom is no wisdom at all. James explains in v. 13 that wisdom is seen in humility and in your life.

In other words, wisdom is not boastful. It does not declare itself. Wisdom is *seen* in the life of the humble and selfless person.

Scripture is riddled with examples of people who boasted wisdom and understanding, but fell short.

We think of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went up to pray in the temple.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Lk. 18)

In this story, like many others, one of the men seemed to have his life together and prayed eloquently, fasted and tithed. However, Jesus points out that he was only deceiving himself. He was no repentant man; he was not wise, but a fool.

The humble man, who beat his chest, acknowledging that he was nothing before God is the one who is exalted. He goes away justified. He is the wise man and it shows in his prayer and in his humility.

Our context

Stories like these are riddled throughout Scripture and they aren't too different than what we find today.

In our very own church many of us would consider our ways pure and right. Many of us would feel like we could point out examples of how we are much more mature than other Christians. We might know our doctrine better than others. We might consider our lives in contrast to other's lives and think pretty highly of how far we have come.

Prov. 16:5 says, "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit."

This proverb should make us stop and think and analyze ourselves. Do we think our ways are pure? Could we be wrong? When the Lord weighs our spirit, what does he find?

Consider your life. Is your life a self-centered life? Do you have a spirit of arrogance and pride when you consider your understanding?

How does our wisdom manifest itself? Do we use our wisdom to help people who are struggling, or are we more prone to demonstrate our superiority? Does our wisdom push people down under us or do we use it to lift people up?

Like crabs in a bucket, all trying to come out on top by crawling over each other, it is easy to use our abilities to push others down to come out on top.

Much like the tongue, knowledge can be used for good or for evil. Our tongue can be an extension of our wisdom or lack thereof. The way we use our knowledge and rhetoric can be for God's glory or for our own advantage. We can use it to control and manipulate or leverage something from others. There are many disorderly and vile practices we can participate in, all while feeling like we are wise.

James explains that the type of wisdom that is used for personal benefit is not the wisdom from above. That is an earthly wisdom. It is unspiritual and James drives it home by saying it is even demonic, because it does not serve God's purposes, but the purposes of Satan.

When we use wisdom and knowledge for our own self-aggrandizement, rather than for the glory of God, we are feeding the idol of self. We are focused on the temporal, the here and now, to build ourselves up as if this is all there is to life. This is the earthly wisdom that our society identifies as wisdom.

True wisdom is living life for that which is to come. True wisdom is understanding that everything in this world is temporary. There will be a new heavens and a new earth. We must start living now toward that future hope.

II. Jesus calls us to leave everything

In Genesis 11, the story of the tower of Babel is recounted: it reads, "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and **let us make a name for ourselves....**'" We then read that the Lord, in judgment upon them, confuses their languages and their efforts and scatters them.

On Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and what many theologians consider a reversal of the judgment of Babel. Rather than one language becoming many, the Holy Spirit is poured out on God's people so that everyone can hear the Gospel in his own language. People from all nations can hear the good news of the gospel – that Jesus has come to rescue us from our sins and from ourselves.

It is no surprise that this gift given to us has been taken for granted. Though the gospel has reached beyond the nation of Israel to include those outside of Israel into the fold of God, we are still intent on making a name for ourselves.

Nations around the globe are building impressive skyscrapers, beautiful buildings and cities that boast their greatness; armies, medical systems, government systems and technologies that baffle many of us. Even today, we still want to make our names great.

This current pandemic in many ways has crippled man's greatest accomplishments and brought them to a full stop. Enormous buildings and stadiums around the world, that cost millions of dollars to build, sit empty and are largely useless with the health concerns that have plagued the world.

In ways similar to the tower of Babel, I cannot help but see how God is bringing us to our knees and making us take our eyes off of ourselves and our glory. He is making us stop and see how foolish our "wisdom" and our accomplishments really are.

If this is our modern-day Babel, may we take it to heart. May we stop seeking a name for ourselves and glory in God's wisdom and his understanding.

This is what the Christian life is all about. It is about dying to self and glorying in God.

Reflect on the order of our morning services here at FPC. Each service is God-centered; it doesn't not revolve around us, but rather around God's glory and his provision for us. He calls us to worship, we praise him, we pray to him, we confess to him, he pardons us, we hear his word, we are blessed by him. He causes us to stop and realize that he is the center of our world, not us.

What change do we think occurs the minute we leave church? Church doesn't change who we are as his children. No! Everything must still remain God-centered.

You see, Jesus has called us to leave everything that we have in this world. In all of the book of Matthew we see the repeated themes of laying down one's life and dying to self.

Jesus called Peter, James and John, and the Scriptures say, "Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." They immediately abandoned their careers as fishermen to follow Jesus. They died to self.

In Scripture, Jesus is constantly communicating the need to die to self, to love enemies, to be willing to lose a limb for the sake of holiness, and to serve others before self.

He is all about the total destruction of self. He is intent on the destruction of our identity apart from him. That is the call of the gospel.

If we stop to consider those people we know, or those we read about in Scripture, the ones we most love are those who most loved and followed Jesus. We love John, because he humbly and quietly followed Jesus.

We love Stephen because he selflessly preached from his love of Jesus as he was about to be stoned to death. We love reading of the martyrs in Scripture and the men and women of faith in Heb. 11, because these people gave up everything to follow Jesus. They were selfless.

It was Jesus who shone through them. It is Jesus that we see when we think of them.

Think back to Stephen. What do we really know about him? Not that much...except that he was so in love with his Savior that we love his story.

Why do we love to read Paul's writings? Because he talks about Jesus. In his writing he elaborates and paints beautiful pictures of Jesus' love for us and God's grace toward us.

Why is the story of the thief on the cross, the forgiven tax collector and the wayward woman so dear to us? Because in their stories, we see Jesus' love shine brightly. They literally had nothing to offer. They knew they were hopeless and rested entirely on Jesus' forgiveness and grace.

That is wisdom – not glorying in our accomplishments or wisdom, but in God. Not boasting in our wisdom but in the beauty of the Lord and his infinite wisdom.

III. Being filled with Wisdom from Above

So how can we be filled with the wisdom that James describes as coming "from above"? I think the show Hoarders can give us some insight.

Many of you might have seen the TV series called Hoarders. If you haven't, I'll explain it with this description by the author Brent Furdyk:

"A&E's Hoarders is one of a few television series that are so addictive yet so painful to watch. Since the show's 2009 debut, Hoarders has brought viewers into the horrendous houses of people whose obsessions with stuff has overtaken their homes and their lives. Hoarders is definitely not a show for the squeamish; The New York Times Magazine described Hoarders as "routinely repulsive, harrowing and unnerving." ¹

One of the most addictive aspects of the show is being shocked to see how the hoarders on the show seem to be completely oblivious to their situation. Their obsessive compulsion to

¹ Read More: <https://www.thelist.com/186250/the-untold-truth-of-hoarders/>

hoard what we would consider garbage has taken over their lives to the point that it is creating enormous health hazards.

The goal of the show is to help these people see that they don't need the things they have been collecting, and that they can throw out and let go of all their possessions – but it is easier said than done. Even with professional psychologists and organizers and teams of workers, they cannot convince many of the hoarders of their problems. They don't see the issue. They value their “things” too much.

And much like the show Hoarders, we have an obsessive-compulsive disorder to hoard things for ourselves as well. We cling to the wisdom of this world. We place our confidence in ourselves and our accomplishments. We hoard wisdom and knowledge and try to build a stockpile of worldly treasures to make us feel secure.

But the reality is that our stockpile is made up of perishable goods. They are all fleeting treasures that not only will not last, but are harmful to us.

And we need a complete heart change. We need to see that everything that we are clinging to is garbage. It is harmful and worthless.

In our morning devotionals, which I would really encourage you to watch on Tuesday and Friday mornings, I am going through the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. Paul's intro. to the fruits of the spirit is very similar to James and Jesus' teaching. He says,

Gal. 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 *For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*

Paul argues that if you want to fight off the desires of the flesh, it is necessary to be filled with the fruits of the spirit. So it stands to reason that if the desires of our flesh find room in our hearts, because they are unoccupied by the fruits of the spirit, those evil desires will move in and take residence. They will fill your heart and your passions.

This is why the Word does not only call us to die to self, but also calls us to exhibit and develop the fruits of the spirit, which are essentially what James outlines here in this passage.

Wisdom from God comes from a spirit of meekness. It requires of us a life that is pure and devoted first and foremost to God's glory, to seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness to the exclusion of our own.

This is the first and one of the most important aspects of finding freedom from our obsessive-compulsive disorder to hoard things for ourselves.

We must seek God's righteousness, not ours.

When we speak to others – be it our family, parents, spouses, children, co-workers or employees, we will exhibit wisdom if we are seeking God’s glory and not our own.

Just think about it. If you are rebuking someone, how will that interaction change if you are seeking God’s glory above your own? I know that for me, that would change everything. I would exhibit a lot more patience, gentleness, and mercy.

As we face difficult moments every day, and disagree with those around us, everything changes if we are seeking God’s glory above all else. Rather than sarcasm, snarkiness or slander, we seek to be reasonable, impartial and sincere. We show love and humility in our demeanor.

If we allow the desires of the flesh to pile up in our homes, there is simply no room for that which is good. We cannot have two masters – one will always overcome the other.

So if we compartmentalize our lives and allow for a way of life in one “room” of our lives – be it the work place, the home, school or church, but we expect that not to run over into the other rooms of our lives, we are severely mistaken.

Whichever master is greater in your heart will fill your house and life with its treasures.

I knew a dear pastor friend who had pastored for over 30 years. He was well respected in the community and at church. But then some people in his church saw one of his racist messages he had posted on a Facebook forum. What he thought was a private post was set to public, and it spilled into his public life and his legacy was ruined.

Brothers and sisters, this is hard for us to understand. We cannot compartmentalize. How we live in one area of life will absolutely affect other areas of our lives. How you live on the internet, how you live in your text messages, on your calls, on your TV, in your family and at work, are not as compartmentalized as you think. They all spill over into the other rooms.

This is why Jesus doesn’t call us to reduce the passions of the flesh, but to kill them. This is why we cannot act one way on the internet and another way at church, why we cannot act one way with our spouses and another way with our co-workers. It all spills over.

James calls us to glorify God with our lives – not ourselves – and we do that by being sincere. He calls us to humility, peace and good fruits that bring glory to God in all areas of life. All the fruits he mentions are conduits to that end, all things that bring glory to God.

Bearing peace is all about humility and dying to self.

Being gentle is all about being secure in God, trusting in his time and not pressuring others to see your way, or to impose your desires.

Being open to reason means that we are humble and teachable, willing to trust in God's wisdom and not feeling the need to prove our own, being humble enough to let others speak into our lives and not shutting them down because it is uncomfortable.

Being full of mercy means not growing bitter with wrath, jealousy and anger when we are so over this time of quarantine and just want to pull our overgrown hair out.

He call us to be impartial and sincere, bearing good fruits – all these things and the ones already mentioned are traits that we see in Jesus. They are qualities of a God-centered and God-glorifying person. They are the fruits of wisdom that we are called to!

And Jesus is our example par-excellence. But more than an example, he is our life.

Galatians 2:20 reminds us that we have been crucified with Christ. **“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”**

You see, he who calls us to die to self lived by example. He died to self to such a great degree that he gave up himself on the cross, that we might live.

For we too must die to self, so that Christ might live in us.

When we die to self, we live to Christ. When we live like Christ, and cling not to the desires of the flesh, but to the fruit of the Spirit, we exhibit the greatest wisdom we can find in this world.

This is true wisdom: to give up that which we cannot keep, to gain in Christ that which we will never lose.²

To Conclude:

If we seek to find wisdom and understanding in this life, we must understand that, before anything else, wisdom is found in the tearing down of our compulsion to love ourselves. Jesus calls us to die to self, that he might be glorified in us – that he might live in us.

May we crowd out the desires of our flesh, and live in the humility of wisdom by pursuing the fruits of the spirit, that we might find in these fruits the wisdom, righteousness and glory of God.

Amen.

² Jim Elliot, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”