

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Know-It-All”
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Proverbs 31:10-31, James 3:13-4:3

He had the good life. Everything you could want. Money, fame, power. Even family and friends. But he wanted more. He wanted what he couldn't have. He stole, cheated, broke hearts, broke up his family, ruined his career.

Who am I talking about? Take your pick. This isn't an unfamiliar story. We've heard it dozens of times. From preachers to politicians, entrepreneurs to actors. This story gets played out on the public stage over and over again.

We have put these people on pedestals and in positions of power supposedly because they have the wisdom to lead, or the wisdom to govern, or the wisdom to guide. And we are disappointed to discover that, as James says, “bitter envy and selfish ambition” has led them to “be boastful and false to the truth” leading to “disorder and wickedness of every kind.”

We watch these events unfold like a bad car wreck. It's a horrific sight, the downfall of this great person, but we can't look away. We stare and think, “How could they?” They should have known better. They had the good life, and they threw it all away.

But perhaps it calls us to reflect upon what we consider to be the good life.

For most of us, the good life would be defined as having enough – enough money, enough love, enough security, enough comfort. But how much is enough? If we define the good life around what we possess, there is always the danger of wanting more, a danger James takes very seriously. This letter claims that if we want what we do not have, we will commit murder. This is not an outside possibility or a slippery slope. This is simple cause and effect.

Now, while most of us here would have to admit that, from time to time, we want something and don't have it, we aren't going around murdering people. That absurd!

Well, I hate to tell you friends, but there is more than one way to skin a cat. No, we don't kill our neighbor and move into their house. We don't kill our business partner and take over operations. Despite the sensationalism surrounding the occasional occurrence of such things, this is not the norm in our society.

But people die to make our coffee and our chocolate. People die producing our clothes and cell phones and cheap plastic everything. Do we murder them in cold blood? Of course not. But do they die so that we can have what we want at the price we want to pay? Absolutely. There's really no getting around it.

We can argue about trade agreements and corporate tax structures. We can deliberate the necessities of a global economy. We can remain blissfully ignorant to the working conditions of those around the world who fill our insatiable need for more stuff. But it doesn't change the fact that James is right. After 2,000 years of civilized development, we are no better and no different. We still possess and love this earthly wisdom that leads us to want more and better stuff, to want what we don't have. And there is still a straightforward link of cause and effect between covetousness and murder. We can point the finger at corporations or governments, but in the end, the blame falls squarely on each of us who are willing to pay for things that are made in unjust and unsafe working conditions.

These are not terribly popular ideas. And by association, James is not a very popular book of the bible. How many of you have read or studied the book of James before this sermon series?

Not many of you. There's a reason for that. James is bossy. That's all there is to it. Of the 108 verses in this short book, exactly half of them are imperatives. None of us would sit and listen to someone who spent half our time together telling us what to do. James doesn't seem to understand that people don't particularly like being told what to do.

Oddly, we seem to have no problem with being the ones telling other people what to do. Or at least talking about what we think other people should do. Because, let's face it, we have great ideas. We are smart people. We're brilliant, just ask us.

This might be another manifestation of what James describes as "earthly wisdom," this "unspiritual, devilish" wisdom. Because this is a wisdom that plays a zero-sum game: in order for me to be right, you must be wrong. And because of our "envy and selfish ambition," we are driven to be right, to be better, smarter, more successful than others. If we know it all, everyone else knows nothing, so our place on top of the dog pile is secure.

By contrast, wisdom from above is "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." Most of these traits won't show up in any books or blogs or lists on how to get ahead in the world. We are a know-it-all society. In the information age, it's all about what you know, who you know, how quickly you can know it.

Unfortunately, most of these characteristics of heavenly wisdom won't show up in any list describing what people think about the Christian church today, either. Our purity, or a better translation might be "holiness," has been corrupted by a desire for material success. Our peace has been disrupted by numerous disputes about doctrine and polity. Gentleness has been overshadowed by pride. People on all sides of any debate have been unyielding, leading to schisms. Instead of showing mercy, we give criticism. Our good fruit is dwindling more and more each year. And one of the top descriptors used by younger generations to describe the church today is "hypocritical."

If it makes us feel any better, these were things that the Christians James was addressing clearly struggled with as well. We are not alone in our failure to possess the wisdom from above.

But we are also not without hope. James tells us that “You do not have, because you do not ask.

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.”

The good life is still within reach, and God desires to provide us with wisdom from above. So how do we ask? And how do we ask rightly?

First, we must understand that, for James, wisdom is a verb, not a noun. Wisdom is a way of living, not an intellectual accomplishment. We can know the doctrine of the Trinity, but does that move us to live more deeply and richly in relationship with God and neighbor? We can know the doctrine of the electing grace of God, but does comfort and gratitude then move us to embrace serving God and others in the world?

In defining wisdom as a way of life rather than a base of knowledge, James stands firmly in the Jewish tradition from which Christianity originated. Judaism has a rich wisdom tradition, ranging from Proverbs like the one we heard this morning to the preacher of Ecclesiastes, from the Wisdom of Solomon to the Psalms of David. One thing that is common amongst all this wisdom literature, including the book of James, is that they tell people what to do, not what to think.

And Jesus, the good Jew that he was, follows suit. His words meant action. He taught in parables to help people see the real-life application of theology before they even understood what he was talking about. He told people to love God and neighbor, to care for the poor, the outcast, and the prisoner, to give of their whole selves to God and live in a way that was, and is, radically counter-cultural.

So we must first ask for the right thing, and that is, of course, not a thing at all. Instead of asking to have things – be it enough wealth and security or enough knowledge and power - we must instead ask God to orient our hearts and our lives to do the right things.

Then, we must have the courage to actually ask for this. This is really the more difficult part. There is a very good reason why Paul says that proclaiming the good news of a crucified Christ will be seen as foolishness. Pay more for what you buy every day because it encourages companies to pay a fair wage and provide a better life for people you will never meet. Foolishness. Worry more about how rich and joyful and true your worship of God is than about how many people are in the pews and how much money is in the church coffers. Foolishness. Really listen to someone who disagrees with your point of view, and tell them where you think they’re right rather than where you think they’ve gone wrong. Foolishness. Admit it when you’re wrong and acknowledge your fallibility. Foolishness.

This foolishness is the wisdom out of which the good life flows. Not an achievement of goods or an achievement of intellect. Instead, a harvest of righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace. A life of goodness born from doing good things, day in and day out. A life of small acts of kindness, everyday choices, consideration for others that all add up to the good life.

The good life awaits us, friends. May we have the wisdom and courage to ask for it. Amen.