

“*AUTHENTIC: Fake News*”

James 3:13-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 7, 2017

English is such a strange language. People whose native language is something other than English frequently have a hard time learning English. As an example, when we were in seminary we became very good friends with a family from Beijing, China. June, who spoke no English when she arrived, was taking English classes a couple of times a week and often struggled. But one day, well into her studies, she was excited to share with us that she had learned a new English phrase – “fed up.” June had discovered that being “fed up” had nothing to do with being fed or being up. And she thought it was hilarious.

Idioms – like “fed up” – can be difficult to understand. Sometimes, though, they can be very funny. Why do we park on driveways but drive on parkways? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat? In English we have something called an oxymoron, which is a figure of speech containing words that seem to contradict one another. For example, jumbo shrimp or freezer burn or one of my favorites, partially completed.

There’s another oxymoron that we’ve heard a lot about lately – “fake news.” The definition of news is the account or reporting of a recent event. To be news it must be true. Therefore if it’s fake, it’s not news. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference.

This morning’s passage is about wisdom. In English, a wise man and a wise guy are not the same thing. James tells us that there are two kinds of wisdom, earthly human wisdom and the wisdom from above, godly wisdom. But the truth is that only one of them is wisdom. There is fake wisdom and real wisdom. James begins by asking, “do some of you think you’re wise and understanding?” Some scholars suggest that James has particular teachers or preachers in mind, possibly some who seem to have all the answers or who love to show how much they know. It’s possible that some of them were

preaching and teaching in order to get rich by taking advantage of people. So James points to them and says, “that’s fake news.” It’s not words that indicate wisdom but actions. “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his *good conduct* let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” By the way, meek doesn’t mean timid or weak. It means a gentle spirit, a mild disposition. It indicates someone who isn’t easily angered or frustrated. James says that wisdom is demonstrated by calmly living a beautiful life.

James then explains what fake wisdom looks like. He says, “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.” He calls this kind of thinking earthly, unspiritual, and even demonic. Here’s the thing. What he’s describing is often referred to as “conventional wisdom.” Our culture says you have to look out for number one. If you don’t take care of yourself first, no one else will. You have to decide what you want and then pursue that with everything you’ve got. If you have to work long hours, neglecting your family and your faith, then that’s the price of success. This lifestyle is often referred to as grabbing the bull by the horns. Ironically, if you’ve ever been to a rodeo you are probably aware that unless your goal is pain, grabbing a bull by the horns probably won’t produce the results you want. That’s lousy advice, even for a metaphor.

James explains the problem. “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” If all that matters in life is what I want, then I will do whatever it takes to get it, even if I have to take it from you. At the root of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are things like pride and greed. If every one of us is thinking and acting that way, there will be not only disorder but probably violence. James rightly calls that evil or demonic. Envy and selfishness will always damage and often destroy a relationship.

Marriages fail because one or both of the spouses feel that they aren't getting what they deserve from the relationship. Churches collapse when people criticize or speak harshly or insist on their own way.

After this stern warning, James then points us to genuine, godly wisdom by describing seven characteristics. "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." Each of these characteristics should describe us as individual followers of Jesus but they should also describe our common life together as the church, the Body of Christ and a family of believers. As we discuss each one, ask yourself, "How am I doing with that?"

James says that true wisdom is first pure. Kent Hughes, in his commentary, points out that there are two ways to understand purity and they both apply here. Godly wisdom is "pure in the sense of being undefiled – morally pure." This kind of purity certainly includes putting away things like jealousy and selfish ambition. But the standard is even higher. It means without fault. You and I are painfully aware that we are unable to meet that standard on our own. But as Hughes says, "This purity comes when one has been cleansed by Christ's blood, who is himself pure." When we surrender our lives to Christ, we receive His purity in return.

The other kind of purity that James intends is what we could call "devotional purity." The idea here is that you are pure in your focus on God. You concentrate on serving Him. In Matthew 6 Jesus said, "do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But *seek first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

The second characteristic is "peaceable." The idea here is that deep sense of peace and well-being that comes from being at peace with

God. It's the idea behind the Hebrew word *shalom*. This kind of inner peace is the result of trusting God with all things, knowing that He is in control. Most of all, it's the peace that comes from knowing that your sins are forgiven. The person with that kind of inner peace then works to bring peace into others' lives, living out Paul's instruction in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

The third characteristic describes the wise person as "gentle." Some translations use the word "considerate" or "kind." When someone offends you, do you become defensive or do you consider what might be going on in his life that you don't know about? In other words, are you quick to give up your right to be offended in order to bring peace?

The fourth characteristic is "open to reason" or "reasonable." Are you willing to accept that you might be wrong? Can you be persuaded? In the Bible, the opposite of reasonable is foolish.

Fifth, James says that the truly wise person is "full of mercy and good fruits." As we saw at the beginning of this passage, wisdom is not revealed in our words but in our actions. We can measure our wisdom by our service to other people. Mercy necessarily involves compassion but it's "compassion in action."

The sixth characteristic is "impartial." I think a better translation would be "unwavering" or "steady." If you are wise you do not keep changing what you believe when you're around different people. True wisdom means knowing the truth and keeping it.

And finally, James says that godly wisdom is "sincere." This literally means "without hypocrisy." Jesus was always sincere with the people he met. He never pretended to be anything he wasn't. He was always confident in who he is. As followers of Jesus we can be confident in our identity because we are confident in Jesus' identity, which means we can always be genuine in our relationships and interactions with other people.

James has made it clear that if we reject worldly, false wisdom that leads to conflict and embrace heavenly, true wisdom, that we will be surrounded by peace. Verse 18 gives us a brief description of what our life will be like: “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” J.I. Packer says that many people think godly wisdom is like going into the control room of a railroad and getting a clear understanding of the purpose of all the movements of the different trains. They think that wisdom will help them to understand God’s plan for their life. But he says that real wisdom is more like learning to drive a car. He says, “When driving it is important to make appropriate responses to the constantly changing scene, to exercise soundness of

judgment regarding speed, distance and braking. You simply try to see and do the right thing in the actual situation that presents itself. The effect of divine wisdom is to enable you and me to do just that in the actual situations of life.”

James says that applying godly wisdom to each situation in life is like planting seeds in a field. When we do it over and over again, we will end up with a “harvest of righteousness.” As we sow seeds of peace or wholeness as we go through life, we will find ourselves surrounded by an abundance of peace – in our lives and in our church.

Amen.