

CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER CHECKLIST

James 3:13-18

Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

INTRODUCTION

A seasoned pastor once asked a young minister who was a recent college graduate what he believed about the Bible. "Why, I believe all the Bible," he replied. "Don't you?" "I wish I could say I believed all the Bible," the older minister wisely replied, "because I would live a lot differently if I did." This mature pastor sought to impress a vital point upon the heart of the fresh ministerial recruit: It's a lot easier to *learn* what the Bible teaches than to *live* as the Bible teaches.

Today's text makes this same point. "Who is wise and has understanding among you?" James asks. "He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness." James here restates what he emphasized in **2:17**: "In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself." We could paraphrase James by saying, "Faith (what we say we believe about the Lord) that cannot be demonstrated by our conduct is dead faith." The Greek word for "conduct" is most interesting. It's from a root meaning "to turn back" or "to turn oneself around." Which Christian doctrine prescribes we must "turn around" in how we live? Repentance. In essence, the "conduct" James refers to is "a lifestyle of demonstrated repentance." We prove Christ's presence in our lives by a lifestyle that puts our Lord's character on display. True repentance is not like the man who sent the IRS a check for \$150 for cheating on his tax returns. A note was attached to his check: "If I still can't sleep at night, I'll send you the rest." We demonstrate **Jesus** has truly "turned us around" from living to please ourselves by now seeking to live in a manner that truly pleases the Lord. A former drunkard shared his testimony during a preaching service held in a park. A skeptic passing by heard him testify how **Jesus** had saved him miraculously not only from sin but also from the demons of alcoholism. The skeptic scoffed to those near him, "This is nothing more than a dream, claiming religion has changed him like this; it's just a mere dream and nothing more." A 10-year-old girl, who'd known the misery of living in a drunkard's home, then spoke to him. "Please, sir, if it is only a dream, please don't wake him. That is my daddy!"

Pentecostal minister and writer Dr. F.E. Marsh (1858-1931) once spoke in a church upon the importance of confession of sin and restitution for wrong done others whenever possible. A young church member came to him afterwards. He said, "You have put me in a bad fix. I've stolen from my employer, and I'm ashamed to tell him about it. You see, I'm a boat builder, and the man I work for is an unbeliever. I have often talked to him about Christ, but he only laughs at me. In my work, expensive copper nails are used because they won't rust in water. I've been taking some home for a boat I am building in my backyard. I'm afraid if I tell my boss what I've done and offer to pay for them, he'll think I'm a hypocrite and I'll never be able to reach him for Christ. Yet those copper nails are digging into my conscience." Weeks passed while he wrestled with what to do. Finally, when he saw Dr. Marsh again, he exclaimed, "I've settled that matter and I'm so relieved!" "What happened when you told your boss?" asked Dr. Marsh. "Oh, he looked at me intently and said, 'George, I've always thought you were a hypocrite, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe there's something to your Christianity after all. Any religion that makes a man admit he's been stealing a few copper nails and offer to settle for them must be worth having.'"

Today we are focusing upon character qualities we should display if we claim a saving relationship with **Jesus Christ**. Our two Outline points are A Satanic Checklist and A Christ-like Checklist.

I. A SATANIC CHECKLIST (James 3:14-16)

Many misbehaviors, like the boat builder's theft of his boss's copper nails, undermine our Christian testimony and make us better ambassadors of Satan than we are of **Jesus** (perish the thought)! James cites examples of such misbehavior in **vss. 14-16**. Let's reread them: "But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth.¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.¹⁶ For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil."

"Bitter envy" is best understood as "bitter jealousy." It's a preoccupation with the correctness of our opinion or a desire to promote ourselves that makes us resentful of sharing credit or attention with others. Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47) was a German-born child prodigy. He composed a handful of operas and 11 symphonies as a youth. As a composer, pianist, and musical conductor, he became one of the most-celebrated musicians of his era prior to his early death at age 36. He once visited the cathedral at Fribourg, Switzerland. Hearing its great organ, he went into the loft asking to be allowed to play it. The old organist, clueless about his identity and jealous of his exalted status as master of this magnificent instrument, at first refused. But the stranger's respectful awe toward him and this organ moved him to allow this earnest young man to try playing on the instrument known as the colossal "thunderer" of the cathedral. After standing by in an ecstasy of delight and amazement over the rapturous music played by this stranger, he suddenly laid his hands on the shoulders of the musician and gasped: "Who are you? What is your name?" "Mendelssohn," replied the guest. The old organist exclaimed, "And can it be that I had so nearly refused to let Mendelssohn touch this organ!" What blessings do we deny others or ourselves from experiencing due to "bitter jealousy"?

"Selfish ambition" originally referred to doing something just for what we can get out of it. It then came to describe "partisan politics" that resorts to any means, including unworthy, divisive tactics, to get its way. Of course, we don't know anything about such bushwhacking today. James warns we have nothing to "brag" about if we succeed in getting our way by ungodly means. If "bitter jealousy" or "selfish ambition" flash from the "heart" of one claiming to follow **Jesus Christ**, this serves to "deny the truth" of the Gospel and to make Christian conversion seem to be a "lie" (as the Greek word for "deny" is usually translated). Rick Barnett, a former church member, now in Hawaii, says the first church business meeting he attended, after he committed his life to Christ, tempted him to think he'd be better off having nothing to do with Christianity.

To the extent we are self-centered or self-promoting in our attitudes toward Christian service, we remain dominated by Satan's "earthly, unspiritual," and "demonic" attitudes; not a Christ-centered mind. "Earthly" attitudes ignore God's perspective and Heavenly values in favor of earth-bound standards of success. We are "unspiritual" if we make human emotion or reasoning our standard of what's right or wrong for us to do, rather than what God says is best. A "demonic" or "devilish" attitude is anything keeping us from faithfulness to God's will. In **Matthew 16:21-23**, "Jesus began to point out to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.²² Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, 'Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to You!'" Peter allowed his personal feelings and thoughts to override what **Jesus** told the disciples God wanted Him to do ("He *must go* to Jerusalem and *suffer* many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be *killed*, and be raised the third day"). At a crucial moment when **Jesus** most needed encouragement to carry out and achieve God's will, regardless of personal cost, Peter became Satan's mouthpiece to mislead Him. Had **Jesus** heeded Peter's passionate advice, He could not have become our Savior. We would have lost our only hope of not being everlastingly destroyed by our sins. This is why **Jesus** replied to Peter in harsh terms: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me because you're not thinking about God's concerns, but man's."

If we allow ourselves to become agents of Satan's "earthly, unspiritual," or "demonic," values, we open the doors to the Devil's "disorder." By overturning God's order in our lives and rejecting Christ's character qualities, we become prey to "every kind of evil" ("every vile practice," ESV). In other words, Satan's goals for our lives and demonic character qualities will compromise and minimize Christ's presence in our lives.

A diamond from South Africa is known as "the fly stone." Under a magnifying glass, you see enclosed in all its brilliancy a little fly—with body, wings, and eyes—in the most perfect state of preservation. How it came there no one knows, but no human skill can remove it. It truly is encased in a valued gem, but is it still a fly? Yes; it lived as a fly and it died as a fly. It did not become a diamond. But it did cheapen the value in the eyes of the business world of an otherwise exquisite gem. We can read the Bible faithfully, attend church faithfully, or hear God's Word faithfully taught, yet retain such "earthly, unspiritual" and "demonic" attitudes and appetites that we cheapen the value of our exquisite Savior in the eyes of the lost world. To become a Heavenly-minded, Spirit-controlled, and Christ-like follower of Jesus who does Him credit, we need to be open to the Lord's correction through our family, friends, and church family, along with the direct correction of God's Spirit, to be released from our sinful flaws. Most of the evidences James cites in **vss. 17-18**, which prove we are living by God's standards, describe our relationships with others. "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy." ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace."

Next week, we'll begin looking at the Christ-like character checklist supplied for us in **vss. 17-18**. Our "homework assignment" between now and next Sunday is to read through these verses prayerfully and ask the Lord to show us how well these character traits are already present (in His eyes) in our lives.

CONCLUSION

In May of 1948, at age 19, Al Johnson joined two other men in robbing a bank of \$1,000 (over \$10,000 today) in Hoyt, KS, north of Topeka. Shortly thereafter, two former convicts were killed in a car crash. When bank officials mistakenly identified them as the robbers, police thought this case was closed. Al breathed easily, thinking he'd never be caught. He built a good life as a sheet metal worker using the seed money from the robbery. He met a fine Christian girl, fooled her into believing he was a Christian, they married, and a year or so later, they became parents. After 3 ½ years, however, someone sent him a tract in the mail, "God's Plan of Salvation." As he read this tract, which included **Acts 2:21**, "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (KJV), his heart leaped! He realized God could forgive him and he could be set free from his shameful past. He knelt in prayer and yielded his heart to Christ. His life began to change. He stopped his habits of lying and deceit. He even confessed the bank robbery to his wife, Beth.

Before concluding this story, what do you think Al and Beth Johnson should have done? There was little possibility his crime would ever become public. If he publicly confessed, he could go to prison, which would tear him from the arms of his young wife and child. If he anonymously paid back his share of the stolen money, would this be enough? After all, God had already forgiven him! Beth encouraged Al to make a clean breast of things, even if he went to prison and she needed to work to support their child until his release. On Sunday morning, May 4, 1952, Al Johnson stepped to the pulpit at the Seward Avenue Baptist Church and revealed to the congregation he'd gone to the district attorney the day before and confessed he'd held a gun and had driven the car for the two other men. He told his church, "I thought about the bank robbery many times. I prayed about it and asked the Lord to give me an answer. It seemed that He would give me only one answer and that was to give myself up."

His confession made television newscasts and newspaper headlines across the U.S. and Canada. His conduct demonstrated his repentance and put Christ's character on grand display before the world. Johnson also revealed in his public testimony that he'd borrowed the money to repay the bank his share of the stolen funds. He'd also agreed to help the authorities locate the other two men involved in the robbery. As it turned out, the statute of limitations had expired and Al Johnson was set free from being jailed or even from prosecution. He went on to become manager of a service station, the father of three admiring children for whom he lived as a Christlike role model of honesty and integrity, and an outstanding Christian layman who testified daily to the reality of our life-transforming Savior and Lord, **Jesus Christ!**