

CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER CHECKLIST PART II

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

In a story of 25 years ago, a Canadian used a hot air balloon to travel more quickly around remote areas of Labrador and Newfoundland. One day he realized he was lost. Reducing altitude, he spotted a woman below. He descended a bit more and shouted, "Excuse me, can you help me? I promised a friend I would meet him an hour ago, but I don't know where I am." The woman replied, "You're in a hot air balloon hovering approximately 30 feet above the ground. You're between 49 and 50 degrees north latitude and between 60 and 61 degrees west longitude." "You must be an engineer," said the balloonist. "I am," replied the woman, "How did you know?" "Well," the man answered, "everything you told me is technically correct, but I've no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is I'm still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help at all. If anything, you've delayed my trip." The woman below responded, "You must be in Management." "I am," replied the balloonist, "but how did you know?" "Well," she hollered, "you don't know where you are or where you're going. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise, which you've no idea how to keep, and you expect people beneath you to solve your problems. The fact is you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met, but now, somehow, it's my fault."

Few details of this story may be true, but some things certainly ring true. Two very different people view each other almost entirely from their own perspective. This makes them shortsighted and overly critical of each other. Their self-centeredness also makes their "help" very impractical. After saying something like, "I'm lost," the man could have asked simply at the start, "How far is it to Deer Lake, Grand Falls Windsor," or whatever town or landmark that was his destination. Even if all he'd said was, "Can you help me? I don't know where I am," the woman could have initially replied, "You are now about 20 miles south of Gander and 15 miles east of Glovertown," or cited the two nearest towns to wherever they were. Instead, they spent most of their time criticizing each other for not looking at things like the other did. How helpful is that?

This is our second look at the "Christlike Character Checklist" found in **James 3:13-18**. The Greek word translated "conduct" in **vs. 13**, "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness," is from a verb meaning "to turn oneself around." "Repentance" is the doctrine of how we must "turn around towards God in how we live." James is urging our "conduct" to be "a lifestyle of demonstrated repentance." We prove **Jesus** is within our hearts by a lifestyle that puts Christ's character on display. Some years ago, a visiting prison worker gave a New Testament to a convict dying of a loathsome disease in Arizona's Florence State Prison. As he read it, he became so convicted of sin that he hurled the Testament across his cell. It landed on the floor; falling open to **I John**. A verse boldly outlined in red caught the angry convict's eye. He stooped down to look and read these words: "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (**I John 1:7**, KJV). These words brought him to his knees. He cried out to God for forgiveness, cleansing, and healing. He became a new man in Christ and started a Bible class for the convicts. God miraculously cured him of his fatal disease. His Christlike conduct and "lifestyle of demonstrated repentance" became so renowned throughout the prison the Governor of Arizona granted him an unconditional pardon! This pardon freed him from prison, but the Lord's pardon brought him purity of spirit, soul, and body, and drew many others to **Jesus**. Few of us display such radical change from Satanic to Christlike conduct, but few of us are as aware of how radically our conduct *could* be changed.

Our two Outline Points are A Satanic Checklist and a Christlike Checklist.

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

James 3:14-16 makes a point that remains as true today: We may 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 priceless quality of our Savior in the world's eyes by how poorly we display His character. [Reread **vss. 14-16**]. An "earthly" attitude ignores God's perspective and Heavenly values in favor of earth-bound standards of success. An "unspiritual" attitude makes human emotions or human 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 that would keep us from being faithful to God's will. We even demonstrate we are under Satan's influence when we easily leave the Lord, His people, or His service *out* of our lives and daily routines, rather than by what we openly do *against* the Lord.

As mentioned earlier in these sermons from **James**, our Lord's half-brother, served as lead pastor of the Jerusalem house churches in the pivotal years after **Jesus'** resurrection and ascension. Persecution driven by the jealousy and hostility of Jewish religious leaders soon forced **Jesus'** followers to flee for safety throughout the Roman Empire. James wrote with a pastor's heart to secure the quality of the faith of these early believers and to promote fellowship in their fledgling Christian churches. The Christlike checklist James provides can safeguard churches and individuals from falling prey to Satanically inspired sabotage of efforts to effectively communicate the message of salvation through **Jesus Christ** and to train mature believers.

II. A CHRISTLIKE CHECKLIST (James 3:13, 17-18)

A. GENTLENESS

The first Christ-like character quality James presents as an antidote to Satan's inroads into our lives and into our church is Gentleness: "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness." This "gentleness" is a "fruit of the Spirit" (**Galatians 5:23**). It's the opposite of the "selfish ambition" God condemns that views everything in terms of what we can *get* from some person or some activity, instead of placing a priority upon what we can *give*. When we are Satanically driven, our main focus is upon *our* wants and needs. When we are Spirit driven, our gentle focus is upon God's wants and the needs of others. **Jesus** invoked the adjective form of this same Greek word when He invited us to "learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart" (**Matthew 11:29**). We "demonstrate our repentance" by "gentleness" that acts in everyone's best interests; not by insisting our interests be served.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-90) gained worldwide acclaim as conductor of the New York Philharmonic orchestra. He wrote original symphonies and scored the music for such Broadway hits as *West Side Story* and *Candide*. When asked which instrument he thought was the most difficult to play, Bernstein replied, "The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm—that's a problem." If we have a healthy understanding of our own unworthiness before the Lord, we are grateful if He allows us to play second fiddle, fifth fiddle, or any "fiddle" in the orchestra that is His church. And if we display Christ's gentleness, we'll lack the pride that makes us quick critics of others. Someone wisely observed we don't elevate any people to the status of "saints" until long after we've had to deal with them on a daily basis. When dealing with fellow Christians, even those of our own evangelical persuasion, it's easy to become impatient with their idiosyncrasies, shortcomings, or pet causes and concerns. We readily identify with this old Irish ditty: "To live above with the saints we love, Ah, that is the purest glory; To live below with the saints we know, Ah, that is another story."

B. PURITY

After emphasizing the Christlike "gentleness" that should govern our actions toward others, especially within our family of faith, James next tells us, "The wisdom from above is first pure." The New Testament

Greek word for "wisdom" is rooted in the Hebrew concept of "wisdom": "the expertise (ability) to negotiate successfully the moral complexities of life" by gaining a God's-eye view of our circumstances. We remain "pure" in God's eyes to the extent we trust what He tells us about what we should do and what we should not do, because we want to return His love for us by doing all we can to please Him. Greeks understood the word translated "pure" in **James 3:17** to mean, "pure enough to approach the gods by external and internal obedience to their claims upon us." This is what **Jesus** had in mind in **Matthew 5:8** when He declared: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

In his discussion on the origin of "evil" found in **James 1:14-15**, James emphatically declares all "evil" ("bad-tempered thoughts and actions") arises from our own "evil desires" ("lustful craving for what God forbids"), and this is what gives birth to sin: "[E]ach person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desires. ¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death." Because every command of God is rooted in His character, God knows that when we yield to temptation we are rejecting Him and spurning His love for us. This is the choice we make each time we reach toward the impurity of sin, just as we reject and spurn the love of a spouse by unfaithful actions.

A small weasel called the ermine lives in remote regions of northern Europe and Asia. It is prized for its thick snow-white fur, which it bears during the winter months. This ermine, by some God-given instinct, takes peculiar care to keep its coat spotlessly clean. There is nothing dearer to an ermine than to maintain the beauty of its apparent purity. Fur hunters take advantage of this trait. Once they find an ermine's home (often a hollow log or a rock den), they daub the entrance with tar or other filth. Hunters then start their dogs on the chase. The ermine flees to its home, only to discover the entrance is covered with filth. Rather than dirtying its pure white coat by entering the den, it will turn to face the approaching dogs. The ermine would rather risk death than to soil its coat and ruin its purity. Would to God we'd be as motivated by devotion to our Savior to maintain the purity of our devotion to Him, and how His purity appears to others, by our own "conduct"; by our lifestyle of demonstrated repentance!

CONCLUSION

How are we to evaluate whether or not we are honorably putting the character qualities of our Savior on display, as individuals or as a church? Is it by the richness of our buildings, or size of our membership roll, or by the number of people who attend weekly services? Or is it by the depths of a transforming relationship with the Lord **Jesus Christ** that we encourage those who fellowship with us to experience?

In 1943, a Philadelphia Baptist congregation watched as three 9-year-old boys were baptized and joined the church. This church had reached out to, embraced, and evangelized these boys; setting them on the path to becoming Christ's disciples by enriching their young lives with encouragement and solid Biblical teaching. Within a year, though, the dwindling membership decided to sell its building and disband the church.

Tony Campolo (born 1935), one of these boys, has had a storied career as a pastor, author, and Christian sociologist. He writes, "Years later when I was doing research in the archives of our denominations, I decided to look up the church report for the year of my baptism. There was my name, and Dick White's. He's now a missionary. Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there. Then I read the church report for 'my' year: 'It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children.'"

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