

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

Will Rogers (1879-1935)—American cowboy, vaudeville performer, and movie actor—became one of the world's best-known celebrities of the 1920s & 30s. His daily newspaper column, *Will Rogers Says*, gave 40 million readers a common sense, often humorous look at life. A few examples: "Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip." "The only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets." "There are two theories to arguing with a woman. Neither works." "Some people try to turn back their odometers. Not me, I want people to know 'why' I look this way. I've traveled a long way and some of the roads weren't paved." "Everybody is ignorant; just on different subjects." And, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

Though known for his humor, Will Rogers also knew how to weep. One day he entertained at the Milton H. Berry Institute in Los Angeles, a hospital specializing in rehabilitating polio victims, people with broken backs, or other extreme physical handicaps. Rogers had everyone laughing; even patients in bad shape. He suddenly left the platform for the men's room. Milton Berry followed to give him a towel, opened the door, and saw Will Rogers leaning against the wall sobbing like a child. He closed the door. In a few minutes, Rogers returned to the platform as jovial as before. Noted Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe reports this story. In his book, *The Integrity Crisis: A Blemished Church Struggles with Accountability, Morality and Lifestyles of Its Leaders and Laity* (1989), he writes, "If you want to learn what a person is really like, ask three questions: What makes him laugh? What makes him angry? What makes him weep? These are fairly good tests of character that are especially appropriate for Christian leaders." Wiersbe cites **James 1:20** (NIV), "[H]uman anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires," and comments, "What we need today is not anger but anguish, the kind of anguish that Moses displayed when he broke the two tablets of the law and then climbed the mountain to intercede for his people, or that Jesus displayed when He cleansed the temple and then wept over the city. The difference between anger and anguish is a broken heart. It's easy to get angry, especially at somebody else's sins; but it's not easy to look at sin, our own included, and weep over it."

The character qualities of **James 3:13-18** highlight our relationship with **Jesus Christ** to a sin-darkened world. "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness." These "works" are "deeds" (NIV) of grace and mercy that demonstrate Christ's heart beats within our heart. James echoes his point of **2:17**: "[F]aith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself." In other words, "Faith (what we say we believe about **Jesus**) that cannot be demonstrated by our conduct is dead faith." The root meaning of the Greek word for "conduct" is "to turn back" or "to turn oneself around." "Repentance" is the Christian teaching that we must "turn around towards God in how we live." We prove **Jesus'** presence in our lives by showing He "turns us around" from living to please ourselves to living in a selfless manner that pleases Him; by "a lifestyle of demonstrated repentance." This is not easy, of course. In the book, *Children's Letters to God: The New Collection*, Diane, age 8, wrote, "Dear God; I am saying my prayers for me and my brother, Billy, because Billy is six months old and he can't do anything but sleep and wet his diapers." A woman's grocery cart made a horrible scraping sound as she rolled it through the supermarket. She finished shopping and another woman asked for her cart. She thought she should explain, "It makes an awful noise, but it works." "That's okay," the woman said. "I have a husband at home like that."

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

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

James seems to have served as lead pastor of the Jerusalem house churches in the crucial 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 identifies safeguards churches and individuals from falling prey to Satanically inspired sabotage that stains our personal lives and nullifies our ability to testify of the salvation God offers us through **Jesus Christ**. Years ago, a small-town pastor came to Chicago to conduct revival meetings. He walked back to his hotel one evening after a service in which many had yielded their hearts to Christ as Savior and Lord. He passed a store whose windows displayed pornographic magazines such as he'd never seen. He returned an hour later to purchase one, though he feared God might strike him dead. By the end of the week to his great shame, he was hooked on such erotic images. This temptation that he was unprepared to face wound up ruining his ministry and his personal life.

James 3:14-16 makes a point that is just as true today: If we allow ourselves to become instruments of the Satanic character checklist that is "earthly, unspiritual," and "demonic," either in our own lives or in our church, we open the doors to "disorder and every kind of evil." Or if we overturn God's order by not living by Christ's character qualities, we set ourselves up to fall prey to "every kind of evil" ("every vile practice," ESV). Satan's character qualities will compromise or minimize Christ's presence in our lives. Let's reread these verses: "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."

Mark Twain (1835-1910) believed Olivia Langdon, a devout Christian, was the only woman in the world for him. She listened at first to God's Spirit; rejecting his proposal. He began professing greater loyalty to **Jesus** than he possessed. She believed him, despite the Holy Spirit's warnings. Early in their marriage, he went through the motions of faith in Christ. He later admitted he couldn't keep up his hypocrisy for long. In time, his skepticism wore away her faith to the point she no longer believed in a personal God. When their daughter Susy died of spinal meningitis at age 24, Twain said to his wife, "If your Christian faith will comfort you, go back to it." She replied, "I have none." An "unspiritual" attitude makes human emotions or human reasoning our standard of right and wrong; what *we* think or feel will make us happy instead of what God says in the Bible is best for us. A "demonic" or "devilish" attitude is anything keeping us from faithfulness to God's will. We often demonstrate we're under Satan's influence by how easily we leave the Lord, His people, and His service *out* of our lives and daily routines, not just by what we openly do *against* the Lord.

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

Our English word "character" derives from the Greek word *kharakter*. It originally referred to a sharp-pointed engraving or stamping tool. The quality of an engraver's skill could be seen in distinctive features he made upon a metal object being stamped or engraved. Given enough time, any rough piece of metal placed in the hands of a skilled craftsman could be turned into a masterpiece! In the 16th century, the distinctive impressions made by engraving tools came to be used to describe "traits" or "qualities" of individuals, so that a person's "character" referred to one's "distinctive features" of conduct and the lasting impressions our personal qualities (or lack of them) make upon others. **Romans 8:28-29** reveals "those who love God" and "are called according to His purpose" are "predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son." If we place ourselves sufficiently in God's hands and give Him time to complete His engraving work upon us, our Heavenly Father can turn any of us into a masterpiece with distinctive, Christlike character features! In the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**), **Jesus** emphasized that character precedes conduct. The more Christ owns our heart, His character qualities become the inner moral orientation serving as a spotlight telling us

when it's okay to proceed with some action (green light); when to proceed but with caution, being ready to stop quickly (yellow light); or when we should stop ourselves from doing something (red light).

A. GENTLENESS

The first Christlike character quality James presents as an antidote to Satan's inroads into our lives & our church is Gentleness: "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness." Such "gentleness" is a "fruit of the Spirit" (**Galatians 5:23**). It's the opposite of the Satanically driven "selfish ambition" God condemns that demands *our* own wants and needs be served. One evening just before dinner, a wife who'd been playing bridge all afternoon came in to the den and found her husband and a strange man (she soon realized he was a lawyer) engaged in some mysterious business over the library table, upon which were spread several sheets of paper. "What are you going to do with all that paper, Henry?" demanded the wife in her usual authoritative tone. "I am making a wish," he responded meekly. "A wish?" she said quizzically. "Yes, my dear," he replied. In your presence I shall not presume to call it a will." **Jesus** invited us to "learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart" (**Matthew 11:29**), using the adjective form of the same Greek word found in **James 3:13**. We embrace the "gentleness" **Jesus** demonstrated by acting in everyone's best interests, including God's; not merely our own.

B. PURITY

After emphasizing Christlike "gentleness" 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 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 and entrusting ourselves to His guidance. The Greek word translated "pure" in **James 3:17** has the root meaning, "pure enough to approach the gods by external and internal obedience to their claims upon us." This is what **Jesus** had in mind when He said in **Matthew 5:8**: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." We remain "pure" in God's eyes to the extent we do all we can to please and to honor Him. In 1904, English preacher Gipsy Smith held services in South Africa. One night a handsome Dutchman attended who gave every appearance of being an upright citizen. Convicted of his sinfulness in the eyes of a Holy God, he cried out for forgiveness and salvation. The next morning he went to another man's home. "Do you recognize this old watch?" he asked. "Why, yes," the man answered, "those are my initials. That is my watch. I lost it eight years ago. How did you get it and how long have you had it?" "I stole it," he replied. "What made you bring it back now?" asked the homeowner. "I was converted last night," said Christ's new follower, "and I have brought it back first thing this morning. If you had been up, I would have brought it last night."

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" (our "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.

CONCLUSION

Dogs understand love better than we do, says British dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse. In her book, *No Bad Dogs*, she writes, "In a dog's mind, a master or a mistress to love, honor, and obey is an absolute necessity. [But] The love is dormant in the dog until brought into full bloom by an understanding owner. Thousands of dogs appear to love their owners; they welcome them home with enthusiastic wagging of the tail and jumping up, they follow them about their houses happily and, to the normal person seeing the dog, the affection is true and deep. But to the experienced dog trainer this outward show is not enough. The true test of love takes place when the dog has got the opportunity to go out on its own as soon as the door is left

open by mistake and it goes off and often doesn't return home for hours. That dog loves only its home's comforts and the attention it gets from its family; it doesn't truly love the master or mistress as they fondly think. True love in dogs is apparent when a door is left open and the dog still stays happily within earshot of its owner." When a dog acts like its owner is "the be-all and end-all of" its "life," says dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse, and nothing can entice it to leave its master's side, that's when the satisfied owner knows he or she has awakened a dog to true love.

Would it be fair to say that the real test of our love for the Lord is not our work or activity in our church or elsewhere, nor the correctness of our doctrinal beliefs, nor our time spent in prayer, worship, or reading the Bible (as important as each of these are)? The real test of the genuineness of our love for Christ is when we have opportunity to wander away after other interests, to disobey His will by exploring or pursuing a temptation He forbids, or to reject His legitimate claims upon all we are, all we have, and all we do. When we choose instead to stay close to Him (within earshot of our owner) and demonstrate we have no greater loyalty or love than our Savior, that's when He knows He's awakened us to true love for Him as our Master!