

SYMPATHETIC OR PATHETIC? CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER CHECKLIST PART V

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

Years ago in Madagascar, some heartless children called out, "A leper, a leper," to a poor woman who'd lost all her fingers and toes to the dread disease. A missionary lady standing nearby put her hand on the woman's shoulder and asked her to sit down by her on the grass. Overcome by emotion, the woman fell down sobbing and cried out, "A human hand has touched me. For seven years no one has touched me." The missionary says at that moment it flashed across her mind why the Gospels tell us **Jesus** touched a leper. That is just what others would not do. He offered His sympathetic touch as well as healing power. **Luke 5:12-13** (NASB) records this event: "While He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man covered with leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.' And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' And immediately the leprosy left him." **Jesus** brought this leper healing of soul and of body.

Our focus in **James 3:13-18** is upon character qualities that put our saving relationship with **Jesus Christ** on display. The root meaning of the Greek word for "conduct" in **vs. 13** is "to turn oneself around." This links acceptable "conduct" with the "about face" of repentance God requires of us when He convicts us of an action or attitude that displeases Him. Thus, the "conduct" James urges upon us is "a lifestyle of demonstrated repentance." We prove **Jesus'** presence in our lives by showing how He's "turned us around" from living to please ourselves, as we did before we became **Jesus'** follower, by living in an unselfish way that pleases the Lord. This is not easy, of course. A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. He put this note under the windshield wiper: "I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses." When he returned, he found a ticket from a police officer along with this note: "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation."

Earlier sermons on this text described the self-centered Satanic Checklist James exposes in **vss. 13-16**. We've also considered four parts of the Christ-like Checklist James promotes in **vss. 13, 17-18**. Today we take a closer look today at Christ's character qualities of being "gentle" and "full of mercy and good fruits."

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

E. GENTLE

The quality of being "gentle" in **James 3:17** is not "fruit of the Spirit" "gentleness" of **Galatians 5:23** and **James 3:13**. Such "gentleness" is the opposite of "demonic" "selfish ambition" God condemns in **vs. 14**. If we're Satanically driven, we exalt our *wants* or our *needs* above everyone else, including God, as Satan did. The smallest person on earth is the one most wrapped up in himself or herself. In **Matthew 11: 29**, **Jesus** described Himself as "gentle . . . in heart." We model Christ's "gentle heart" by serving everyone's best interests instead of insisting our interests be served. **Luke 22:24-7**(NCV) tell us, "The apostles also began to argue about which one of them was the most important. But Jesus said to them, 'The kings of the non-Jewish people rule over them, . . . But you must not be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the leader should be like the servant. Who is more important: the one sitting at the table or the one serving? You think the one at the table is more important, but I am like a servant among you.'"

Paul Harvey (1918-2009) enjoyed telling stories with a twist at the end that change the way you view what you just heard. Here is one such story as he told it: "One summer morning as Ray Blankenship was preparing his breakfast, he saw a small girl being swept along in the rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his Andover, OH, home. Blankenship knew that farther downstream, the ditch disappeared with a roar underneath a road and then emptied into the main culvert. Ray dashed out the door and raced along the ditch, trying to get ahead of the floundering child. Then he hurled himself into the deep, churning water. He surfaced and was able to grab the child's arm. Within about three feet of the yawning culvert, Ray's free hand felt something—possibly a rock—protruding from one bank. 'If I can just hang on until help comes,' he thought. He did better than that. By the time fire-department rescuers arrived, Blankenship had pulled the girl to safety. He was awarded the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award is fitting. This selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew—Ray Blankenship can't swim!"

Each day of our lives, do we see people inside and outside of churches who are being swept along by the lifestyles and mistakes they've fallen into that place them in even greater danger, if not as at immediate risk, than the young girl being swept along in the rain-flooded ditch? Yes! Their peril is not being physically drowned but being plunged into everlasting damnation! There are often great risks if we seek to be their rescuers: anger, rejection, scorn. There are also greater rewards. Aside from the satisfying joys over those we help rescue, our Lord seems to have a Silver Lifesaving award in mind for us. The Hebrew of **Daniel 12:3** can be taken to mean, as the NIV suggests, "Those who impart [God's] wisdom will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

The word translated "gentle" in **James 3:17** literally means "thoroughly reasonable" or "fair-minded." We mirror **Jesus'** "gentle" character if we place "reasonable" expectations upon how others behave and if we favor fairness over faultfinding, even if the faults of others are real. We apply the same standards to other's faults we want others to apply to us. **Galatians 6:1** (CSB) instructs us, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted." The Greek word for "wrongdoing" does not refer here to "flagrant disregard of God," but to "a moral lapse," "a misstep," "a wandering from the godly behavior one usually follows." James advises humble compassion toward fellow Christians temporarily overcome by a temptation, "remembering that next time it might be one of you who is in the wrong," as TLB closes out this verse. Instead of automatically insisting on the letter of the law, we should humanely and reasonably considers all the facts of a case before making a judgment, as **Jesus** did in His treatment of the "woman caught in adultery" (**John 8:1-11**). Did **Jesus** encourage disregard of God's laws by refusing to condemn the adulterous woman hauled before Him by a band of legalistic Jewish religious leaders? No. His last words to her were, "Go, and from now on do not sin anymore." **Jesus** *did* discourage a judgmental, self-righteous application of God's laws that crush devotion to the Lord in the hearts of His people by its unfairness.

F. FULL OF MERCY AND GOOD FRUITS

This leads us to the character quality, "full of mercy and good fruits" of **vs. 17**: "[T]he wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy." Before the Son of God walked this Earth, the Greek word translated "mercy" meant little more than "pity for another person's suffering." "Mercy" was just an emotion; pity for another's struggles. But such pity without a display of merciful sympathy is pathetic. It may make us feel better about ourselves, but it does nothing to relieve another's need. A church decided to build a recreation center to better serve the local youth. They employed a marketing firm to identify potential wealthy donors in the community. A deacon met with one potential donor, explained their vision for a local youth center, and said "We have done research and believe you have the ability to make a substantial gift to the church." "So you've done some research," he said. "Has your research told you that I have an aged mother confined to a nursing home?" "Uh, no" said the deacon, somewhat sheepishly. "Has your research told you I have an alcoholic brother who spends all of his paycheck on liquor and leaves nothing for his wife and children?" "No" said the

deacon quietly. "And has your research told you that I have a son who was injured in an accident and is unable to work and support himself?" "No" said the deacon, now thoroughly humiliated. "Then what makes you think I would give money to you when I don't give anything to any of them?" This rich man was so pathetically poor he lacked even pity. He certainly lacked the sympathy of Christian mercy.

Jesus Christ embodies God's merciful sympathy that compels God to *act* upon His sorrow over our misery and offer His aid to anyone who would receive it, regardless of our unworthiness. **Romans 5:6-9** (NLT) reminds us: "When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners.

⁷ Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. ⁹ And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, He will certainly save us from God's condemnation." In other words, God's mercy seeks to spare us from the worst consequences of our sinful world: judgment, poverty, illness, abuse, and wretched decisions.

From the Church's earliest days, Christ's followers knew they must do more than *disapprove* of the causes of another's suffering; they must do all they can to *improve* another's suffering. Christians revolutionized the care of the poor and the sick, as a "good fruit" of Christlike "mercy." Medical clinics of the pre-Christian Roman Empire cared solely for soldiers, gladiators, and slaves of the wealthy. Manual laborers and the poor had no place of refuge. People took little interest in the sick and dying, except to drive them away to leave them to their fate. The first true hospitals caring for all who were ill and destitute were Christian institutions appearing around A.D. 400. Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), the founder of modern nursing, received her inspiration from **Jesus Christ**, as did Henry Dunant—Swiss banker, philanthropist, and leading founder of the International Red Cross in 1864. For 2,000 years, the most faithful of **Jesus'** followers have embodied **James 2:14-17** (CSB): "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,' but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself."

CONCLUSION

You may have seen *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. It won seven academy awards in 1957, including Best Picture. It's largely a fictitious account of how British pluck and discipline supposedly allowed WWII POWs to triumph under harsh slave-labor conditions while building a railroad bridge for the Japanese in a steamy, disease-infested jungle. POW Ernest Gordon's eyewitness account, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, tells the truth. Stripped of modern society's restraining influences, these "civilized" soldiers quickly reverted to the law of the jungle; a dog-eat-dog mentality of every man for himself. Allies would rob and cheat each other at will. Men would sleep on their packs; yet have them stolen from under their heads. Mere survival became the controlling thought of nearly everyone. Then the news of Angus McGillivray's death spread throughout the camp. No one could believe big Angus had succumbed. One of the strongest men in camp, he could have easily seized anything from most anyone. Many thought he'd be the last to die. But it wasn't the fact of his death that shocked the men, but the reason he died. Slowly they pieced together his story.

Angus McGillivray, a Scottish prisoner and servant of **Jesus Christ**, took to heart the buddy system of the Scottish Argylls. They believed it their duty to ensure their buddy survived. When Angus' buddy lay dying, everyone gave up on him but Angus. Someone stole his buddy's blanket. Angus gave him his own saying he'd "just come across an extra one." Likewise, at mealtime, Angus would get his rations, take them to his friend, stand over him, and force him to eat them. He told his buddy he was able to get "extra food." As Angus' buddy began to revive, Angus collapsed, slumped over, and died. The camp Dr. discovered he'd died of starvation complicated by exhaustion. He'd given his buddy his food and shelter; everything he had—even his very life. He'd lived Christ's words of **John 15:13** (NKJV): "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

The unselfish Christlike quality of being "full of mercy and good fruits" displayed by Angus and a handful of other devout Christians made a startling impact on the prison compound! The entire atmosphere of the camp began to change. Suddenly, men began to view their fellow POWs as mates and friends. Atheists, agnostics, and "Christians in name only" committed themselves first to Christ and then to each other with all their hearts. The quality of their lives became more important than mere survival. The most helpless and ill among them were showered by sympathetic aid. They began to pool their talents—one was a violin maker, another an orchestra leader, another a cabinet maker, another a professor. Soon the camp had an orchestra full of homemade instruments. The men began a university, a hospital, and a library system. Their "Church without Walls," the lifeline of their transformation, experienced such compelling devotion to Christ and uplifting love that even some Japanese guards began attending their church. The quality of their fellowship with Christ and with each other became so personally and corporately enriching that when they returned to their home churches after the War and found them half-heartedly committed to Christ and to each other, some longed to be part of their inspiring "Church without Walls" again, even at the cost of being a POW!

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