

STEADFAST AND SINCERE: CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER CHECKLIST PART VII

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 church phone rang one day. "Hello, is this Pastor Wilson?" the caller asked. "It is." "This is the Internal Revenue Service. We'd like your help." "I'll try." "Do you know Peter L. Green?" "I do." "Is this man a member of your congregation?" "He is." "Did he make a \$10,000 donation to your church?" The Pastor replied, "He certainly will." Even Christians may resort to deceit, at times, but the truth usually comes out.

Have you ever wondered why letters often carry the word "Sincerely" above the writer's signature? Our English word "sincere" comes from the Latin phrase "sine cera," which means "without wax." In the ancient world, marble likenesses of people of wealth, fame, or prestige could be sold for high prices. True craftsmen were not satisfied until they'd fashioned the most flawless likeness possible. If a statue later got chipped by a sculptor's carelessness, or by an accident or abuse, wax could conceal the damage. Skillful wax-mends could make flaws nearly invisible. Wise customers therefore learned to view statue-images in the sunlight before purchase. The sun's light and heat would soon expose flaws concealed by wax. The Greek word translated "sincere" in **Philippians 1:9-10** (CEB) literally means "judged in the sunlight": "This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. ¹⁰ I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere ["free from all impurity"-GNT] and blameless on the day of Christ." "Sincere," wax-free marble images would not embarrass their owners by having a wax nose slide off the face, or a wax finger fall to the floor, if placed in the sun or when a home was heated. If we are "sincere" followers of **Jesus**, we won't attempt to conceal our defects. Sooner or later, our conduct in heated moments or the searchlight of truth will expose our moral faults. A senior usher in a large church was training one of the newest members to be an usher. "We have nothing but good, kind Christians in this church," he told the new usher, "until you try to seat someone else in their place in the pews." We are "sincere" believers if we allow God's Spirit to chip away our flaws to sculpt us into Christ's genuine likeness.

James 3:13-18 contrasts Satanically inspired behavior with character qualities putting our saving relationship with **Jesus** on display. The root meaning of the Greek word for "conduct" in **vs. 13** is "to turn oneself around." This links "good conduct" with the repentance God requires when He convicts us of attitudes or actions displeasing Him. We prove **Jesus'** presence in our lives by how much He "turns us around" from ignoring or defying God's moral values, as we did before He claimed us. **Acts 26:20** (NIV) reveals Paul the Apostle promoted demonstrated repentance wherever he proclaimed God's offer of salvation through **Christ**. "First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds." An American Dr. knew of at least 100 of his patients who, when faced with seemingly certain death, were hopefully converted, and God then allowed them to regain their health. Of these 100 patients, this Dr. knew of only three who devoted themselves to the service of Christ when they got well. An English Dr. reported he'd seen at least 300 people profess repentance and faith when they thought they were dying, but later recovered. He witnessed just 10 such "death-bed" conversions provide evidence of a true commitment to **Jesus Christ** by a changed life. Regrettably many who profess in times of disaster they want God to save them *from* their sinful selves to live *for God*, really want God to save them so they can go on living *for themselves*. Once the danger they fear no longer confronts them, they conveniently ignore their commitments to God.

Last Sunday's message asked, "What is the best gift you can offer God in return for the costliness of His sacrificial giving through Jesus Christ toward you?" The answer is to cooperate with **Jesus** as He saves you from getting your way or even wanting to get your way. And for good reason. The essence of sin, the cause of all that's harmful and hurtful in the world around us, is the insistence we want things our way, whether or not this is God's way and regardless if this is truly best for others. We "sin" by making up our own rules of right and wrong. An Ethics Professor of a leading American university attended a convention in distant town with a Philosophy Professor. Courtesy of the university, they lunched at an elegant restaurant, with the finest quality tableware and cuisine. They avidly discussed the issues of truth and morality. Before leaving their table, one professor slipped some of the genuine silverware into his pocket. Noticing his colleague's puzzled look, he explained, "I just *teach* ethics. Where else am I going to be able to get spoons of this quality?"

If we are "sincere" followers of **Jesus**, we'll welcome God's Spirit convicting us of the "envy and selfish ambition" that are behind "disorder and every kind of evil," of which **James 3:14-16** warns us. Or, the Holy Spirit may confront us over "earthly, unspiritual, demonic" "conduct" that exalts earthly values above Heavenly values or makes a god of satisfying our own wants and pleasures. In all such instances, God expects us to humble ourselves before Him in repentance, to ask for His forgiveness, and to cry out to Him for our Satanically driven character qualities, including "favoritism and hypocrisy," to be replaced with the sincerely "pure," "peace-loving," and "compliant" character qualities of **Jesus Christ**.

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

G. WITHOUT FAVORITISM

The Greek word translated "favoritism" by our text appears just once in the New Testament. It's the most difficult trait to define in James' list of "conduct" aligned with God's "wisdom from above." Most literally the word means "not to be divided." By urging us to be "without favoritism," James might be telling us to be "impartial" (NIV); don't unfairly discriminate against others based upon externals such as wealth, clothes, or race. **James 2:1-4** (NIV) declares, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

On Sunday morning June 4, 1865, two months after the Civil War's end, a well-dressed, lone black man, attended the service of the St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, VA. He may have sat at the back. Few had noticed his presence. But just before communion, he rose and walked down the center aisle where all could see him and knelt at the communion rail. A rustle of shock and anger swept through the congregation. The minister seemed at a loss on how to proceed. At that crucial moment, a distinguished Christian layman stood, stepped to the front of the church, and knelt not far from this black man. They received communion together, as brothers in Christ. The layman was none other than the beloved and revered Robert E. Lee. Most of the congregation then streamed to the front of the church to follow Lee's inspiring example.

Unrighteous "favoritism" or "partiality" behind discrimination may have been what is condemned in **vs. 17**. A second way to interpret the Greek word that literally means "not to be divided" is that James may have exhorted Christ's followers to be "straightforward" (Living Bible) in our dealings with others. We should shun being two-faced or the cunning deception of "guile" that seeks to fool others for personal advantage. Do you recall the praise Nathanael received, the sixth disciple **Jesus** recruited, in **John 1:47** (KJV): "Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile ["deceit"]."

Golfer Ray Floyd is now age 76. He won 22 PGA events, including four major championships. He is one of only two players to win official PGA Tour events in four different decades (as did Sam Snead). Ray had the reputation throughout his career of being a tough competitor. He was also known as a man of Christian

integrity. One day he prepared to tap in a routine 9-inch putt when he accidentally caused the ball to move ever so slightly. The PGA rule book requires a golfer to take a penalty stroke for such an infraction. At that moment, Floyd stood among the leaders in a tournament offering a top prize of \$108,000. To admit the ball had moved could cost him his chance for big money. Journalist David Holahan describes what other golfers have later admitted to doing in such situations: "The athlete ducks his head and flails wildly with his hands, as if being attacked by a killer bee; next, he steps back from the ball, rubbing his eye for a phantom speck of dust, all the while scanning his playing partners and the gallery for any sign the ball's movement has been detected by others. If the coast is clear, he taps the ball in for his par." Ray Floyd, however, did not resort to guile. He assessed himself a penalty stroke and wound up with an over par bogey on the hole. This cost him a tournament win but he kept something more valuable to him and to the Lord **Jesus**: his integrity.

The third option for interpreting the Greek word that literally means "not to be divided" in **vs. 17** is to be "unwavering" (NASB). This is how James uses a form of this Greek word in **1:5-7** (NIV), where he faulted believers for being "double-minded" by doubts of indecision: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and *not doubt*, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." Do we call **Jesus** "Lord" and then pull back when He asks us to follow Him as Lord in accomplishing tasks He calls us to do, because we don't fully trust God's will?

Pastor James Brown of Louisiana took flying lessons. One day, his instructor told him to put the plane into a steep and extended dive. The engine quickly stalled and the plane began to plunge out-of-control. He expected the instructor to take over in this crisis. He didn't. At first, all James could do was to panic! After a few seconds, which seemed like eternity, his mind began to function again. He recalled what the instructor had taught him and quickly righted the plane. He then began to vent his fearful frustrations on the instructor, who calmly told him, "There is no position you can get this airplane into that I cannot get you out of. If you want to learn to fly, go up there and do it again." At that moment God seemed to be saying to pastor Brown, "Remember this. As you serve Me, there is no situation you can get yourself into that I cannot get you out of. If you trust me, you will be all right." That lesson served him well over the years, as it will serve us.

H. WITHOUT HYPOCRISY

The expression, "without hypocrisy," is from a Greek word that literally means "without pretense." We can be hypocrites in either of two ways: we can try to deceive others or even ourselves about not being as bad as we truly are, as by not admitting our faults. Someone has said, "If you feel you have no faults, that makes another one." Or, we can try to deceive others or ourselves about being better than we truly are. We may make a show of how much we pray, give to the Lord's work, care for others in need, or walk closely with the Lord. Yet, when others are not around to applaud our efforts, we may prove to be far less mature or unselfish. The tragedy of hypocrisy is that we will never become mature, "sincere" Christians unless we admit our faults or immaturities and cooperate with the Lord to change us.

Charles Swindoll puts it this way in his book, *The Grace Awakening: Believing in Grace Is One Thing; Living It Is Another*: "You want to mess up the minds of your children? Here's how - guaranteed! Rear them in a legalistic, tight context of external religion, where performance is more important than reality. Fake your faith. Sneak around and pretend your spirituality. Train your children to do the same. Embrace a long list of do's and don'ts publicly but hypocritically practice them privately . . . yet never own up to the fact that it's hypocrisy. Act one way but live another. And you can count on it - emotional and spiritual damage will occur." When we publicly act one way but privately live another way, not only do we suffer emotional and spiritual damage, but many who know us who might have been drawn into a life-transforming relationship with **Jesus Christ** will suffer emotional and spiritual damage, as well.

CONCLUSION

A godly father devoted great attention to the moral and Christian training of his son. Until the age of 14, his son maintained a spotless reputation for honesty. He was then caught in a serious, deliberate lie. The father's grief was great. After much prayer, he determined he must punish the offender severely. He knew such blatant dishonesty, if uncorrected, could cost his son great future harm. He called his son to him and prepared to inflict the punishment. But he became so overcome by emotion that tears filled his eyes; all he could do for a few moments was weep. At first, the boy seemed confused by the struggle he observed in his father's heart between love and justice. Then, realizing his lie had wounded his father deeply, he cried out with remarkable sincerity, "Father, father, whip me as much as you please; but please don't cry." His father's point had been made. His son's heart had been movingly affected by this display of the grief he'd caused his father. This young man grew up to become one of America's leading Christian laymen.

One of the best lessons we could ever learn is there are far worse punishments for ungodly and deceitful actions than our Heavenly Father's judgment or correction. It's the knowledge we are wounding the One who loves us most and sacrificed the most for us. **Proverbs 3:12** (NLT) tells us clearly, "[T]he LORD corrects those He loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights." But more important than our Heavenly Father's correction is His heartfelt love that motivates Him to correct us, which **Isaiah 63:7-9** reveals: "I will make known the LORD's faithful love and the LORD's praiseworthy acts, because of all the LORD has done for us . . . ⁸ He said, 'They are indeed My people, children who will not be disloyal,' and He became their Savior. ⁹ In all their suffering, He suffered, and the Angel of His Presence saved them. He redeemed them because of His love and compassion; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of the past." If we fully grasp how much our unChristlike actions wound our Heavenly Father, we would more eagerly avoid all actions and attitudes that make Him feel the pain of needing to correct us.

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