### “First Pure” by S. Finlan, at First Church

September 23, 2018

**James 3:13, 16–17; 4:1–3, 8**

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. . . . 16For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. . . .

4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. . . .

3You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. . . . 8Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

**Mark 9:30–37**

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

James stresses the truth that doing good *matters*: “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. . . . For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind” (3:13, 16).

Envy and selfishness are character disorders that reveal an underlying *spiritual* disorder, an unhealthy focus on power and status. Excessively ego demonstrates a lack of God-focus. It’s okay to have an ego, but when the ego fills the room, it leaves no room for God’s presence. This is spiritual disorder, and it leads to all kinds of disorder in life, including psychological imbalance. Those who are inwardly conflicted, whose cravings are in conflict with their ideals, will experience psychological distress. But that state is better than that of the person who has finally suppressed the last vestige of conscience. Such a person can present what *looks* like a normal personality, but is really a mask.

But “wisdom from above is first pure . . . willing to yield, full of mercy and . . . without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (3:17). This kind of wisdom is impossible without at least some degree of surrender to a higher power, some degree of humility and spiritual hunger.

But hypocrisy is very common among the spiritually disordered. In fact, something *like* hypocrisy is common among those who, possibly like you or me, have a smaller amount of disorder. When we know what people *want* to see and we seek to present that, we come very close to being actually dishonest. You might say “we’re only trying to make a living, or make social events move along smoothly. You can’t say we’re living a lie, can you? Some degree of conformity is *expected* in our jobs. And some degree of charm is required in social circles.” So, are we being hypocritical?

No, I’m not going to say that, but I *am* saying that the desire to *measure up* is a *temptation* toward hypocrisy. We need to be aware of the danger of this temptation, and we need to have a line that we promise not to cross*—*that we promise to *ourselves*. Otherwise we slip into hypocrisy unawares. Many hypocrites are partly unconscious of their hypocrisy, or have managed to forget when they first slipped into it.

Those who have sunk *deeply* into it, tend to be thoroughly *unjust*, as well. Notice how James pairs up hypocrisy with partiality. Those who are *partial*, that is *unfair*, will hypocritically try to hide their evil-doing, even from themselves.

But leaving aside that advanced form of hypocrisy, I am drawing attention to the more common kind of hypocrisy that goes along with selfishness and mental laziness. A big part of winning our battle against mental laziness comes from our prayer life. If we pray for God’s help in acting honestly and justly, we have taken the biggest step toward stopping the slide into hypocrisy. Then we don’t need to agonize about everything we do, whether it is hypocritical or not. If we make the commitment to *ask* for Godly character, then we can just go on with our lives, *trusting* that God will help us. As I said, this involves some humility and an admission of one’s spiritual neediness.

Now the apostles, in our story, were slipping back into selfishness and mental laziness. They were confident that the kingdom was coming soon, and they were debating which of them would be the greatest, who would become Jesus’ Secretary of State, or of War, or his chief spokesman. They were lusting for power, but they couldn’t admit it when Jesus challenged them. He shocked them by saying that whoever would be greatest must become *servant* of all (Mark 9:35). He is offering unselfish service in direct opposition to self-assertiveness. Then he points to a child as an example for them, which also goes right against their quest for hierarchic power.

The apostles were competing for status. They were pretending to be smarter, wiser, bolder, and better than they really were. It was a case of petty pride and braggadocio, and Jesus punctured their bubble.

“Instead of claiming to be such big shots,” he is saying, “why don’t you just be good enough to welcome a small child? Be humble and good. *That’s* all that’s needed! That is what makes you great.” Isn’t that comforting, really? Jesus seems to be saying that all you have to do to be *great* is to be *good*, to be welcoming, to be willing to serve others. This is the basis of the whole idea of Christian ministry, the idea of *serving*.

And this returns me to my title, “first pure,” which I get from the James passage. Wisdom is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy” (James 3:17). Such pure and spiritual motives are the basis of Christian character, and also of Christian ministry.

All the apostles had to do to restrain their selfish ambition was to pray honestly, and seek to get their priorities straightened out. But they needed to not “ask wrongly,” that is, *selfishly*, as James says (4:3). And we, too, should ask God for courage, strength, and love. In other words, ask God for Godly character, insight into God’s will, and the courage to carry it out. “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10) is the real heart of the Lord’s Prayer. It’s the spiritual motive that matters. As he says a few sentences later in Matthew: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21). You see, the beginning of spiritual living is simple: just honestly seek God’s will and God’s way. It may sometimes be hard to carry out in practice, as when one is going against the majority, but that’s why you pray for wisdom and strength.

So today we welcome the children in our midst. You are not only children of your parents, you are *spiritual* children of Jesus! And we pray for *wisdom*, to help us not fall into those bad mental habits like hypocrisy, revenge, and other disordered states.

God, all of us today, whether we are young or just young at heart, seek to listen to your son, Jesus, and follow his guidance. Even when life throws us an unexpected curveball, we will be ready for the next pitch, ready to do our best and to seek your wisdom, which will help us to be true to ourselves and to you. We seek you always. Amen.