

Wisdom from Above and Below

In the name of him who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel we see a glaring disconnect between Jesus and his disciples. As they're traveling throughout Galilee trying to avoid the crowds because Jesus wants to work with his disciples alone, he's telling them how that very soon, he's going to be arrested, condemned, and killed. He's trying to explain what's going to happen: how he will give his life on the cross as the ultimate act of loving service on behalf of sinful mankind. He's telling them how he's going to allow himself to become the lowest of the low in order to rescue and raise up the fallen human race. And meanwhile, as he's telling them these things, they're arguing among themselves about which one of them is the greatest. So, as Jesus speaks of his humiliation, suffering, and dying, they are contending for glory, honor, and cushy lives for themselves. They are poles apart in their thinking. And that's emphasized by the fact that when Jesus is telling them these things, they don't have the foggiest idea of what he's talking about. And they're afraid to ask, presumably because they don't want to sound stupid. And then when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about on the way, they're ashamed to say. Well, at least they got that part right: they should have been ashamed.

What we are seeing here are two entirely different ways of looking at the world, two diametrically opposed systems of understanding reality and evaluating what is good. It's the same unbridgeable gap in thinking that St. James discusses in today's Epistle. The first way of thinking, what the disciples were doing, James calls earthly wisdom. It comes from below. The second, Jesus' way of thinking, he calls the wisdom coming down out of heaven from God.

Regarding the first – the wisdom from below – well, James hasn't got anything good to say about it. He calls it unspiritual and demonic. He says it's the cause of quarrels, fights, and even murder. What is it? If you'll allow me an illustration, it's like seeing all of life as a great big ladder. Wherever you are on it, your goal is to climb higher; to reach the next rung. And from that rung to the others higher still. The wisdom from below always seeks to move up: up in social class, up in economic class, up in relative "holiness", up in fame, honor, influence, and power. Just keep moving up. That's what life is all about.

And part of the problem is that it makes so much sense. It appeals to the work ethic in all of us. I mean, how *does* one get ahead in life? You know: you pull yourself up by the boot straps. You set your goals high. And you apply your ingenuity and work really hard to achieve your goals. You start at the bottom and move your way up. And for the most part it works: in works in business, in sports, in politics ... It's the way of the world.

And the way you measure your progress is by looking around at others to see where they are on the ladder. The ones below you – the ones you can look down on – they make you feel better about yourself. And the ones above you – those who are looking down on you in order to feel better about themselves – they make you envious. They make you want to climb up to where they are and beyond so you can look down on them. And the people who are more or less at your level? They're the competition. They're the ones to beat to the next rung.

They're also the ones who tempt us to take shortcuts or to cheat. Not directly; they don't do the tempting. No, it's the inner desire we have to beat them to the next rung that does it. Got to get there first. How? Maybe by doing sycophantic favors for someone higher up. It's

good to have friends in high places, you know. They can use their clout to give you a boost up; maybe even let you skip a few rungs. Nothing like being on the fast track. How else might you do it? You can try to knock out the competition: take credit for their work if possible, and if you can't do that then discredit their work. Point out their flaws. Attack their integrity. Question their motives. Prove to yourself and others that they are unworthy of moving up; they don't deserve it. And if they do get to the next rung before you, well then call them lucky. Accuse them of cheating. Tell yourself and the world that if you had all the unfair advantages they had, you'd have been their first.

Oh, and then there's the sweet joy of seeing people fall from their place on the ladder. The Germans have a word for it: it's Schadenfreude, which means "bad happiness". It's the pleasure we experience when bad things happen to other people, like when a powerful politician is exposed in a scandal and his life collapses around him. What is it they say? The higher they are the harder they fall? And boy do we love to see them take that dive; the farther the better. Why? Because it validates us. It proves our superiority. And it means they are fewer people above us, so we're that much closer to the top of the ladder.

And please do not misunderstand me: there is nothing wrong with working hard, becoming wealthy, being promoted, and earning recognition and honor for your achievements, your creativity, and your talents. There's nothing wrong with having authority over other people. These are good things. And it's right that we make the best use of the gifts that the Lord has given us. The problem is the insatiable desire we all have to feel in one way or another superior to others, to establish the pecking order and to move our way up on it. That's what drives the wisdom from below.

It's also what drove Satan to rebel against the Lord. He wanted God's throne for himself. He wanted to sit in the driver's seat. And it was the same temptation he used on our first parents: "You can be like God." It worked on them; they fell for it. And it works on us too. And I want you to see this for what it is: it's self idolatry. It's you worshipping yourself. Think about it: if life's a ladder then the top rung is occupied by the Lord. And your steady climb is ultimately about removing him from his place so that you can occupy it. In your mind, you already do. This is why you tell yourself, "If I were in charge, the world would be a better place. There wouldn't be all this sorrow, sickness, and sadness everywhere. There'd be no wars, no famines, no diseases. Life would be good for everybody. And more importantly, I wouldn't be treated the way I am now. No, things would be fair. People would respect me. They'd look up to me. And I'd get the things I deserve." The wisdom of the world is mankind's attempt to supplant the Lord and become God. This is why James calls it what he does: demonic. It's the mind of Satan.

The wisdom from above is the mind of the Lord. And it's exactly the opposite. Instead of always trying to climb higher, the wisdom from above *descends*. It reaches downward. Its goal is not to climb above others but to get below them, as it were, and serve them – to do what's best for them. The wisdom from above sees that there really is no ladder that distinguishes one person from another. That's a false construct. There are only people, people originally created in the image of God but now fallen into sin. That's why with the wisdom from above there is no favoritism, no distinctions made between people based on their relative rank, wealth, vocation, or place in society. There are only people. And all of these people have needs. Some may need food, shelter, or clothing. Others may need education. Still others may need a friend, a word of comfort or encouragement, or some assistance getting a job done. Everybody needs something. And the wisdom from above asks, "What can I do to help fill this need?" And then does it, without counting the cost or worrying about what others will think.

We see this wisdom from above most clearly in the Gospel itself, as the Son of God leaves behind his heavenly glory and enters this corrupt and fallen world as one of us, taking on our frail flesh. He then lives the perfect human life, not in princely glory and comfort, but in deepest humility, poverty, and weakness. And then to serve our most pressing need, the need to be saved from our sins and everlasting condemnation, he bears our sins to the cross. He takes them on himself as if he himself had committed them. He bears the shame. He bears the disgrace. And he endures the punishment, as the wrath of God that should have been ours falls on him. In the end, he dies in our place in order to satisfy for us the eternal decree: the soul that sins must die.

That's the loving service he performed for us to redeem us and give us new lives in him – lives free from sin and its curse, lives filled with his Holy Spirit who gives us the mind of Christ so that we no longer see things according the wisdom of the world. Now, by God's Word and the Spirit living within us, we can begin to see other people as they really are according the wisdom from above.

This wisdom, James tells us, is first of all *pure*; that is there is nothing evil or self-centered in it. It delights in the good of others and seeks to ensure their well-being. Then it's *peaceable*: it wants to make amends and bends over backward to settle disputes. It's *gentle*: the word James uses means that it puts up with a lot of abuse and insult, and doesn't get angry or resentful. It's *open to reason*; that is, it's able to see things from other points of view and is willing to make concessions to accommodate the weaknesses of others. It's *full of mercy and good fruit*; that is, it forgives the faults of others. It holds no grudges against them. And it works for their good despite what harm they may have done to you. It's *impartial*: as I said before, it plays no favorites. In the wisdom from below, we're most likely to serve those whom we perceive can repay the favor and do us good in return. The wisdom from above doesn't do that. It's not motivated by the hope reward and so serves all according to their needs. And finally, James says, the wisdom from above is *sincere*; that is, it's genuine. It's the real thing – not just an act we put on to impress others with our goodness and piety. No, it comes from the heart. And with all of these attributes, James tells us, the wisdom from above sows in peace a harvest of righteousness; that is to say the good it brings about in the end is far greater than the investment.

All of which sounds real good, doesn't it? But if you're like me, you're probably thinking, "But that doesn't describe me. As much as I might want to think and act that way, I don't. I'm still stuck in the other mode. My mind functions according to the wisdom from below." If that's what you're thinking, you're right. Or to be more precise, you're partially right. It's true: you still have your old fallen nature that operates according to the wisdom from below. While you live in this world, you always will. But because you have been called and enlightened by the Spirit through the Word of Christ, there is a part of you – your new and redeemed nature – that thinks and operates according to the wisdom from above. So, in addition to your old, fallen mind, you *do* have the mind of Christ. We are, as James puts it, "double-minded". And your growth toward spiritual maturity depends on getting less of the first and more of the latter.

How? James tells us. You begin by recognizing the wisdom from below for what it is: demonic. It's sin. Friendship with the world and its way of thinking makes you the enemy of God. That's bad. So, when you find yourself thinking and acting in the wisdom of the world, understand what you're up to and repent. As James says, "Be wretched and mourn and weep". Know that it's what you are supposed to be ashamed of – like the disciples were. And then in humility turn to God in Christ, seeking his blood-bought forgiveness, and he will grant it. He gives grace to the humble. And he draws near to those who draw near to him. More than that,

he yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us. He wants to see that new nature in you grow and mature and bear the fruit of his righteousness. And he wants to give you what he knows will serve you best. It's what he in his wisdom is all about. So ask. Ask believing that he can and will grant to you the wisdom from above and he will do it for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria