

Disruptive Living
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James 3:13-18 NRSV

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But 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. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

It is Time to be Disruptive

The word “disruptive” has become popular in business and investment circles. Disruptive companies are those who up-end their respective markets, reaching stratospheric valuations in a very short period of time. Apple reached a \$10 billion valuation in 23 years, and Amazon did in less than five. At the same time, companies are being disrupted faster than ever. Since 2000, half of all Fortune 500 companies have either gone bankrupt or been acquired. They ceased to exist in less than two decades. Some financial advisors promote themselves as being wise in the ways of disruptive investing because no one wants to be on the wrong side of disruption.

We are returning to James, and to his letter written to the scattered Christians of the Jerusalem church. They have left the city under persecution. They believe that they are on the wrong side of the disruption. But James says that the opposite is true! Jesus Christ, the one who revealed the truth about how things really are and how God really intends them to be, has turned the world upside down. His life, his violent death on the cross, and his resurrection all confirm that this is the kind of disruption the world has been crying out for. In Christ, God has entered into human history and brought the great disruption that will set things right. Those who would place their trust in Jesus will stop investing in the toxic, corrupt, and broken ways of doing things – the practices of the “old world.” Instead they continue Jesus’ disruptive work. They will put their hands and hearts to building the kind of world in which God’s love, compassionate generosity, and justice are enjoyed by every single person. They will invest in what Jesus called The Kingdom of God.

So James goes out of his way to emphasize that the guidance he is offering is contrarian to say the least. Instead of trying to escape trials, celebrate them. Instead of looking out for yourself, take care of widows and orphans. Instead of using your money or your words to gain advantage or preferential treatment, use them to bless your neighbors and honor the Lord.

In this, the third installment of our on-going study, we get four more lessons for how to live contented, trustful lives as friends with God and allies with our neighbors even as disruptive forces overtake our nation and our world. In this first lesson, James wants us to understand that

Wisdom is the only reliable path to a good life and a good society.

If you want a good life, envy and ambition won't get you there. Playing fast and loose with the truth never leads that way. There is no peace in a society led by those who rule by division and celebrate aggression. In this year of all years, we need to practice wisdom, we need to actively support leaders who demonstrate wisdom, and we need to lovingly-yet-firmly reject unwise thinking and acting. It is time to be disruptive.

The so-called wisdom that promotes winning-at-any-cost isn't what James calls "wisdom from above." James says that it is "earthly, unspiritual, and devilish" which is very close to what Paul describes in Ephesians 2:1-3 as the source of evil. The Bible and classic moral theology teach that the source of evil is the World, the Flesh, and the Devil – *in that order!*

These three words have created a lot of confusion, so a little explanation is needed. The **World** isn't creation, or nature. It's the institutions and systems that justify sin as necessary to get ahead. The world teaches us that might makes right, the loudest person wins, and greed is good.

The **Flesh** is not your body or your sensuality as we have come to think. The Flesh is best understood as our egos. The Flesh is our false images of ourselves that can so easily become bloated, fragile and empty – constantly needing more and more to be satisfied.

The **Devil** is the personification of invisible, negative force. When we become enthralled with the world and the flesh, we not only stop seeing sin as sin, but we glorify it and see it as the highest good. It is invisible to us as if it's in the air we breathe. So Paul refers to the Devil in Ephesians 2:2 as "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." Anything that is too big to fail or too powerful to critique inevitably becomes demonic.

We are all under the influence of the World, the Flesh and the Devil. We are steeped in a culture that is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. Good people – even good church-going people – are not exempt. And the state of our society in 2020 demonstrates it. We all know that the pandemic hasn't caused it. It only revealed it. What we have seen in ourselves in 2020 cannot be unseen. If we want good lives for ourselves and a good society for future generations, then James' disruptive wisdom is what is needed.

So perhaps we should ask: What is Wisdom Again?

Earlier in our study of James I offered my working definition of wisdom:

Wisdom: An understanding of reality that enables me

to respond in the most loving way possible.

Notice how James describes a wise person. Verse 17 – “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.”

I don't know about you, but when I read this I think of the Apostle Paul's writings. People try to suggest that James--a leader of the Jerusalem church, and Paul—the evangelist to the Gentile world, see faith and works very differently. But I can't help but notice that the Holy Spirit who inspired James to write verse 17 also inspired Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 and his fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Yes, it is a truly a crazy world we live in where self-control, peace-making, and plain-speaking are radical and disruptive acts. But that is the kind of world we are living in. And if we Christians won't live this way, what hope is there for the world? Who do we expect to know – much less practice – this kind of disruptive living if we won't?

Seeing reality in a way that enables us to respond in the most loving way possible won't be possible with earthly wisdom. Only “wisdom from above” can do this.

How To Get Wisdom from Above

So... Where and how do we acquire “wisdom from above”? There is an answer that preachers always *give*, because it is the thing that preachers always *got* – namely, the Bible. If you want to gain wisdom from above, then you should read your Bible. Read it daily. Study it with others. Read authors who have steeped themselves in the Scriptures and learn from their wisdom. If you are in the habit of listening to preachers, then you are expecting me to say that. And now I have.

But the older I get, the more I realize I can't *teach* people into a relationship with God. More and more information about God will not do it. Remember that, from our study of John 9, no one knew more about God and God's law than the Pharisees, yet they could not recognize the Son of God when he was standing right in front of them.

[Rohr says:] “What is needed is an experience of God. What is needed are practices in Presence. Presence is the one thing necessary to attain wisdom, and in many ways, it is the hardest thing of all. Just try to keep your *heart* open and soft, your *mind* receptive without division or resistance, and your *body* aware of where it is and its deepest level of feeling. Presence is when all three centers are awake at the same time!”

So my invitation to you this week:

Attempt a 20 minute “sit” of contemplative silence, three times this week.

[Describe a “sit”.]

Over the last two weeks, the Session has been practicing this, because they recognized that the need for wisdom has never been greater. For a week we met each afternoon to pray together. Yes we sang, yes we made our petitions known to God, and yes we said the Lord’s Prayer. But we also practiced presence. Why? Because wisdom is not the gathering of more facts and information. Wisdom is a way of seeing and knowing the same things but in a new way. More data does not equal more meaning. But more time practicing presence allows us to take the data we do have – even as we wish we knew more – and make decisions that come from a place of peace and gentleness. Presence enables us to act out of faith, hope, and love.

James is no-nonsense guy. He is nothing if not a realist. He never shrinks from confronting the brutal facts of life, and of sin. But James is also a mystic. His wisdom is born out of countless hours on his knees, practicing presence with God. Our community, our nation, and our world need more no-nonsense mystics like James. How will you offer the wisdom from above you have received to your desperate and divided nation?