

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Attitudes of Faith,
A Series on the Letter of James:
A Single-Minded Faith”
Proverbs 23:15-25
James 4:1-10**

**Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 7, 2018**

Proverbs 23:15-25

My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. My inmost being will exult when your lips speak what is right. Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off. Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags. Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice; he who fathers a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.

Introduction

Thus far in our series on the Letter of James, the Apostle has taught us much about the attitudes of faith. Firstly, our faith must be active. In this way we produce true and pure religion, being not only hearers of the Word, but doers also. Secondly, true and pure religion, he argues, is free from partiality. For human distinctions are judgments encroaching into the realm belonging to God. Thirdly, an active and impartial faith is influenced by divine wisdom, which comes from above and is itself pure, peaceable, impartial, and sincere. When we open ourselves to being persuaded by the sound reasonings of holy wisdom we are led to a fourth attitude: single-minded faith. Now, there's a positive way and a negative way of understanding single-mindedness. The negative way conjures notions of close-mindedness or narrow-mindedness. I don't think that's what James has in mind. For him, a single-minded faith is a focused faith. Focused on God in thought and deed. And this will be made apparent as we study...

James 4:1-10

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

"A Single-Minded Faith"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our passage today follows on the heels of last week's, so it is safe to assume a continuity between them. When our moral compass is that of earthly wisdom, James says our "passions" rage within us. Other translations may use desires, lusts, cravings, or pleasures. The word James uses is *hedoné*. This word does mean pleasure, lust, or delight; and it comes to us in the word "hedonism." Hedonism defines pleasure as the highest good. Christianity, however, defines pleasure differently. The hedonist tends to see pleasure strictly on the level of sensual feeling and limits pleasure to quantifiable dimensions. The hedonist asks, "How much pleasure will such and such activity bring me?" When this is the focal point for all thought and deed, we can see how quickly the passions come to rage and war. Just look at this debacle with the Senate. Those senators don't care about Judge Kavanaugh or Dr. Ford. Their motivation is whether or not the vote they cast will secure their future. The battles of our own hedonism are playing out right before our eyes!

The "war" of the passions stems from the ethic of hedonism: if it *feels* good, it *is* good. This may sound appealing, but hedonism is a philosophy rooted in despair. What's actually reflected in this way of thinking is the sense of hopelessness that grows after you've erased the eternal. If life is just everything between birth and death, and there is no eternal significance, then grabbing onto earthly pleasures makes sense. It's a way out of the reality of our own mortality. Trouble begins when what feels good to you doesn't feel good to me, and it might not feel good to her, which might not feel good to him. And thus our pleasures are at war, both within ourselves and without. Just look at James' examples: "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." The way beyond this, for the Christian, is found in focusing on God.

Heavenly wisdom grants to us a vision of the true and eternal peace that comes through Christ, yet it cannot be measured or it may feel delayed to us. Earthly wisdom limits our view to the here and now to known experience, which is why hedonism as a philosophy and a way of life is so popular. The hedonist pursues a selfish peace: the peace of wealth, the peace of power, the peace of prestige. Yet that peace is earthly, tainted, and temporary. The Christian pursues a peace that is perfect, holy, infinite, and found only in Christ. This is a foundational concept for the church in general and for Presbyterians in particular. "What is the chief end of man?" Y'all know it: "To glorify God *and enjoy* him forever." God is to be our highest joy. Our passions, pleasures, and happiness are to be found in God first and foremost. Friendship with God means enjoying him completely and forever.

Friendship with God, finding our pleasure in him, is the basis of our covenantal relationship with him. At creation, God found his handiwork good, and the culmination of that work—Adam and Eve—he found very good. He rested with the man and the woman, he enjoyed their presence, he walked in the garden with them. But because of the fall, humanity no longer shares that blessed rest with our Creator. "Sin destroys happiness. By sinning we violate God. We injure our relationship with him. We frustrate the goal of our own humanity. But sin is pleasurable. If sin

offered no pleasure it would have little attraction for us. The enticement of sin is for the short-term feeling of pleasure.”¹ When we give in to the tempting pleasures of sin, we are buddies up with iniquity. To see after sin’s decadence is to enter into camaraderie with wickedness. To be friends with the world and desire a friendship with God is spiritual adultery!

Biblically speaking, adultery means more than just illicit sexual relationships. The Bible also uses it to describe the Church’s desiring of “both-and” or a “have your cake and eat it too” mentality. In the Old Testament, Israel is constantly called out by the Prophets for her adulterous relationships with other gods. The Israelites want to be the blessed children of God on the one hand and, on the other hand, they want to worship the idols of the world. We see this playing out immediately following the Exodus. Moses has been up on Mount Sinai for a very long time. The people, having been delivered from Egypt, are looking for some leadership. So they turn to Aaron, Moses’ brother, and they ask him to “make us gods who shall go before us.” Instead of chiding and rebuking the people for their insolence, Aaron orders them to turn over their gold jewelry that he might fashion a golden calf.

At the creation of this idol, those rowdy Israelites say, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Not only that, Aaron, upon seeing their brazenness, builds an altar before the calf and makes this noteworthy proclamation: “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” You see, Aaron is doing two things at once. He’s appeasing the people’s adulterous idolatry *and* invoking the name of the one true God. Both-And. The Church doesn’t completely ignore God in our idolatry. We like to hedge our bets. The nominal Christian doesn’t want to risk losing God, but at the same time is not convinced about God, so he supplements his faith with idols and false doctrines. In our minds, it is safer to just lift the idols up to God’s level and worship both, rather than focus on one over the other.

My friends, this cannot be so. Elsewhere, Jesus says, “because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” The Christian cannot eat the cake of iniquity while seated at the Communion Table, for James so boldly puts it, “friendship with the world is enmity with God.” Do you remember what happened to the Israelites who worshiped the golden calf? At God’s fury, the ground swallowed them whole! Seeking friendship with both the world and with God is the very definition of double-minded faith. Double-mindedness tries to hold on to two opposites, and in that folly, proclaims both as truth. Church, there is but only one truth. And that is God’s truth. We cannot have God’s truth as our moral compass while also following the world’s version of the truth. This double-handed juxtaposition happens when there is a failure to cultivate divine wisdom. When we fail to pursue heavenly wisdom, we engender double-mindedness through the hypocrisy and selfishness of hedonism. Moreover, seeking after our own passions, letting them rage and war within us and without, is the very real breaking of the Greatest Commandment. Hedonism says there is no need to care for the poor because the poor should be able to care for themselves just as I care for myself. Double-mindedness says there is no need to commit oneself to God because God is an expression of *a* truth and truth is subjective.

The only cure for hedonism and double-mindedness is submission to God through a single-minded faith. We Americans hate the idea of submission. We hate the idea of submitting to a crown, or to a master, or even to Congress! I bet if Americans could strike all notion of submission from the English language, we probably would. That's hedonism! Submitting to God is the highest calling. Submitting to God is the Christian's responsibility. Submitting to God is probably one of the hardest things for us to do. I'll be the first to tell you I don't do it perfectly or as often as I should. But submission to God is exactly what we need to do. Only through submission are we able to free ourselves from the trappings of hedonism. Before we can even resist the devil, we must submit to God. In submitting to God we turn our whole focus onto him. In submission, we give ourselves over to his transforming and renewing power. Only when we fully surrender ourselves over to God does he cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. Here, again, we see James' referring to the Double Love Rule. Clean hands and pure hearts reflect the love we have for our neighbors and for God. Loving both God wholly and neighbor fully is the only "both-and" the Christian should desire.

With clean hands and pure hearts, we are able to turn our earthly laughter and worldly joy into gloom and dust. It's not that God doesn't want us to be happy. But our happiness should be in him. What God does find beautiful is our humility. We proclaim with the Fifty-First Psalm: "Create in me a clean heart, O god, and renew a right spirit within me...a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." One of the ways we humble ourselves before God is by coming to the Communion Table. He has set this wonderful feast before us, so we should come focused on him. In the bread and cup we are nourished by the presence and spirit of Christ himself, if only we shed off our selfishness. James tells us to humble ourselves before the Lord, and we do so by presenting ourselves before the table. We come to this meal as sinners, turning to God as our sole salvation, being guided by his wisdom, and sharing his love. We gather around this sacred sustenance with contrition on our hearts and discernment on our minds. Only God is in a position to condemn, and that should move us to seek after him alone. Sisters and brothers, as we share in this feast together, let us remember that we are to be single-minded in that our sacrifice of praise belongs to God and to him alone.

Let us pray. O Holy Spirit, you are our Guide and Advocate, help us to turn to the Father and to the Son, from whence you came. Help us to be single-minded in our faith, not succumbing to the pleasures of this world but in desiring God. May our hearts, minds, and bodies be focused on loving God with our whole selves and loving neighbor as we love ourselves. If we love Christ, we will keep his commands. In his name we pray. Amen.

¹ R. C. Sproul, "Hedonism: Grabbing for All the Gusto! (pt. 3)" from *Ligonier Ministries*, 2009. <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/hedonism-grabbing-for-all-the-gusto-pt-3/>