

SERMON 9-20-15 (17th Sunday after Pentecost)
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Today we continue in our second lesson to hear from the Epistle of James. You may recall that last Sunday we heard from James about the dangers of an unbridled, untamed tongue. Today James moves from words tripping off the tongue to actions that will bring us to disorder and wickedness of every kind.

Remember who James is writing to. James is not writing to some ne're do wells or enemies of God – he is writing to the church, to us, to those who profess to believe in God and to follow our Lord, Jesus Christ. And he acknowledges that even though we are Christians, we continue to be tempted as we are formed into disciples of Jesus. Christian formation is a lifelong experience of perfecting ourselves in Christ.

In our individual lives as Christians, and together as the church, we are continually making choices between God's way and the way of the world. While it is good for us to retreat into this beautiful church building and to worship God and have meaningful fellowship with one another, once our service is over, we're going to have to go back out into that world, and live out our Christian lives in a sometimes difficult environment.

James talks about our behavior in the world, and one particular behavior he hones in on is envy, and I'd like to spend some time focusing in on envy, and what James says about envy – how it pulls us from the wisdom of God, leading us away from God into disorder and wickedness.

James writes: "If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."

There is God's wisdom, and the wisdom of the world. And the wisdom of the world is the logic of envy.

What is envy: envy is to long to possess something awarded to or achieved by another. We don't have it: someone or something else does. We want it.

Envy James writes comes from the heart – from our very essence; we desire something we don't have and from that we become envious.

Now it's hard to blame you and me from having envious desires. Because we live in a society based on the logic of envy. Our market-based economy runs on envy.

Consider the barrage of commercials and advertisements we encounter every day of our lives. What message are they sending? Here is a product or a service that you don't have that will give you happiness. You need this product or service, because you will be unhappy, you will live an unhappy life until you make that purchase.

This TV you are watching is now too small for happy television viewing. You need a larger TV. This iPhone6 that you have is too clunky and limited – you need the happiness that the new iPhone6s will bring (in stores beginning this Friday). You are looking pretty rough; buy this beauty cream and you will regain your youthful complexion.

Oh how envious we are called to be of those who have that 90 inch ultra-high definition TV, who make their calls on the newest Smartphone, who are beautiful beyond their years.

It's a mindset of winners and losers, of being reminded that someone else is better and greater than we are.

Now I could go on and say that it is just American society that is prone to the logic of envy, but I think it is not limited to us. Consider today's gospel: the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest – like there is a competition, there is one winner and many losers, and one is envious of the position of another.

Nelson Aldrich Jr. wrote a book called *Old Money: the Mythology of Wealth in America*. In it he commented on the role envy plays in American society. He wrote:

“Envy is so integral and painful a part of what animates human behavior in market societies that many people have forgotten the full meaning of the word, simplifying it into one of the symptoms of desire. It is that [(a symptom of [desire](#))], which is why it flourishes in market societies: democracies of desire, they might be called, with money for ballots, stuffing permitted. But envy is more or less than desire. It begins with the almost frantic sense of [emptiness](#) inside oneself, as if the pump of one's heart were sucking on air. One has to be blind to perceive the emptiness, of course, but that's what envy is, a selective blindness. *Invidia*, Latin for envy, translates as "nonsight," and Dante had the envious plodding along under cloaks of lead, their eyes sewn shut with leaden wire. What they are blind to is what they have, God-given and humanly nurtured, in themselves”

Envy begins with a sense of emptiness within ourselves, and is a selective blindness to what we have. We see ourselves as unfulfilled and look to the world for fulfillment, envying what we think we do not have. We are manipulated by marketers to be envious, engineered to see ourselves as inadequate and empty. That is the wisdom of the world, the logic of envy.

But as Christians, we are not empty. We are filled with the Holy Spirit. We are temples of God, rich with abundance. But envy makes us blind to that. We are foolish rather than wise to what we have been given.

Bertrand Russell, a Nobel Prize Laureate and early 20th century philosopher, wrote a book called the [Conquest of Happiness](#), in which he explored why people are unhappy, and he believed that envy has a lot to do with unhappiness. He writes:

“Of all the characteristics of ordinary human nature envy is the most unfortunate; not only does the envious person wish to inflict misfortune ... but he is also rendered unhappy by envy. Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, he derives pain from what others have. ...The only cure for envy in the case of ordinary men and women is happiness, and the difficulty is that envy is itself a terrible obstacle to happiness.”

We are a nation that is committed to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But when we pursue the illusion of happiness through envy, we never truly achieve happiness. Because just when we get the next popular gadget or satisfy our desires, there is something else to envy, and we are unhappy until we pursue that as well.

Where does envy lead? Not to happiness, James says, but rather to disputes and conflicts, a war within you that can ultimately lead to murder, since the ultimate way to get something that someone else has is to eliminate them and take what is theirs. He cautions that the creeping of the world's wisdom into the church itself will cause disputes and conflicts. The logic of envy is that ours is a scarce world and I'm going to take what I desire, whatever the consequences.

James contrasts this wisdom of the world, this logic of envy, with the wisdom of God, which he says is pure, then peaceable, gentle. What is the opposite of envy, but to be at peace with what we have, with where we are, with who we are, to be full of Spirit of God? In God there is great abundance, contentment and peace of mind. In God we are loved as we are. In God we understand what we need, rather than what we desire. In God's wisdom we are willing to yield. Because we are not envious, it doesn't matter what someone has or does, we are fine yielding to it, it has no power over us. Someone has a larger flat screen; fine. Someone is having a good time on vacation while you are sick or suffering; fine. You are not defined by these things; you are defined by your creator, you are a child of God, filled with the Holy Spirit. When you give these things more power than you give to God, you give into idolatry. Release their power over you and embrace God's wisdom.

In God's wisdom we are full of mercy. An envious person would have no mercy, no care of others besides self. While an envious person pursues worldly happiness, a person in God's wisdom dwells in contentment and peace, a state of well-being, true happiness. An envious person, James points out, desires God to do their will and is angry when their prayers aren't answered, because that person does not seek God's wisdom and asks wrongly. A person who desires God's wisdom will know that God's spirit is with them and God will give them what they need, and will pray for peace in their heart and God's will to be done.

James in his lesson today is being very pastoral. He knows what world we live in. He knows it's set up to bring out the envy in us. But he also knows we have a choice. We can give in to the logic of envy, and the emptiness and illusion of happiness that it gives us. Or we can choose the good life, one lived in gentleness to ourselves and others, calling upon the wisdom of God, and finding happiness in his calling to act in love and mercy to others, being content that we are filled with abundance with the Spirit and showing in our works our gratitude for what we have been given and for who we are. We are called to the Good life in Our Lord.

So when you see an ad telling you that you are inadequate, empty or lacking, or need to buy something to be happy, remember that this is just the wisdom of the world, and you are not beholden to that wisdom. Because you follow a different wisdom as a follower of Christ. You are a child of God, filled with God's abundant love, you are more than adequate: you are awesome just as you are.

Let us open our eyes and be grateful for the blessings we have been given, and happy for all of God's people. But be alert, for the devil will try to turn your heart into one of envy; James says to resist, again and again and again, and the devil will flee from you. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you. That is the secret to true happiness, to dwell in God's wisdom, to dwell in that peace which passes all understanding. Pray unceasingly to be open to that wisdom. It is within you right now. The 23rd Psalm begins: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Only in our Lord are we truly satisfied and without want, only in him are we truly secure, only in the Lord will we discover true happiness.