

## Devotion on James 3:13-18 (LTS in Tshwane, 2015-08-05, Werner Klän)

Does it really come as a surprise to us that James has to criticise his addressees so harshly? Sometimes we fantasize that in the primitive days of Christianity, everything was far better than it seems to be in our time and day. We often share a more romantic perspective, idealizing the first and second Christian generations. The New Testament record, however, is apt to give us a sober impression on the state of Christian life in the early congregations, even in the times of the apostles. That is what we learn, e.g. From James' letter to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1). If this address originally meant Jewish Christian groups in the first century A.D., it nevertheless aims at us here and today: students from many parts of Africa, professors coming to this seminary from three to four continents to teach. So the description of the target groups that James writes to, meets with our situation, as we are gathered this morning for confession and absolution, Lutherans stemming often from minority churches living around the world.

There must have been envy in those congregations, bitter envy even; there must have been ambition, selfish ambition indeed.

*Envy:* This person has got more money than I have got; he or she lives in a bigger home than I could ever afford; this lady wears bracelets I may never be able to buy for my beloved wife; that guy drives a car that is far too expensive for me in terms of purchase, not to mention maintenance. Comparing ourselves to others, who seemingly are wealthier, or better off than we consider ourselves to be, that causes jealousy, and jealousy will render us either angry, or downcast. And anger will make us furious and aggressive, while depression will paralyze us, suffering from inferiority complexes. Because our anger usually cannot be addressed to the person that is responsible for it – unless we really go to beating up somebody in an outburst of fury – it will fall back on us: we start to mumble within ourselves; we cannot sleep at night, as our grudge is stirring up our hearts continually; we cannot concentrate on the things we ought to do, as our ill will keeps our minds busy with thoughts of compensation and revenge. Indeed, if it comes to envy in our hearts and minds, if we foster it in our souls– then "you find disorder and every evil practice" (3:16).

But it is not only the material world that causes envy: With suspicious eyes we look at people who seem to be more influential, or higher esteemed than we judge us to be. We feel underestimated then, ignored, neglected, or disdained even; we suffer from feeling sorry for ourselves; we give in to low spirits and melancholy; we tend to burrow into sorrow and become fainthearted. But again: These feelings will fall back on ourselves: if we feed them with the excess nutrition of self-pity, we seclude ourselves from others, complaining our miserable fate, and deploring how badly all the world constantly and unceasingly is acting against us. Indeed, then "you find disorder and every evil practice", deep down in your soul (3:16).

*Selfish ambition:* That is the other side of the coin only. In the western world it seems understood that striving for success, looking for good and even better opportunities or making each and every effort for improving one's situation, were only human. Competition is seen as the driving power of the economy. Therefore it is recommendable to outplay my colleague at work; therefore it is advisable to trick my boss in terms of my working hours; therefore it seems to be allowed to seek one's own advantage by all means, even the meanest means. Of course, if I were in the position that those means were mean means, so much the better, e.g. if I can sell a dirty trick for a favour I am doing somebody. In all this behaviour, in all these strategies, if we pursue them, we will find ourselves circling around ourselves, revolving around our concerns, our wishes, and our goals. Greed is absolutely legitimate, it seems, in the stock market. Avarice is ultimately allowed, obviously, in the business world. All over the world, we can easily observe, what results come from these attitudes: bribery, corruption, financial bubbles that unavoidably will burst, then bankruptcy, breakdown of markets, economic ruin, social calamities, poverty, hunger, suicides, etc.

The apostle is quite right: With these kinds of approaching life, you will end up "in disorder and every evil practice". There is no doubt about it: people acting this way, often present themselves to be clever, and are canny, urbane, and wily; they seem to be bright, intelligent, and prudent in pursuing their goals. But in truth, this is "wisdom" that "does not come from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil" (3: 15). Because this behaviour causes harm to others, it will hurt them, it will damage their options, and will be detrimental to them in many a regard. Not only this, but the evil powers being behind these actions, they do harm to the person him-/herself who behaves this way; these people then –unwillingly and sometimes without their knowing – hurt themselves, and they suffer from damage done to their image, pain from feeling isolated, from being cut off from social relationships because nobody really will like them.

Well, I have to agree that at least partially, I see myself mirrored in what I have depicted in terms of envy and selfish ambition; there traces of those in my heart that model my deeds very often, whenever my Old Adam gets the upper hand in me. And vice versa: That "wisdom that comes from heaven", like humility and peacefulness, I am far too often lacking. My motives to do this and that are not always as "pure" as they ought to be. Surely, I would like to be, as the apostle is recommending, I would like to be "considerate", much more than I usually am; I should like to be, as the apostle is proposing to us, should like to be much more "impartial and sincere" than I regularly can achieve to be. And looking with sober eyes at myself and my way of living, I have to admit that the "good fruit" that my Lord and Saviour rightly demands of me, falls short of the amount I am supposed to show. My "harvest of righteousness", if I see myself without self-deception, is poor, minimal, and only little. Too often tend I to anger, am I inclined to rage, am I pleased with my big-shotism in that I feel myself to be superior to others. Far too many times I insist on my own right instead of giving in to the legitimate demands of my fellow-brethren. That is why I so often fail to be a peacemaker; instead I cause new conflicts over and over again. My judgments are made quickly over against others, and always they are harsh, my tendency towards

bossiness is eminent, and my willingness to make concessions is under-developed; “submissiveness” is a concept far from my inner feelings; and my intention to be merciful is rather limited. And in addition, unfortunately I do rather seldom “sow in peace”.

How to cope with such an unfeigned self-perception? If we were on our own, we would either be forced to endlessly defend ourselves that we have been right after all and still are right in spite of all criticism that we might face, or we would be doomed to run into desperation because we have to realize that we are not right, indeed. But, thanks be to God, we are by no means on our own. We do reap a harvest of righteousness, yes we do. But we do not reap it from our own fields, nor do we earn it from our own merits. The harvest of righteousness that we are meant to receive, is a harvest that has been bestowed upon us. It flows from the superabundant treasure of forgiveness that Christ has in store for us. Only in the light of His mercifulness we dare approach our God; only in the perspective of His unceasing willingness to be gracious, we dare stand before Him – but rather we kneel.

For this is the sign of “humility”, that “comes from wisdom, from true wisdom, indeed. This is the attitude required of us when God’s truth shines upon us and lightens our ways: We have to acknowledge our sinful state, but moreover, we trust that God will purify us, that he will make us considerate, and that finally He in His mercy will have us share this mercy with others. Yes, we set confidence in the promise that God by humbling us through His Word of accusation and judgement, at the same time provides the prerequisite to extol us by His Gospel-message of forgiveness. We do put our hope in God’s all-overwhelming peacefulness, by which He has made peace with us in Jesus Christ, very much so. That is why we are here this morning in the LTS sanctuary, Lutherans from many countries, baptized believers from various continents, similar to those “twelve tribes scattered among the nations”, gathered to confess our sins, failures, and shortcomings compared to God’s holy will, and to be addressed with Christ’s word of forgiveness: “I forgive you all your sins”.

AMEN