

Me First!

A sermon based on James 3:13-18.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you parents have this phrase or word your kids say that drives you mad, makes you clench your teeth in frustration? Was there one you remember using in your younger years? Like the child who incessantly asks, "Why?" I recently heard from another pastor how his 3-year-old daughter has seemed to take a liking to adding "No" to everything. "Mine!" is another popular one. A few examples of some phrases from kids that convey a negative attitude...one we want to wean them off of.

Well, I have a different one for you this morning, all thanks to a seemingly harmless children's book. It details the actions of a rather plump, delightfully expressive pig named Pinkerton, who always insists on being first, **"even if it meant bouncing off bellies, stepping on snouts, or tying tales,"** as the story describes. And doing that always seemed to work well for him, that is, until one day, when he was out at the beach with his Pig Scout troop, and he heard a voice, from an island across the water, call out with the alluring request, "Who would care for a sandwich?"

Of course, Pinkerton said, "Me first," rushed towards the voice, only to get his comeuppance, as the sandwich he was eager to get into his belly turned out to be an actual Sand Witch, who needed someone to take care of her...and there was Pinkerton, eager to be first...not so eager to serve. You can bet this little piggy learned his lesson in humility.

Of course, this is a fun and funny story intended to teach kids to avoid saying "Me first!" ...to not always be thinking about ourselves first...to not so selfish. Guess who's learned the opposite lesson (although, I think, wanting to give her the benefit of the doubt, I think she's joking, but still causes me to clench my teeth when I hear her say it)?

What does it take to move on from that selfish "me first" attitude? What do we do to combat jealousy and envious thoughts of others? As parents, we try to instill this desire in our children to be willing and happy to share...or to be patient...or we don't always have to be at the front of the line...or we can always be thankful for what we have because there are others out there who don't have close to what we do.

But, what about for us adults? Do we need that lesson as well?

"Go on, you deserve the credit. Let people know what you did!" Those were Diane's words to her co-worker. Even though Joe had just completed an important project ahead of schedule and under budget, he was reluctant to put himself in the spot light. He preferred to stand in the background because he found satisfaction in just doing his job well. Diane was the exact opposite. She loved the attention. This is why she told Joe to take credit for what he had done. Her plan was to ride his coat tails and receive some of the accolades. This is also why she became frustrated and replied, "Don't you care if no one knows what you did!" Joe humbly mused, "I only did my job."

Who would you be in that situation? James writes here, **"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom (I'd even say godly wisdom)."**

Is that you? Or does what James write next fit you more closely: ***“If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.”***

You know, doesn't the story of Pinkerton...doesn't the story of Diane and Joe...don't they mirror the way many think, including us at times? Maybe it's not so much us wanting to be the first for everything. Like the new iPhone 8 has just come out...and actually, the iPhone X is about to replace it next month...and I don't feel the need to be waiting in line for its release. If I'm not first or even at the front of the line for a potluck, that's no skin off my back; I know there'll be something left for me to eat.

Yet the “Me first!” attitude is still there. How does it show itself in you? You know, going back to Diane and Joe, Diane's fascination with praise and frustration with the lack of it offers a valuable insight in our lives. It's easy to want the commendation of others, and there's this certain satisfaction with the recognition of one's peers...when the focus is on you.

People like praise. People like recognition. People like to hear how good they are. You and I no different. From the teacher who puts the smiley face at the top of your test because you aced your test to the employer who hands you an envelope with a bonus check inside because you exceeded expectations for the quarter, ambition and praise drives us and motivates us.

And not that it's always a bad thing (God certainly wants us to do our best). But what about when it becomes all about me? Unfortunately, this desire for praise can affect my spiritual life. Maybe it's falsifying (I'd call it padding) the statistics in order to gain a promotion. Telling lies about someone else in order to advance at my job or look better in my teacher's or parent's eyes. Putting down others because it makes me feel better about myself. Sounds a lot like Pinkerton “bouncing off bellies, stepping on snouts, or tying tales,” doesn't it.

We face this constant temptation to think God should be impressed by the things we've done. You know what all of that says, don't you? “God, me first!” “God, it's all about me!” “God, look how fit I am for heaven!” In reality, though, it's us giving into bitter envy and selfish ambition.

As James says, if such “wisdom” is yielding a life full of bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition, this is no wisdom at all but pompous gas. This is not heavenbound but earthbound, not of God but of Satan (the Greek word there is *demos*...that kind of thinking is demonic), not of the Spirit but unspiritual.

You and I may try to boast about what we've done, but remember it's the Lord who sets the standard. We may do many good things, yet none achieve perfection. As Jesus once said: ***“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.”*** When I compare my deeds with the Lord's desire for perfection, I can only hang my head in shame. It is impossible for me to attain his perfect standard. Me first? Maybe first in line for eternal judgment.

Maybe we could use a sand witch to teach us a lesson in humility. Or maybe something better...like Jesus. Jesus offers a different perspective...one that started with God saying, “Me first. Here's what I want...***God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”***

God wants you and me to be with him in heaven forever. So he sent Jesus, the greatest display of humility and selflessness. Just look at how James here characterizes the wisdom that comes from

heaven: ***“pure...peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”***

Don't we see all that in Jesus? Pure...holy...perfect...in place of us who aren't. Considerate...he cared about our well-being over his, as shown in the violent, gruesome, painful way he suffered and died on the cross. Submissive...putting God's will above his own and being obedient to God's plan to shoulder the sins of the world. Full of mercy, impartial, sincere...so great was his undeserved love for you and for all people (his love has no bounds, no limitations), he lived and died and rose for you. Jesus is the ultimate peace-lover...the ultimate peacemaker who has raised a harvest of righteousness through his work of salvation...and that's us.

Friends, Jesus came to this earth; he took on our flesh and blood to accomplish what was impossible for us. With his death and resurrection, he made God's declaration of perfection a reality for you and me. Now, instead of looking to myself and promoting what I have done, I look to Jesus and rejoice in his completed work that exalts me. God loved us enough to display a "you first" attitude through his sacrifice of Jesus. Now we wisely do the same...replacing our selfish ambition and bitter envy with all the characteristics of godly wisdom James shares here.

And what does it look like? Wisdom from God is in the first place "pure." It has no additives mixed into it. It is what it is supposed to be. It seeks others' welfare first, not worrying that it will be left out in the cold. The Christian...you and I, we're ready and willing to "give in" for the sake of others. The Christian on the freeway doesn't have to cuss out the other driver for cutting him off. The Christian employee can carry out his boss' demands without sputtering under his breath or talking behind the boss' back. The Christian student doesn't have to put down a loner classmate in order to stay in the good graces of his peers. Christian siblings don't have to argue about whose turn it is to pick up the living room or clear off the table. And this attitude is one which the Christian exhibits to all, not just a chosen few. And it's all real, not a facade...not forced.

A couple of weeks ago, on the *Your Time of Grace* Youtube video devotions, Pastor Mike spent the week talking about the concept of submission, especially as the Bible applies it to marriage. His simple definition for submit? "You first."

Being pure, having the mind of Christ...this is where it starts. "You first" is not just for marriage. It's putting God and what he wants always in the first place in your heart and your life. It's putting the needs and interests of others before your own. And then, finally acting in a way that actually shows that...and leads to a harvest of righteousness.

"Me first!" We're going to keep working on cutting that phrase out of our daughter's vocabulary. But it's an attitude we get to keep repenting of and then working to avoid in our lives as well. Thankfully, we have the greatest motivation. We have a Savior who put us first when he lived, and died, and rose for us.

And now we live for him. It's as simple as that. It's 'you first," and here's a prayer for us as we live that way, "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ, my God. All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood." Amen.