

The world values cunning today. The shrewd are rewarded with promotions, bonuses, or even elected office. The cut-throat world of seeking success at all costs seems to favor and encourage those willing to exaggerate their own success and minimize the success of others. I recently heard of an industry titan mentoring one of his executives in the world of software, and the message was, “it doesn’t matter if you’re right. It matters if you win.” And the implication was to gain favor in the long run by temporarily compromising, or silencing, a sense of righteousness.

No industry is immune to this. Even the military in some way deliberately promotes the politicking for success. While I was enlisted my entire 12 years in the Marine Corps, I spent about a week at Officer Candidate School to become a commissioned officer before they discovered a shoulder injury that disqualified me from continuing. I never really even got started there, but my fellow Marines who were in the same officer commissioning program I was went through and completed. And I can recall them telling me how bad the pretense of camaraderie was out in the open, when behind closed doors, when they were required to do written peer evaluations on their team members, they would slander and defame others to prevent them from being seen as favorable by leadership.

These evaluations affected graduation rankings, and graduation rankings affected how likely you were to get the job you want – an infantry officer, or an administration officer (incidentally, most Marines would much RATHER be an infantry officer and feel insulted to become an administration officer). So there was an intense pressure to exaggerate your own accomplishments and slander the character of others in the hopes you would ultimately get what you want. “It doesn’t matter if you’re right. It matters if you win.”

I have been impacted by this in my civilian career, in state government. I was selected for an interview to head up the major production of Virginia’s 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of 1619 – a very important year in Virginia: Some might know 1619 as the year the first Africans arrived in Virginia, but it was also the year the first assembly of democratically elected representatives – a Little Parliament – met in the American colonies. It was also the year the first college in Virginia was established in Henricus. Being an American Historian that at the time focused almost exclusively on early Colonial Virginia, having written extensively about all these major events, I felt confident I could provide value as the director of this project.

I was even given assistance by a coworker, who introduced me to an influential historian who could provide a valuable reference. The interview went very well, and I expected at the very least to advance for another interview. But nothing happened. Weeks later, I followed up with no response. A year later, I received a call from my current boss at the time – the Commissioner of Veterans Services – very concerned. He felt betrayed and insulted by me, he said, because I had lied to him.

“What do you mean?” I asked, having no idea where this was going, but very concerned that I had indeed wronged this man. “Andy, you lied about having a history degree and

used that lie to get your current job. You never would have been hired [for this current job] if we knew you didn't have a four-year degree.”

I was floored. “Where is this coming from?” I asked, and before he could respond, I said, “Sir, I can send you a picture of my degree and my transcripts right now – as we're speaking on the phone. There is no way I don't have a diploma conferring me with my degree in history. I can give you the phone numbers of my professors. What evidence do you have that I don't have a degree?”

It turned out that same co-worker who offered to introduce me to that valuable historian reference advanced the rumor behind my back that I had faked my education credentials, which was the reason for my never being considered further for that 1619 position. She had eventually also informed my boss, the Commissioner, of this same rumor, which prompted him to call me. I emailed my coworker to ask why she had done this, but I never received a response. She still works there five years later.

What's interesting is I never noticed any competition between us, no animosity. I know we differed politically, but it seemed we worked well together. And it's interesting to me that one of the most effective weapons in today's cut-throat business world is the façade of altruism, that is outwardly pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. But inwardly, an honest assessment would reveal the cunning and shrewd politicking and back-stabbing to be earthly, unspiritual, demonic even, with disorder and every vile practice. “It doesn't matter if you're right. It matters if you win.” Politicians “know” this better than anybody.

But that is the wisdom of man, O church. The cunning and the shrewd who slink upwards in the ranks and accumulate influence like a grease trap builds up oil and gunk, their wisdom does not come from above.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”

This word “meekness” is the same word we saw in James 1, in which he commands us, “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with **meekness, humility, gentleness** the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

As James reminds us about wisdom, he is also reminding us about Christ. In the same way we are called to receive Christ – the implanted word – with humility, we are then called to express Christ – wisdom personified<sup>1</sup> -- in our good conduct. This is no surprise. We've been reminded of Christ throughout the book of James, but this isn't a call only to imitate Christ outwardly, when others are watching, when the cameras are on, then in private you remove the mask and show the true, wicked motives of your heart,

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1

slandering your peers or actively working against their well-being. It is not enough to imitate Christ outwardly.

If you have bitter jealousy and strife, rancor in your hearts, it doesn't matter what you say or do. Your works and words are nothing to boast about.

Now you might have noticed I used the word “strife” instead of the ESV translation “selfish ambition”. Without getting too far in the weeds of the Greek, “selfish ambition” is a sense of the word, but it's not a literal translation. And I don't think it's the best sense of the word here. “Strife” is the King James translation, but there's more context. Strife is chosen for this noun because its associated verb pretty clearly has to do with strife and contention. But this word, ἐριθειαν, was classically used, by Aristotle for example, to describe people who were running for office, along with a long list of other contemptible characteristics that have to do with the party strife of politics.<sup>2</sup> I believe the word “partiality” gives a better sense, given what we have discussed and what is yet to come.

We have seen recently how contentious, acrimonious, and filled with partiality the team sport of politics can be. Elections can be filled with strife – people compromising every moral principal outwardly expressed for the sake of a vote (do not think I have only one party in mind). This is the same type of strife we hold in our hearts when we use our shrewdness and cunning outside of politics to unjustly advance our careers or reputation and destroy the careers and reputations of others. “It doesn't matter if you're right. It matters if you win.”

The obsession over and idolization of power is as old as sin. It's as old as the serpent in the garden of Eden and the spiritual death. To quest for the power of man is not wisdom from above. It is not heavenly wisdom. It is earthy at best, hellish at worst. It is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. When you connive and scheme to manipulate yours or another's reputation by two-faced deceit, you are doing Satan's bidding. The temptation is great, I know! “It's unfair that others less qualified, less deserving, less righteous are winning. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?<sup>3</sup> Why does God idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?<sup>4</sup>”

How does the Lord answer Habakkuk when he asks this very question?

God does not say, “It doesn't matter if you're right. It matters if you win.” No, God says, “Habakkuk, the evildoer's soul is puffed up. It is not upright in him. But the righteous, the just, shall live by his faith.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1302b. The context here is political revolution, and the fundamental motives of human nature that drive corruption and political change.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 12:1

<sup>4</sup> Habakkuk 1:13

<sup>5</sup> Habakkuk 2:4

This faith, given to us, is faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. And we are commanded in this faith to “show no partiality.”<sup>6</sup> Maybe your present circumstances *will* be better if you treat the man with gold rings better than the man with dirty clothes. Maybe your reputation will be improved if you praise what is popular among the profane and reject what is legislated in eternal holiness. It doesn’t matter. “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”<sup>7</sup>

Resist the temptation to show unjust favor because it matters more that “you win”. This outward expression of partiality is rooted in earthy, unspiritual, and demonic motives. Where this type of jealousy and strife and contention and partisanship exist, you can be sure that there will be disorder and every vile practice. Our modern cultural landscape is an object lesson in this.

As the socialistic philosophies compel outward altruism in the redistribution of wealth, they are rooted in rotten, worldly, demonic motives. As the hyper-individualists of existentialism compel outward altruism by demanding tolerance and affirmation for the individual “identity,” their thoughts are rooted in disunity, partiality, and immorality.

This is what the wisdom of man gets us. Cultural impoverishment. Political decay. A civilization of **bad works. Rotten fruit not even worthy to be gleaned.**

But now, look at the contrast. The wisdom from above. James again play in opposites. Having described the wisdom of man as being bitterly jealous and contentiously factious and partial, now see how beautiful the wisdom of God is: pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and **good fruits, impartial** and sincere.

Another reason I think “partiality” is a better sense than “selfish ambition” for the Greek word ἐπιθειαν is because “impartiality” is listed in the list of opposite attributes.

Where does this wisdom come from? Job asks this very question, which we heard in our Old Testament reading. “Surely there are mines for gold, silver, iron, and cooper, and look at the lengths to which man will dig in the earth into the darkness just to fine some glimmer of wealth! He overturns mountains by the roots. He cuts out channels in the rocks in the pursuit of what is precious. But where is the most precious thing found? Where is wisdom found? The deep says, ‘It is not in me,’ and the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. From where, then, does wisdom come?”

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<sup>6</sup> James 2:1

<sup>7</sup> Mark 8:36

It comes from above. “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. He established it and searched it out. And he said to man, “Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.”<sup>8</sup>

James, as he concludes this paragraph, returns to the very-familiar agricultural language that illustrates the grace of God so vividly. The harvest of the grain and the vineyard that is mentioned so often in the Old Testament points to the Bread of Life and the True Vine. The harvest<sup>9</sup> or fruit of righteousness is only possible because of the Lord of the Harvest, and James knows it. True wisdom only comes from above, and true righteousness only comes from above. Again, James reminds us that Jesus Christ is the point. Jesus Christ, the consummate firstfruit, whose good works have been imputed to us.

There is much for us to do, brothers and sisters. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore **pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest** to send out laborers into his harvest.”<sup>10</sup>

We don’t need to spend our lives worried about “winning at all costs”. We do need to spend our lives concerned with being right. With being righteous. With showing the righteousness of Christ, by using our wisdom from above unto good works to one another. To show Christ in our politics, to promote and defend holiness in our business, to live humbly knowing that our king is victorious. Brothers and sisters, that which is right, that which is righteous **has won and will never fail to win**. Christ, the firstfruit of the resurrection, has conquered the grave so that we may enjoy eternal life, eternal peace with him in glory. And every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

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<sup>8</sup> Job 28

<sup>9</sup> See BDAG at καρπος (B).

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:2