



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

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in the Season after Pentecost

Christians Strive to be Servants of All

We live in a society of me. More and more, people in our society are more interested in themselves than others. Their lives become obsessed with my needs, my opinions, my interests, and my success. Christians often fall into the same trap. The teachings of Jesus look in a very different direction. In the Gospel for today we hear Jesus say: “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Jesus encouraged that kind of service and he also modeled it as he served and saved us.

First Reading	Numbers 12:1-15 <i>The Lord disciplined those who undermined humble Moses.</i>
Second Reading	James 3:13-18 <i>Avoid arrogance; strive to live in humility and peace.</i>
Gospel	Mark 9:30-37 <i>Jesus wants us to be servants of all.</i>
Sermon	James 3:13-18 and Mark 9:30-37

They were born between 1907 and 1927. My parents were born then; maybe yours, too. Life wasn't always easy for them, but life was fairly simple and pretty predictable. They made sacrifices but didn't always realize they were making sacrifices. But then in 1929 the stock market crashed and those young people began to know what sacrifice meant. Banks closed, crops failed, people lost their jobs. They lived through the Great Depression and most of them made it. But then in 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the Second World War began. 16 million of them served in the armed services and they learned a new meaning for sacrifice: over a million paid the ultimate sacrifice of their lives or their health. Years later, the TV commentator Tom Brokaw wrote a book about them and he titled it *The Greatest Generation*. The title stuck. We still talk about the greatest generation.

The Greatest Generation knew what it meant to make sacrifices; they also knew what it meant to make babies. There was a baby boom after World War II and the Baby Boomers didn't need to make sacrifices. New jobs, new highways, new technology—the Boomers could have it all. Some of the Greatest Generation instilled the idea of sacrifice into their children, but not all; in fact, not many. The new generation wasn't about to sacrifice anything; they wanted what they wanted. Another commentator, Tom Wolfe, named them “the Me Generation.” The Me generation didn't end with the Baby Boomers, either. The Boomers passed it on to their children who are now passing it on their children. More and more, what matters in our culture is my opinion, my politics, my success, my happiness: me, myself, and I. And nobody else counts for squat. The ancient Greeks told a story about a handsome young man named Narcissus who spent his life looking into a pool where he could see a reflection of himself. We live in a culture of Narcissists—people who are in love with themselves.

The Bible doesn't know anything about Narcissus, but it knows plenty about people who love themselves. We heard examples in the readings for today: Miriam and Aaron who thought there were just as good as their brother Moses; two of Jesus' disciples who wanted to be the greatest in his kingdom. The Bible writer James talks about this in the Second Reading, but he doesn't mention any names; he doesn't give any examples. James is talking to us this morning, all of us.

He's speaking to all of us no matter what age we're at or what era we're in because in many ways we are all members of the Me Generation. So this is what we're going to talk about:

The Problem with Me

It's source and symptoms

It's cure and correction

1. When God created us he put a sense inside our brains called self-preservation or a defense mechanism. Your defense mechanism is what makes you duck when you see something coming at your head or slam on your brakes when a kid runs into the street. You don't dive into a motel swimming pool without knowing how deep the water is and you run inside when lightening gets close. God doesn't expect us to be fools who rush in where angels fear to tread.

But sometimes self-preservation turns ugly. Sometimes self-preservation turns into self-promotion and self-interest. That's what James is talking about here. **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 down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.** What turns self-preservation into self-promotion comes from sin. Self-preservation comes from godly wisdom; self-interest doesn't. **James sees the source;** he calls it **envy and selfish ambition**. We want what they have and we don't want them to have it. We want to have it our way and we don't want them to have it their way. We want to be always right and we want them to be always wrong. We've always done it our way and don't want them to do their way. We might say, "Well, we're all a little like that, aren't we; it's kind of natural, isn't it?" James doesn't think so. James says it's **earthly**, it's like the animals think, it's nothing but instinct, like the chipmunks who chew on my tomatoes. James says it's **unspiritual**; envy and ambition don't come from faith, they come from the sinful nature that lives and lurks in us. We know the sinful nature, don't we. That's the voice that whispers in our ears and sometimes it shouts in our brains. **And then James names the ultimate source:** he says that bitter envy and selfish ambition are **demonic**—they are like demons and demons are like the devil. Look. Envy and ambition are not defense mechanisms. The envy and ambition that prompted Aaron and Miriam to rebel against Moses wasn't natural. The envy and ambition that led the disciples to argue about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven didn't come from faith. They sinned and so do we. Let's cut the excuses and face the facts.

What happens when we sin? James knows: **For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. How do I list all the symptoms here?** We see these things in politics and business and sports. We see it when little boys scream at each other on the baseball diamond and when their parents scream even louder in the bleachers. We see it in road rage and frivolous lawsuits and arguments over vaccines and masks. We saw the ultimate example on 9/11 20 years ago. And you know what? We see it in ourselves whenever our stubborn pride gets the best of us and leads us into miserable chaos. **You see why I said that the problem is me.**

2. When Jesus was walking with his disciples through Galilee, he didn't need to ask what they were arguing about. He knew. He could see the envy and arrogance in their debate about greatness and he knew the disorder and evil it would cause. So he sat them down and he said: **Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all. He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.** If you want to do things my way, Jesus said, you do a switch on greatest and least: You care less about yourself and more about others. Hugging that little child was the perfect illustration. Back then, children weren't the kings and queens of culture like they are today. Nobody cared much about little kids, not even their parents. When you care about people no one else cares about, you are setting aside your own greatness and becoming a servant of all.

Obviously, it took more than a good illustration and a pretty picture. It wasn't long before these same disciples were shooing little children away from Jesus. It takes more than guidelines and graphics to change our hearts. And so Jesus told the disciples something they didn't understand, at least not at this point. **He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.** We understand this, don't we. We know that Jesus didn't come to earth just to hug little kids. He came to put himself in our shoes and to take our

place and to do all that he became the servant of all. Jesus said in another place, **The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for all.**” And then he rose from dead to guarantee that all this is real. **There is the cure for the problem with me.**

If we have all this in Christ, what is there to envy in someone else? If heaven is our goal, what other ambition can we have? If life with God is all about Jesus, life for us never has to be all about me. Why should I look into a pond like Narcissus, when I can see the face of Jesus in the lives of others? With Jesus, it isn't about me, myself, and I. It's about them, themselves, and theirs.

Knowing and believing this is the wisdom James is talking about. It's a wisdom that comes from Christ through faith. **Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.**

I guess we all have corrections to make. With Jesus' power we'll strive to get rid of the anger and jealousy and short temper we often struggle with. In our family, among our friends, or at church we'll defend people, speak well of them, and take their actions in the kindest possible way. We'll strive to speak cautiously and carefully even in tense situation. We'll give in to others unless the Word of God is at stake, and even then we we'll speak the truth in love. Our eyes won't notice different skin colors or recognize different social standing because we know that all are one in Christ. With Jesus for us and in us, we'll put the sinful nature down and become the servant of all. And then, when the Last Day dawns and we stand before the throne of God we will hear the voice of Jesus say, **Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine—whatever you did in faith as my follower—whatever you did, you did for me. Come and share your master's happiness.**

And that, my friends, is how we treat the problem with me.