

Aug. 28, 2011

James 3:13-18

“The Way of Wisdom”

As we near the end of our Grand Sweep through reading the entire Bible in one year, we are moving through the short epistles of the New Testament fairly quickly. The letter of James was included in this past week’s readings.

James is actually not as much like a letter as most of the other epistles. It contains many sayings that resemble those in the book of Proverbs, in the Old Testament. It is considered part of the “wisdom” writings of the Bible.

The short passage we heard this morning focuses on wisdom itself. What IS wisdom? I think of wisdom as a guide. It leads you in life. It helps you make choices. Wisdom directs your steps. The voice of wisdom speaks, telling us what path to follow. It’s what underlies our decisions.

James presents a stark contrast between earthly wisdom and God’s wisdom.

What does earthy wisdom tell us? What advice, or directions are “out there” to guide our steps along the path of life? Consider these consumer warnings, offering specific pointers to guide us in using various products we purchase:

On a Sears hairdryer: *Do not use while sleeping.*

On a bag of Fritos: *You could be a winner! No purchase necessary! Details inside.*

On a bar of Dial soap: Directions: *Use like regular soap.*

On Swanson frozen dinners: Serving suggestion: *Defrost.*

From a Pop Tart box: *Warning: pastry filling may be hot when heated.*

On packaging for a Rowenta iron: *Do not iron clothes on body.*

On Nytol Sleep Aid: *Warning. May cause drowsiness.*

On most brands of Christmas lights: *For indoor or outdoor use only.*

On Sainsbury peanuts: *Warning: Contains nuts.*

On an American Airlines packet of nuts: *Instructions: Open packet, eat nuts.*

On a child's superman costume: *Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly.*

On the inside of a lid for radiator sealant: *Caution. Do not lick lid.*

On the package for Top Cog automotive fan belts: *Do not change belt while the engine is running.*

Written on the back of one of those things you put in your car windshield on sunny days to keep your dash from melting while the car is parked: *Do not operate vehicle with screen in place.*

These warning would seem to suggest we are all total idiots barely able to walk and talk. Even newspapers get into the act: One article pronounced, *A congressionally funded study has determined that many smokers are ignoring the warning labels on cigarette packages.* Another, written during a summer heat wave, described ways to beat the heat: *No. 1: Stay out of the direct rays of the sun.*

Another troubling, warning I have found is a side effect listed on the printout from the pharmacy that accompanies various anti-depressant medications. As you read along, in the paragraph enumerating potential side effects, you find lists like: *difficulty sleeping, extreme drowsiness, increased appetite, weight gain, decreased appetite, weight loss, confusion, lack of coordination, dry mouth, constipation, diarrhea, **depression.***

So is any of this very helpful? Not much. Except that it makes us laugh and laughter is good for the mind, body and spirit. But there is no wisdom here to help us along the road of life.

Does James have anything to offer us? James asks us to decide between earthly wisdom and true wisdom that comes from God. He doesn't mince words. He clearly states that earthly wisdom will not lead to a happy, enjoyable or meaningful life. Instead it leads to all kind of chaos, conflict, wrongs and pain. God's wisdom, on the other hand, leads to peace, harmony and goodness.

When one of my kids was in middle school, we had an interesting conversation. I was asked about devil worship. This dear young person in my life was worried about the possibility of ever being exposed to it, even lured into practicing it. I was surprised at first, but then realized we all sometimes have crazy worries and fears.

This is what I believe and what I shared with him:

People engage in things like devil worship to gain something: power, money, personal success, a life full of “goodies”. But this makes no sense at all, once you look a little bit deeper. Because who, or what is the “devil”? I understand the devil to be the being, force, power, entity who opposes God.

God stands for life, love, and the triumph of good over evil. The devil opposes ALL of those. The devil, by definition, is out to devour and destroy all goodness and life.

So. You might get some results from your devil worship that LOOK like benefits at first. But since the devil is devoted to devouring and destroying life, eventually that evil will circle around to attack YOU. YOU and YOUR life will be devoured. So, it all comes around to bite you in the butt.

Obviously relieved, my middle schooler said, “Well, that makes sense. Why does ANYBODY want to worship the devil? Has ANYBODY ever EXPLAINED this to them? I said, “Well, if YOU ever get a chance, be sure to do that.”

(If you’d like to explore more about demonic forces and how they work in human life, join the 9:00 a.m. Adult Study in the parlor, which will discuss C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, which consist of correspondence between a couple demons as they try to entangle humans in their webs. The class will begin Sept. 11th and last for 10 weeks. Although the topic is serious, much of the writing is humorous.)

Most of us are not tempted to join a satanic cult or collude with demons. But James is teaching us that ALL that is opposed to God will lead us nowhere good. He doesn’t describe devil worshippers in his words of warning. He says harboring certain attitudes will send us on the wrong path through life: things like bitterness and envy, selfish ambition.

Let's think about this. Bitter envy. Selfish ambition. Doesn't the world PROMOTE those things? Showing us all we could possess, if we just get enough money to buy things? Showing us how much fun we'll have once we get that car, go on that cruise, or drink that beverage? Doesn't the world tell us to climb the ladders of success at school, work, in our homes, even sometimes in church? To climb them as high as we possibly can? This is what James is talking about when he speaks of the wisdom that does NOT come from God.

The way of true wisdom, that comes from God, is described clearly also: 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.

Okay. So, how does this work? James says it works in the heart. Just outwardly doing the "right" things is not wisdom. He says what's in our hearts will appear in our lives. Our actions, our behavior, will show which voices of wisdom are guiding us. So, let's just get our hearts full of all that peace, and "considerate-ness", mercy and sincere goodness. Then life will be full and wonderful. Life will be a bowl of cherries, with wonderful friends and companions who love us and APPRECIATE us surrounding us all the time, and everything will just be wonderful. Right. Right. (with some sarcasm).

It's not that simple is it? Some situations in life are immensely complicated. We struggle to see what's right, what we should do. And sometimes we know what's right, what we should do. But choosing to do it is difficult. We risk getting hurt, hurting others. It's not so simple.

A teenager in a church I served was troubled by a situation at her high school. As she and one of her friends stopped by the friend's locker, a few items were knocked onto the floor as the locker opened. One item was a plastic bag of white powder. The teen from my church was terrified and asked what on earth she was keeping in that locker. Her friend swore her to secrecy, saying that she was keeping it for her boyfriend, who had been in trouble previously with the law.

This did not happen in an urban community. This happened in a semi-rural community. This did not happen just recently, but back in the early 1990's. This is the path that presents itself to our young people. This young person

needed to share her burden with a trusted adult—but it was not easy for her to make that decision. The friend was helped to stop assisting her boyfriend in his illegal activities...but it was still a tangled mess.

I'm not going to tell you it's easy to follow the voice of God's wisdom all the time. But with God, we can do it a little better each day. Each day we'll be called to choose what path to follow. Here are some things to consider:

First, our lives will show us if we are following God's path or not. Look at your relationships. Do you find a sense of peace in them, or chaos and conflict? No relationship will be perfect, but there is an undercurrent deep within them that helps us identify what brand of wisdom is at work. **Look at your life.** Is there good fruit, do you find actions motivated by love and compassion? If not, you're kidding yourself to think you're following God's wisdom in your life.

Second, **God forgives us when we wander off his path.** Please believe this. Trust in it. It's what makes us brave enough to do step one; to look unflinchingly at our lives and the fruit or lack of fruit found in them. It does not matter how messed up you are, how messed up your life is. God has seen it all, trust me. He will step in with JOY, even if you can't imagine he would. **Invite him into your heart.**

That's the third point: We can call upon the Holy Spirit to grant us wisdom from above. **God's wisdom is not something we can produce on our own. But it is there for us when we ask. Ask. Then listen.** God will speak through events in your life, through people you trust, through the words and stories of the Bible. It's amazing what God can do in us and through us, when we give him our all.

It will not always be easy. We may need to talk with other trusted people. We may need time to screw our courage up. But God can make it possible for us to choose HIS way, even when we're in a tangled knot of trouble.

Give God all you have and all you are. Let him live in your heart and speak to your mind. Seek his wisdom, for it ALONE brings love, light, joy and life. Amen.