

## *Divine Wisdom – Living Right • James 3:17-18*

Yogi Berra, that great American philosopher, says, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” Of course, which fork we take determines our ultimate destination. It’s the difference between ending up in Canada or Mexico, in Portland, Oregon or Portland, Maine, in heaven or in hell.

That’s the whole point of James 3 in the New Testament. Everyone comes to a fork called wisdom in the road of life and must choose between the devil’s wisdom described in James 3:14-16 and God’s wisdom described in James 3:17-18.

Choosing heavenly wisdom is a total way of life and the way to eternal life. It is radically different from earthly wisdom. According to James 3:17, “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.” So if you become a Christian and live God’s way, this is how you will be.

First on this 7-point list is purity because it is most important. If a person is pure, all the rest will automatically follow.

The word pure comes from an ancient Greek religious word that meant “pure enough to approach the gods”. To the ancient Greeks it meant going through a ritual of washing dirt off their bodies before they went into the temple. In the Bible it means purity from sin so that a person can go before God.

If you take a trip by plane you are required first to go through a metal detector. Before doing that you must first empty your pockets and person of all metal objects. If you fail this test an alarm goes off. You are not allowed in unless you pass the test. There are no exceptions.

The same goes for God. Except it’s not metal, it’s sin. Every sin must be removed before we can have access to God. It’s fascinating how many people pray to God and expect him to quickly solve their problems and deal with their issues, but they are unwilling to meet the prerequisite of purity. If a person is having an affair, lying to an employer,

cheating on business deals, refusing to forgive or living selfishly—the alarm goes off. Every sin has to go.

What is interesting here is that the way we get cleaned up is that God does it, and he does it upon request. God requires that we first repent of the sin, then trust Christ for forgiveness of sin and rely on him to stay pure. If sin returns we must confess it and get cleaned by God.

When we choose to live God’s way with God’s wisdom, purity is Number One. But if there is sin in our lives right now, it must be taken care of before anything else. God invites us to name the sins. Confess them to God. Tell him we are sorry and want to stop that sin forever. Tell him we will do whatever he asks us to do to stop. Become pure. Step into the presence of God. Then get ready for the next six points.

Next on the list of living God’s way is to be peace-loving. This refers to having right relationships. It’s the person who highly values a good relationship with everyone and especially with God. It is one of the clearest dividing lines between earthly and heavenly wisdom.

Earthly wisdom says that it is good to peg yourself as superior to others, to have your employees fear you and to always win the battles in interpersonal relationships. But heavenly wisdom says you always want good relationships with others, you never want to go to bed at night until a conflict has been resolved and that you are the kind of person who always seeks to de-escalate conflict and make relationships good.

Peace-loving also applies to vertical relationships

with God. Peace-lovers always want to be on right terms with God and always work to insure that others have a right relationship with God. They never want to do anything that will come between anyone and the Lord.

Third on the list is to be considerate. To be considerate is to be gentle, always kind to other people, even if they do not deserve it. This is the

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person who refuses to exact the letter of the law. It is the judge who has every right to send the defendant to jail for 20 years but gives the benefit of the doubt and grants the lighter sentence. It's the restaurant patron who receives marginal service and leaves a generous tip anyway. The considerate Christian always goes the second mile even though she doesn't have to.

When I think of the Christian virtue of gentleness I think of a cat named Jack who used to be part of our family. Jack was quick and strong with very sharp claws. With a quick swing he could have drawn blood or even blinded an eye. Our young children were sometimes too rough with Jack. They would carry him upside-down and play too rough with him. When his patience ran out he would swing sharp and fast with his paw—always with very accurate aim, but never with claws drawn. He never scratched, although he could have. He had every right. But he kept his claws inside. Instead, he was considerate. Jack wasn't a Christian, but Jack was gentle.

And Christians are gentle. Christians who live God's way are always considerate and gentle. They don't draw their claws even when they have every right.

The Christian who lives by God's heavenly wisdom is also submissive. Literally, this means "open to reason" or "easily persuaded". At first this sounds a lot like Christians are wimps, but that is not at all what God has in mind. This is the person who truly listens to others' points of view and wants to agree. It is not gullibility. It does not mean surrender of principle. It is not talking about essential values or moral principles

My mother had an interesting principle of childrearing. She decided with her four sons that she would always try to say, "yes", to their requests. From my point of view as a child that did not come through as clearly as I would have liked, but the principle is a good one. I think it's a Christian principle.

There's an exercise that is sometimes used in conflict resolution or marriage counseling. Both parties give their sides of the issue. Then they trade places and must explain the other person's perspective to that person's satisfaction. Sometimes it takes a dozen tries. Sometimes it never works. Some people are totally unwilling to listen to any point

of view but their own.

The way of godly wisdom is to be automatically submissive—try to say "yes", hear the other person out and go along whenever possible.

Fifth on the list is a pair of characteristics: ". . . full of mercy and good fruit". These are not two separate items. They must go together. "Full of mercy" refers to love and compassion for people in need. It is sometimes called "pity" or "feeling sorry for someone". In Christian terms, the way that person got into trouble is not what is important.

Non-Christians may have feelings of mercy for people hit by the tragedy of a hurricane or a reckless driver. But Christian mercy extends even to people who should have known better and brought the trouble on themselves.

The reason why Christians have mercy on those who get themselves into trouble is because we know that we are sinners who got ourselves into trouble and God was merciful to us. We have the same compassion toward others that God has toward us.

But mercy without action really doesn't make much difference. That's why "good fruit" is attached. "Good fruit" is doing something to help the person who is hurting or in trouble.

The combination means that Christians have hearts of mercy toward those who are hungry, but we also give donations to food shelves. It means that we are sad about the neighbors who are sick and we act to help them out. It means that we are sensitive to the hurts around us and that sensitivity leads to action.

The next item on the list is particularly important to us today. It is that we are to be impartial. To be "impartial" is to be free of prejudice. Partiality and prejudice treat people on the basis of conclusions we have reached without really knowing those people as individuals. It is simply not Christian to relate to a person primarily on the basis of race, gender, age, weight, wealth, disability, position, power or ethnic origin. To do so is to demean that person and to elevate oneself as superior.

Jesus is the grandest example of all. In his day whole categories of people were severely discriminated against including Samaritans (who were an ethnically mixed group of people), tax collectors

(who were Jews who helped the occupying Roman army by collecting taxes to pay for that army to keep the Jews subjugated), prostitutes, non-Jews, women and children. But Jesus spoke to Samaritans; he included women among his friends; he was kind to prostitutes; tax collectors were in his circle of disciples.

In some cases these people were labeled because of behavior they had chosen, such as tax collectors and prostitutes. In other cases the people had no choice, such as Samaritans, Gentiles, women and children. In all cases, Jesus treated them impartially. He treated them as individuals. He did not prejudice them.

In America today prejudice and partiality are common. Treatment of persons is based on their race, their gender or their lifestyle group. As sinners we tend to put people into categories so that we have an excuse to treat them poorly. That is not wise. That is not Christian. The Christian who lives God's way is impartial.

Last on heaven's list is "sincere". Another way of saying it is that this person is not a hypocrite. The word "hypocrite" comes from the ancient Greek name for a stage actor. That is, someone who pretends to be something he is not.

It is easy to play the game of insincerity. We like to make ourselves out to be better than we are, to show off, to come across as better than others. This is not God's way. But, don't misunderstand. The sincere Christian doesn't put herself down. He doesn't feign a false humility. It is mostly a matter of honesty—presenting ourselves for who we really are.

One final example is added in the last line of James 3:18. It's actually a proverb that closes this grand description of the person who lives God's way. It says, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." It is one more reminder that Christians who love good relationships plant seeds that eventually produce a great harvest of good.

It makes sense, doesn't it? Anyone who lives God's way will end up with great results while those who live the devil's way will harvest sin and

misery. It may take time—there is often a long period between when seed is sown and the harvest is gathered. And it can be hard along the way. But God promises that those who live the right way will see a rich harvest of righteousness. It will be worth it in the end!

The mother-in-law of a friend of mine came from Chicago to the Twin Cities for a visit. She drove the 400 miles alone and stayed for a week. When it was time for her to go home she got onto Interstate 94 and drove and drove and drove. The road was smooth. The traffic flowed. The weather was good. The driving was easy. But when she arrived in Fargo she realized something was wrong. She turned around, drove back and stayed overnight at her daughter and son-in-law's house north of St. Paul.

It is a far more serious mistake when people make the wrong turn at the fork in the road marked "earthly wisdom" or "the devil's way". Many people don't pay any attention to the signs. The road seems smooth. Lots of

people are going in that direction. Sometimes it is not until a lifetime later that they realize they have ended up at just the opposite destination from where they should have gone. Don't make that tragic mistake.

Be a Christian. Live God's way. Be pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

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