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## BEWARE OF THE SATAN VIRUS

James 3:13-18

Two months ago we were making final plans for our trip to the Midwest for our niece's wedding. We were told by the family that they had arranged a place to stay in their small Minnesota town, but they wanted us to be forewarned. We would be sleeping in a double bed and the house we would be staying in does not have air conditioning. At home we sleep in a king bed and we weren't thrilled with the double bed idea, and definitely not with the no AC. They told us an alternative was we could get a room in the town 20 miles away where the wedding would be in northern Iowa. Our first thought was we would go ahead and pay for the hotel room, because in small town Iowa how much could it cost? I was dismayed to learn that it would cost more than \$160 a night! I really wanted to stay in the hotel because I knew we'd sleep better there. But Laurie and I talked about it and we finally decided it was only going to be for 2 nights. We had free lodging available and thought it would be wise not to spend the \$300 plus when we didn't have to. We could survive 2 nights, after all. Yes, the wise thing to do was to save \$300.

Yeah, that turned out to be real wise. The result was we stayed in that house which led to our encounter with our friend the bat. That meant we had to have rabies shots. We got a clue that this could be a problem when everyone we talked to in the hospitals where we received the shots said, "Unfortunately this is going to be really expensive." They weren't kidding. So far our out of pocket expenses have been over \$2000, and we're probably not done. But hey, we saved \$300 on that hotel. Yes, that was really a wise decision. Had we stayed in the hotel there would have been no bat and no rabies shots.

Today we're going to think about wisdom. Only we're going to be thinking about a different, much more important kind of wisdom. We tend to think of a wise decision as being a smart one, especially a smart financial decision. But wisdom, real wisdom, is about much more important things than money, and isn't about just being smart. We will learn about this in James 3:13-18.

## THERE WERE PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCHES

James wrote this letter in part because in the middle of their many difficulties that first generation of Christians didn't always behave like saints. In 4:1 James shines the full light of day on what was happening. He says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" So how were they getting along? Well they were having

fights and quarrels. Unfortunately this was going on way too much in the first churches. In 1 Corinthians 3:3 Paul wrote, "You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?" In Philippians 2:14 Paul had to urge the Philippians, one of the best early churches, to "Do everything without grumbling and arguing." Not much has changed in the past couple of thousand years. Seems like fights and quarrels are part of the human condition, and unfortunately that is as true in the church as it is everywhere else.

In November 2015 Thom Rainer, president of Lifeway Publishing, had in his blog a list of things churches have fought over. These were actual incidents. They included:

- A fight over the length of the worship pastor's beard.
- A fight over whether to remove a clock from the worship center.
- A fight over whether the church should buy a weed eater.
- A fight over whether the church should allow deviled eggs at potlucks.
- A fight over which picture of Jesus to have in the foyer.
- A fight over whether to serve Folger's or Starbucks coffee at the church.
- A fight over whether to use the term potluck or pot blessing.
- A fight over whether to have gluten free communion crackers.

It makes you want to weep. But this was going on in the earliest churches. And there has been no period in history where the fighting and quarreling among Christians did not take place. This is not a problem limited to church people. It is a function of fallen human nature. Everywhere you look in human relations you see people fighting, quarreling, going to war with each other over anything and everything.

Laurie and I were at the airport waiting to board an airplane for a flight home at the end of our recent vacation. The plane we would fly on had not yet arrived. It was coming in from Seattle. When the plane was about 10 minutes out we noticed 3 police officers enter the gate area and begin talking with the airline agents. We couldn't hear everything that was going on but we heard enough to figure out they were there to take someone off the incoming flight. Apparently something bad had happened on that flight and the police had to be called to deal with it. When the plane arrived the police went on board with the airline people before anyone was allowed off the plane. Then they took the offenders off the aircraft. We had no idea what had gone on until Laurie happened to talk to one of the passengers from the flight while in the restroom. Apparently two couples had gotten into an altercation that got loud enough and concerning enough that the flight attendants had to step in

to prevent a brawl from breaking out. The triggering event had to do with whether to open the cover on one of the windows.

Unfortunately conflict and fighting is everywhere in the human race, but it is disturbing when we recall that Jesus said people will know that we are his followers by the way we love one another. When we are fighting and quarreling over everything under the sun, including trivial minutiae, doesn't that suggest that we aren't really followers of Jesus at all? The world has the right to conclude that. This reality demands that we find a way to love each other despite our disagreements. We won't always agree on which coffee to use, which picture of Jesus to put up or whether communion crackers should be gluten free. Disagreements will happen. But somehow we need to love each other and resolve differences in a way that depicts the love of Christ to the watching world.

James took this problem head on both at the end of chapter 3 and in the beginning of chapter 4. He gives us 2 critical ideas to come to grips with in dealing with our inevitable conflicts. We will look at the first one this week and the second one next week.

#### THE PROBLEMS WERE CAUSED BY "WISDOM"

A critical factor in this discussion is wisdom. James began the section asking, "who is wise and understanding among you?" James made a critical distinction in verse 13. Let the supposedly wise person "show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." He is reminding them of the difference between our world's idea of wisdom and the ancient Old Testament view.

The world thinks of wisdom as knowing what is best while in the Bible it has more to do with doing what is best. Being wise in life in the biblical sense means trusting that God sees the big picture, leaving that to him, and carrying out his instructions ably in life. You can see this at the beginning of the book of Proverbs, which is all about wisdom. Proverbs 1:2-3 say that these wisdom Proverbs are "for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair." Wisdom and insight, this says, is about prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair.

This is an important distinction because as James points out in verses 15-17 there are two kinds of wisdom. One is wisdom from above, heavenly wisdom. It is God's kind of wisdom. The other "wisdom" is "earthly." It is "natural." In other words, it is the wisdom of the world. It is what human nature has to offer us. We get a clue that this may not be a good thing from the fact that James also says it is demonic.

This is a "wisdom" that comes straight out of the think tanks of hell. It is "wisdom" that looks reasonable, even brilliant, but that is designed to destroy humans, not bring them life and good! This wisdom is a hellish kind of Trojan Horse. It is a computer virus planted by an innocent seeming email message, whose goal is to cause havoc and destruction.

James identifies two aspects of this "wisdom" that are at the heart of the trouble it causes. In our translation they are identified as jealousy and selfish ambition. Most of us do not think we are especially jealous or full of selfish ambition. So we think this is not a problem for us. But it actually is a problem for every single human being. The Satan virus has been planted in all of us. Let's think about what these two traits actually are.

The first word was the Greek word *zelos*, from which we get the word *zeal*. Sometimes the word could mean zeal or passion. But it also could have a very negative connotation. That negative sense was much broader than jealousy. James used *zelos* because of the heat and the intensity of the feeling of it. But as he used it the word focused basically on the "passion for me" aspect of the word.

This word was used to describe the warlike spirit of a tribe. The Ancient Greek poet, Hesiod, called it the "passion which poisons human society." The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says it is, "the kind of zeal that does not try to help others...the predominant concern being personal advancement." The early church leader, Clement ascribed Cain's murder of his brother Abel to *zelos*. Cyprian, another early church leader, said it is the most dangerous secret evil in the life of a Christian.

Proverbs 27:4 says, "Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?" In the Greek translation of that verse the word used for jealousy was *zelos*. It is terrible when someone is angry with you. It feels cruel. If someone is furious at you it feels overwhelming. But this *zelos* thing is worse, much worse. No one can stand against it.

The other term, selfish ambition, is the twin of *zelos*. The emphasis in this word is not so much on ambition as it is on "selfish." It is defined as the attitude of self seekers, of those busy and active in their own interests. It is about those who seek their own gain or advantage even if it demeans a cause they are supposedly working for.

There is an example of this in Philippians 1:15-17. Paul was incarcerated in Rome. While that was happening he said, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains."

It is hard to imagine this, but some people apparently were trying to undercut Paul. Why would you do that? Likely the reason is they wanted to gain a following, gain respect, get a little power in this new Jesus movement, and probably make a nice income while they were at it. They preached Jesus, but the whole motive behind it was personal gain.

These twin words point us not so much to envy and ambition, as to a passionate commitment to take care of self, to promote one's personal interests above all else. This attitude is at the heart of the Satan virus, and it has been planted in every human soul.

I have a friend who is a pastor of a thriving church that is in the vicinity of a megachurch led by a well known, "successful" pastor. On one occasion he personally observed this megachurch pastor in a conference setting tear into a church employee who was on their technical team and who made a rather trivial error. In front of a number of people he yelled at this man and humiliated him for his minor mistake. My friend's church gets a steady stream of refugees who have left the megachurch after being abused by the famous pastor. This is a man who is promoting himself, and he will walk all over anybody to do it. The world publishes his books, invites him to speak at conferences and hails him as brilliant. What the world cares about is "success" as it defines it. It does not care much about how that success is achieved. It's a little like what they say about sausage. You're probably better off not knowing what goes into the making of it.

A couple of years ago after we had stayed in a nice hotel while on vacation we were contacted by that hotel company and offered a terrific deal to stay in that company's vacation villas in that area. All they asked was that while we were there we take a brief tour of the facility. That sounded fine, so we agreed to the deal. We ended up have to reschedule our stay a couple of times, but we finally got to use that opportunity on our recent vacation. I confess that Laurie and I can be awfully naive at times. We believed them when they said all we had to do was take a tour of the facility. That wasn't true, and we should have known it. It included a tour, but it was not just a tour. It was a full on Time Share sales pitch. Three times as it

began they assured us this would not be high pressure, at which point my eyes were opened. I knew it was going to be high pressure. I am sure they would insist that it was not high pressure at all. Define high pressure. They didn't bring out pliers and start pulling our fingernails out with them, so in that sense it wasn't high pressure. But they definitely made it quite awkward. The sales person and his manager both used every tactic they could think of to try to get us to buy what they were selling. They were somewhat dishonest and they used all the manipulation they could come up with to sell us their property. They tried to mask their real motives and pretend interest in us and care for us, but that charade was tissue thin. You'd have to be as dumb as a rock not to see through it. They were exhibiting selfish ambition, not love. Suppose that they were wildly successful and became wealthy by selling so much property. How would the world view them? It would view them as successful, someone to be envied. That's because the world operates by this earthly wisdom. It is thoroughly infected by the Satan virus.

It's always easier to see when someone else has "wisdom" that is actually driven by the Satan virus as evidenced by ulterior self serving motives. Sometimes we may fail to notice our own earthly "wisdom." As I was reflecting on this passage it hit me that I don't always operate by heavenly wisdom. Why were we in that situation of dealing with a subtly high pressure sales pitch? This is where it gets uncomfortable. Two years ago when we were contacted by that company I decided that since it only required a tour it was too good of a deal to pass up, so we bought it. I knew the whole point of that was to try to get us to buy one of their time share villas. From the beginning, I am ashamed to admit, I had no intention whatsoever of buying. I just went because it was a good deal for me. Was I focused on doing what Jesus calls me to do, to love other people and glorify him? No, I saw a good deal for me and took it. I was as guilty of earthly wisdom as were the sales people.

Sadly this virus is naturally active in each and every one of us. We wake in the morning and what is on our minds is our agenda, our to do list, for the day. We go through the day preoccupied with our own lives. We are pursuing our own interests, and any occasion in which we must give up our interests feels like a huge sacrifice to us. It is natural for us to operate from this demonic wisdom. We don't have to choose it. It is our default. It is there all the time and it feels to us like the only reasonable way to live. To do anything else feels threatening, dangerous and even crazy.

This "wisdom" has some devastating impact on us and on others. James says it produces disorder and every evil thing. It inevitably leads to battles with other people. It's not too hard to see why this might be. Suppose that you are boarding an

airplane. It is a packed flight, and these days you know what that means. The overhead bins are going to be jammed. In fact, there are going to be more carry on bags on the plane than there is room in those bins. So you board the plane. What are you thinking? I've got to hustle and find space for my bag no matter what it takes. That is natural. It is earthly wisdom. It is the Satan virus at work. Do you suppose it is possible that there might be someone else on the plane who is also operating by earthly wisdom? You'd better believe it. They all are. So what's going to happen when there is only one space left and there are 3 people who want to put their bags away? The competition is on, and everyone will be lucky if it stays civil.

At the other end of the flight earthly wisdom shows up again. The plane finally comes to a stop at the gate and what happens? People stand up and get in the aisle. Inevitably someone seated behind me will get in the aisle and move up so there is no way I can get out of my seat. They are operating by selfish ambition. What is funny is every time it happens I feel annoyance. I want to tell them to wait their turn. The irony is how much difference is it going to make? They might get off the plane a whole 30 seconds or a minute earlier. Sheesh.

When our son, Toby, was very young, he was rather strong willed. Strong willed is a kind, parental way of describing utterly controlled by the Satan virus. His little neighborhood playmates were also possessed by this bug. The result of this was there was a lot of conflict. When they played games out in the street they spent about a third of their time playing, and the other two thirds arguing. I remember on one occasion when two of his friends were at our house playing up in Toby's room and the inevitable argument grew to a climax where his friends left and he was upset and crying. He was frustrated and angry because they wouldn't do what he wanted them to do. I know he doesn't remember this, because my kids don't recall any of the great wisdom I imparted to them. But I told him, "Toby, if you always have to have your way, then you are always going to end up alone. The only way to have everything your way is to be by yourself."

That was my version of what James tells us here. This is a truth we all need to be very clear about. The inevitable result of earthly wisdom is conflict, division, damaged relationships and isolation. The Satan virus will always leave us alone and angry.

### **THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM WAS WISDOM!**

But there is another kind of wisdom. It is wisdom from above. It is wisdom from God. This wisdom could not be more different than earthly wisdom. It is 180 degrees away from it, its complete opposite. James tells us this wisdom is pure,

peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Focus on those last two words for a moment. Literally in Greek they mean "whole hearted" and "unhypocritical."

Think about what that means. Whole hearted means that it goes right to the core of the person. They are not mixed about what they are trying to do. They are focused on one thing. Unhypocritical means there is not some agenda lying beneath the surface that is masked by a false front. So let's imagine that when Laurie and I were at this supposed tour of a property that turned out to be a pressurized sales pitch, that the person making the presentation was operating out of heavenly wisdom. How would that change the equation? It would be totally different. He wouldn't be trying sell us something in hopes of making a commission and climbing the ladder of success. He would be totally focused on one goal, and that would be finding out what is truly for our good and helping us do that. It would have meant he would very quickly have said, "This really isn't a very good idea for you. I would encourage you to just say no thanks and we'll be done."

This wisdom from above is submissive. That means it is happy to do things another person's way. It subjects its own demands to the needs of another person. Paul put it this way in Philippians 2:3-4. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition (there it is again) or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to our own interests, but each of you to the interests of the others." I wasn't look out for the interests of the people involved in that time share project when I took them up on that deal. I was looking out for my interests. And they weren't looking out for my interests when they offered me the deal, nor when they made their presentation.

When we operate by this wisdom from above you begin to see that it will make for peace. It is gentle with others. When we were getting off a plane we had that trying interval between arrival and actually being able to get off the plane. It is such a relief when you can see the roadblocks up ahead breaking up and people actually leaving the aircraft because that means it is almost your turn. I saw something remarkable up ahead. A man got his bag out of the overhead bin and was free to leave the aircraft, but he noticed an older woman on the other side of the aisle struggling to get her bag out of the bin. She wasn't in his way, so he could just have left. But he set his bag down and said to this stranger, "Would you like some help?" Then he reached up and helped her get her bag down. He went out of his way when he gained exactly zero benefit from it.



Okay, but what exactly is this wisdom? 1 Corinthians 1:23-24 says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." In verse 30 Paul wrote that Christ Jesus, "has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." So the wisdom that is from God is Christ.

Christ is the wisdom that comes from above, and it is only through him that we understand who God is, who we are, how we relate to him, what life is all about, and how we are supposed to be. God's wisdom in Christ tells us that though we are undeserving, God has forgiven us, loves us, and has adopted us to be his children. He has assured us that we will be in his eternal kingdom. We are safe, valued, and secure in him. But the wisdom of Christ also tells us about what kind of people we should be. I will point out three aspects of that wisdom.

Jesus was totally consumed with doing whatever the Father wanted him to do. In Luke 2 there is a story about Jesus as a 12 year old boy. His family left him behind when they returned home after going to Jerusalem for one of the feasts. Jesus' parents were in a panic looking for him for 3 sickening days. When to their enormous relief they found him in the temple talking to the top rabbis they said, "Why have you treated us like this?" Verse 49 says he answered, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?"

Even at 12 Jesus was about the Father and doing whatever he said. In John 5:19 Jesus said, "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the son also does." At the end of verse 30 Jesus said, "I seek not to please myself but him who sent me." In John 4:34 he said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." That which he lived for, what sustained and strengthened him, was to do the Father's will. Luke 22:42 says the night before Jesus died as he looked at the horrifying events about to unfold, he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." The wisdom from above means we will live not for our own comfort, success or satisfaction, but for the will of the Father. And that changes totally how we will live.

Jesus had unlimited power, but was never concerned with using that power for his own purposes. Jesus had limitless divine power, yet he let his opponents do their worst against him, he let them arrest him and he let the Romans put him on a cross. He didn't insist on using his power to take care of himself.

One of the main features of power is that it means we can have control. We can control other people and our circumstances so we can get what we want. If we operate by the wisdom of Jesus we let God have the power, we let him control, instead of insisting on manipulating and controlling life ourselves. We trust his sovereign and good wisdom to guide our lives.

Jesus sacrificed himself for the good of others. Jesus was human. He did not enjoy being rejected, ridiculed, mocked, falsely accused, and most of all, he did not like being tortured and killed. All of that was as hard for him as it would be for you and me. But he underwent all of it to accomplish the greatest good of all for people who were totally undeserving of the gift he gave.

Our flight back from our vacation was scheduled to get in a few minutes after midnight on a Friday night. Of course the flight was delayed a bit, so we got in very late. Not wanting to make anyone come get us in the middle of the night we had arranged for an airport shuttle to take us home. It was one of those shared shuttle deals, and there were 2 other parties in the van. My first thought when I got in the van was, "Please take us home first." We were tired, it had been a long flight, it was late, and I just wanted to get home and go to bed. As the van headed out I could piece together the route. One guy lived in Rancho Bernardo, a couple lived in San Marcos, and we live in Carlsbad. It was obvious that we were going to be last. I initially felt a bit of exasperation. Why does it always seem to work that way? Why do we have to be last? I know you can feel my pain. But as I rode in that van it hit me that the wisdom from above could apply here. That wisdom says that I am on this planet to serve, not to be served. I can serve these people by cheerfully and willingly being last. I didn't control that either way, but it completely changed my attitude to go the way of Jesus and be happy to serve. That became even more urgent when I realized that the older couple in front of us had some serious needs. The gentleman was clearly suffering from some serious age-related problems. He seemed totally unaware of what was happening and unable to take care of himself. His wife had to care for him almost like he was an infant, for he was that helpless. We needed to serve. In this case, having heavenly wisdom didn't change anything I did, but it had a big impact on my attitude about what was happening.

#### APPLICATION

How do we have this wisdom from above?

**YOU GOTTA WANT IT**

First you have to want to have it. It is not the natural way nor is it the easy way to live. So why would we want to live by this heavenly wisdom? The only alternative

is to live by earthly wisdom. But remember where that wisdom comes from. It is the Satan virus. Why is it there? Do those who spread computer viruses do so to enrich your life? No, they do it to hurt you and create havoc in your life. Satan has the same goal in mind. His "wisdom" has one purpose, and it is to destroy you.

James ends this section saying, "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." I like the New Living Translation of the verse, which is closer to the original. "Those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness." Literally they reap the "fruit of righteousness." In other words, they get something really good in return, because righteousness produces life and peace.

The only way there can ever be peace between people, in a marriage, in a family, in a neighborhood, in a church, in a nation, is if people choose to live by heavenly wisdom. Earthly "wisdom" inevitably will produce strife and war, it can never yield anything else.

So when I say you've got to want this, I mean you are going to have to consciously choose it. That means recognizing the world's way and rejecting it. It means telling Jesus you want him in charge of your life. It means saying to him, "I want your way, not mine, Lord." My life is yours.

#### YOU GOTTA HAVE A SOURCE

This is not natural. If you try to live by your own ability, your own wisdom, you will end up operating by the Satan virus way, and you'll get the deadly results. Because this isn't natural we need some source to input heavenly wisdom into our hearts and minds. We need some strength greater than ours to choose to live by that wisdom. So you need to be connected to God through Jesus Christ. You need to trust in his grace to provide it for you. And you need to do that on a continuing basis.

#### YOU GOTTA HAVE FEAR

Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." So we're supposed to be afraid of God, and that's what helps us have his wisdom? No, that's not what the fear of the Lord is about. Having fear of the Lord means having awe of him that is so powerful it is almost like fear. It should have the kind of emotional impact that fear has in terms of its intensity.

We were at a beach while on vacation. There was a part of the beach where there was a cove protected by a reef. While we were there at one point the lifeguard

made a startling announcement over the PA. It went like this. "Shark warning. Swimmers stay inside the reef." Say what? There might be a shark out there? I'm not just staying inside the reef. I'm staying out of the water. I have no hostility toward that shark, but I have great respect for him and don't want to mess with him.

This is about that kind of intensity of feeling. I have such huge awe of God that it impacts my behavior. I have awe of his unconditional and limitless love, of his almighty power, of his majestic wisdom and goodness. When I live in awe of him and these aspects of his character I want to trust him, let him run the world and my life, and I want to have his wisdom rule my decisions and my actions. When I am astounded and humbled by his grace and convinced of his unfathomable and infinite love for me and am free in that love, I will truly be in awe of our majestic God. In short, it is this awe that makes living by his wisdom possible.