

## Wisdom and Foolishness

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 25th Sunday in Ordinary time, September 7, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8; Mark 9:30-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Encounter 97 ends tonight - at least the meetings come to end. But, hopefully, the results of what happened will positively effect the Oxford area for years to come. The night I was there over 100 people responded to the invitation and went forward to receive or renew their relationship Christ. <sup>most of them teenagers.</sup> At Encounter 89, eight years ago, about 10 people from our church <sup>of all ages</sup> went forward. Many of those people are still active in our church. Some of them gave brief testimonies over the last several weeks encouraging us to attend Encounter 97. And some people from our congregation went forward this past week. We need to be wise and understanding as we think about Encounter 97 and the people who went forward. <sup>James has a lot to say about our need for wisdom & understanding. In chapter (...)</sup> ~~James speaks of our need for wisdom and understanding.~~ He makes a contrast between <sup>the</sup> the wisdom from above and the wisdom from below. The wisdom from above shows itself in a good life. It enables us to deal gently with ourselves and with others. It's pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits. But the wisdom from below is characterized by envy, selfish ambition, boasting and playing fast and loose with the truth. It's worldly and from the devil. But the wisdom from above comes from God. We need the wisdom from above. <sup>I want to apply what James says about wisdom</sup> ~~So I want to share whatever wisdom I have in relationship~~ to Encounter 97.

When I was in eleventh grade I responded to an invitation to go forward at an evangelistic meeting held at my home church, the Newark Evangelical Presbyterian Church. **I had two great concerns** as a Christian teenager that I hoped going forward would resolve. **One concern was God.** God was very important to me. But in high school I started to question what I believed - something - by the way which I believe is necessary for us to come to a mature faith in Christ. We have to take what we've learned from Sunday School and Church and from our parents - and many of us have to go through the furnace of doubt before the faith becomes our very own and able to stand up against the assaults of the world, the flesh and the devil. So I was a Christian who had doubts: Is God really real? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Do I really

know Christ? And how do I relate scientific theories about the origin of the universe and of humankind with what the Bible says? I was worried and frightened that my doubts were not simply doubts - but unbelief that would damn me. I was hoping that if I stepped out of the crowd where everybody saw me as a model teenager - president of the Newark Evangelical Presbyterian youth group, and president of the Newark High School Youth for Christ - that my doubts and questions about the Bible and the resurrection of Jesus and evolution and creation would all go away. I'd show God that I meant business. My doubts would immediately disappear, and I'd leave that meeting knowing for sure that there's a God in heaven and Christ rose from the dead and that I was going to heaven when I die.

The first great concern I had as a teenager was God. **The second great concern was girls.** Actually girls may have been my first great concern and then God. As a Christian I was concerned about dealing with all the temptations and fantasies and fears that one experiences, perhaps most intensely, as a teenager. At that age we have a tendency to think with our hormones rather than ones brains and every sight and event seemed to be filled with sexual innuendo. And so I went forward at the evangelistic meeting not only to get rid of my doubts, but to get rid of my sexual fantasies, fears and temptations. Maybe, I thought, if I go forward Christ would so transform my mind that I would think only pure, wholesome thoughts in my waking and my dreaming hours.

I'm glad I went forward - but I was not wise with respect to my expectations. I had little understanding of the hard nose reality of living the Christian life. I *did* really mean business when I went forward, and I *know* God honored that commitment because, as James says, if we draw near to God he will draw near to us. But although I went forward with great expectations, it was not long before I felt tremendously let down and discouraged. I came home that afternoon with all my questions, my doubts, and my hormones to boot. But over the years, as I've read the Bible and <sup>prayed +</sup> shared my struggles with other, I believe I've grown in wisdom and understanding.

Most Christians come to understand that when we receive Christ as our Lord and Savior - either at an evangelistic meeting or as the end result of a confirmation process - when we're born



again we don't become angels. We remain human. Thank God for that despite what being human involves. We still have struggles. Many Christians still have doubts. We get answers to some of our questions about God, but new ones come up constantly. Not only do many Christians continue to struggle with doubts and questions, many Christians, like W. H. Auden, struggle with their sexuality throughout their lives. Christians will most likely experience heartache and tragedy in our lifetime that cause us to ask *why?* and lead us to question God's love and power. Sometimes the pain, suffering and heartache that we experience will be directly related to our commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior, like the parent who worries, not only about their adult children's financial stability but also about their relationship to Christ.

Christians in every age have longed and hoped for a quick fix, instantaneous holiness, and salvation in a moment - and then we become disappointed when it doesn't happen. That's exactly what happened to the early disciples that are mentioned in our Gospel lesson. They were not wise and they had no understanding. Jesus told his disciples that he would be betrayed and they would kill him. But they didn't understand. They thought that if they followed Christ everything would go well for them and for Christ. They were not wise in their expectations. They didn't understand. They set themselves up for disappointment. - especially were they disappointed when Christ was betrayed & crucified.

So I'm telling you now. It's important for us to understand that becoming a Christian, being born again, doesn't exempt you from problems and doubts and struggles. The Christian life is a life long pilgrimage. As T.S. Eliot said, Christians are "always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on the way ... lit by the light; Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way."

Sometimes a drug addict gets saved and is miraculously cured of his or her addiction - but most drug addicts who come to Christ will continue to struggle with an addictive personality throughout their lives and they'll need a strong Christian community for support, as well as professional counseling. And most people who commit their lives to Christ with the hopes that their struggles with sexuality will be over and done with discover that rarely happens and they'll need a strong Christian community to support them. And the person who doubts and yet

believes, and believes and yet struggles with questions, may make a public profession of faith in Christ with the hopes of resolving the conflict. But usually we struggle with questions and doubts throughout our lives and we will need a strong Christian community where our questions came be asked<sup>and accepted</sup> and where we can help one another answer our questions. *And if we have wisdom & understanding we will work & pray to become, as a church, the stone for community...*

So it isn't wise to expect all our troubles to disappear when we become a Christian or recommit our lives to Christ. In fact, it can be quite devastating for a Christian who foolishly thinks that when trials and tragedy come upon them. The wisdom from above assures us that if we resist the devil he'll flee from us - but most likely he's going to come back again and again. And the wisdom from above assures us that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us. But the experience of most Christians is that we're continually going back and forth so that we continually need to draw near.

Remember the song we use to sing in Sunday School? The wise man built his house upon the rock. And the rains came down and the floods came up. And the house on the rock stood firm. But the foolish man built his house upon the sand. And the rains came down and the floods came up. And the house on the sand went BOOM! The rain comes down on the wise and foolish. The floods come up for all of us. Being a Christian doesn't spare us from getting wet or experiencing terrible loss. But the wise person has a solid foundation in Christ and his church <sup>through his church</sup> which is built on him. And Christ will bring us through those storms and tragedies and it will not depend on how strong or weak our faith will be but how strong Christ, the Solid Rock is.

*Let us pray: God of grace and God of glory, On Thy people pour Thy power; Crown Thine ancient church's story; Bring its bud to glorious flower. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, For the facing of this hour. In Christ's name. Amen.*