

5 Shevat, 5768 (Jan. 12, 2008) *The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men* J. M. Terrett
James 3:13-18 Spiritual Wisdom

Parasha Bo	Enter
Torah:	Ex. 10:1-13:16
Haftarah:	Jer. 46: 13-28
Brit Chadashah:	Rom. 9:14-29
L-rd's Table	

Review: John Steinbeck wrote a rather disturbing story about two drifters who were following a dream that never happened. It was not that their dream was out of their reach, it was just that life kept getting in the way and like them, we need to know that **even the best intentions are no guarantee that we will achieve what we set out to do.**

People often ask me to help them find the will of G-d in their lives and, mistakenly think that setting **high goals** and having **clear priorities** is the key to spiritual success. In this next series, I want to examine some passages of Scripture which talk about coming to terms with the **personal issues of our spirituality** which will make sure that our plans do not get sidetracked or stalled.

Have you ever wondered why many of the things which look so good on paper, never really work out the way we expect them to? Probably one of the great disappointments in my spiritual life has been to discover that leadership and reconciliation procedures which are so clearly outlined in the Bible are too rarely followed by those in leadership or by too many of those believers who claim to be in good standing with the L-rd.

James 3:13-18 outlines one of the best descriptions of the problem when a clear distinction is drawn between authentic **spiritual wisdom** and its **carnal counterfeit**. This morning I want to briefly look at what James is talking about and both look at how it applies to us as individuals in a community which belongs to a larger movement. I also want to examine the solutions James offers us as we navigate through these treacherous waters ourselves. Here is the passage:

“Who is **wise** and **understanding** among you? Let him show it by his **good conduct**, by deeds done in the **humility** that comes from **wisdom**. But if you harbor **bitter envy** and an **argumentative spirit** in your heart, do not exalt yourself and lie against the truth. Such wisdom does not come from heaven, but is **of this world**, and is **carnal** and even **diabolical**. For wherever you have **bitter envy** and an **argumentative spirit** there is **confusion** and every kind of **evil activity**. However, the wisdom which is from heaven is first (1) pure, then (2) peace loving, (3) considerate, (4) solution seeking, (5) full of mercy and of good fruit, and is exempt from (6) deceitfulness and (7) hypocrisy. The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who seek peace.”

Many of us come to faith with a high degree of idealism and too many sincere believers have turned their back on **organized religion** and on **religious communities** when they discovered that many of the **leadership practices** and **community standards** that are upheld by believers who claim to know better, are sometimes just as bad as those which exist in the world – and sometimes they are even worse. James outlines the problem as at least **threefold**. First, people who have no spiritual credibility are being allowed to function in a leadership capacity. “Like wind and clouds without rain, so is man who makes fall claims about his potential.” (Prov. 25:14)

Secondly he talks about people whose supposed zeal to serve the L-rd is nothing better than bitter envy where they are using their faith and their leadership position as weapons to control and justify their carnal, even diabolical agendas at the expense of the kind of **spiritual integrity** and **spiritual accountability** which the Scriptures require.

Lastly James indicates that too many believers whose spirituality is carnal and diabolical will stubbornly and eloquently defend, excuse and even justify their lack of true spirituality. I find it very hard to deal with people who know that they are off track but feel that being in such a condition is part of what it means to grow spiritually – and even though their lives are full of confusion, envy and deceitful hypocrisy which all too frequently negatively impacts the lives of those around them, they have designed any number of cunning explanations which demonstrate that it is not their fault and they cannot be held accountable for things they claim to be working on.

A good friend of mine who was raised in Christian schools and in the church will have nothing more to do with the silly games believers often play and once asked me quite seriously why I bothered to have anything to do with **religious people** who have turned the expression of their faith into a **serial soap opera** which keeps playing out with **very bad taste** and **incredibly bad acting**. At first I was at a loss at what to say since I am a professional clergyman who makes his living leading a community of religious people. I wanted to speak up in defense of my ministry colleagues and point to the countless examples where scriptural principles are followed, both by those in leadership and in the congregations they lead.

However, I soon understood that I was on the wrong track, because it is not my job to defend the **poor performance** of those leaders and those communities whose **serial violations** of what the Scriptures teach are one of the biggest barriers to the spread of the Gospel in our society today. The Scriptures clearly warn us that such abuses not only lead to the captivity and dispersal of our people, but will one day be a **major item** on the **agenda** of the **Day of Judgment**. What people get away with in this life pales when you consider the eternal destiny which awaits evildoers and hypocrites, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, to the believer first and also to the unbeliever.

G-d is not mocked and in the process of reaping and sowing which our lives really consist of, there is an element of impact which may not become evident in this life, but which will be crystal clear when we all stand together before the awesome, fiery light of His presence. So, once we understand that it is not our job to try and fix people who do not want to be fixed, we discover at least three more things, and I will close with this.

First of all it is our job to make sure that we do not fall into the same pit of self deception and that we do not allow what we know is wrong to negatively impact our own spiritual growth and health. Once we have done all that is within our power to implement the reconciliation procedures of the Scriptures, we need to learn to implement the **protective compensations** of Scripture which will prevent us from becoming infected. **First** we have to forgive and then we have to do our **level best** to fix the problem and then we either have restored fellowship and friendship, or we have a situation where we walk away, **knowing that it is G-d who shall have the last Word and not us**.

Secondly, we have to gather with **likeminded believers** and **purposely build the kind of community and establish the kind of leadership which the Scriptures require from believers as part of the reaction we need to have when we come to faith**. Yeshua said we are to forgive seven times seventy times a day. He also says we have to build our house on the rock, **so that the various faith storms of this life do not demolish our spirituality. If we give up and isolate ourselves from the corporate or community side of our faith, then could it not be said that this kind of a cop-out is just as carnal and diabolical as the nonsense the bullies and the brats are perpetrating in the supposedly spiritual communities they are polluting?**

In a very real sense we have to own both the problem and G-d's intended solution if we are serious about taking up our cross daily and about loving the L-rd with all our heart, all our might and all of our soul. This means not just avoiding the **hypocrisy** and the **diabolical carnality** which we have to contend with in so many abusive leaders and in the toxic communities they lead. **It also means that we will learn to embrace truly spiritual wisdom and dedicate our lives to tending G-d's garden, instead of just complaining about all the weeds.**

Spiritual wisdom is purposely described as having seven characteristics, five of them positive and two of them protective – and I want to close with this. Let’s look at verses 17 and 18 together:

However, the wisdom which is from heaven is first (1) pure, then (2) peace loving, (3) considerate, (4) solution seeking, (5) full of mercy and of good fruit, exempt from (6) deceitfulness and (7) hypocrisy. The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who seek peace.”

Pure here does not mean **perfect**, but **clean** and clean often means not just getting rid of stains and dirt, but also taking active steps to limit their ability to repeatedly infect our lives. ***We cannot retain a high level of spiritual hygiene if we spend our days and living splashing through puddles we should be learning to avoid.*** Peace making works in the same way because we are called to succeed in making peace with as many of the believers in our lives who share the same objective. We should not allow ourselves to be repeatedly dragged into fights and arguments ***when we could be learning how to both avoid them and actually solve the issues which cause them – such a radical idea.***

I struggled with the next word which the NIV translates as considerate, because the French word could be translated as moderate. However, the term does describe someone who is not constantly trying to push and shove and jockey for the best position as if the life we are called to is a race where we compete against each other or a rumble where our job is to become the king of the castle by subduing and dominating over everybody in our lives (the spiritual version of Ultimate Fighter, but with fewer rules and no referees).

We need to be aware of each other and learn to pursue our calling in **cooperation** with each other and not bully our way through people’s lives whenever they seem to get our own way. The next term says that part of this is being committed to finding solutions, and not just to pointing out flaws and placing blame, both in the way in which we deal with other people and in the way we let other people deal with us.

Our next term needs some explanation because ***mercy does not excuse stupidity and release people from accountability*** – it is committed to giving people as many opportunities to get it right as we have needed in our own lives. It never says that it is perfectly all right to consciously live in a state of sin with no intention of learning how to repent; it says that our attitude will not be one of the barriers to repentance and reconciliation when that person finally comes to their senses. The next step in this process of mercy is called good fruit, and means that we never cease to walk with the L-rd, even in the midst of those who do not, ***because the garden of our hearts and lives is our responsibility to tend, no matter what else is going on around us.***

Finally the last two terms will lead us into our observance of the L-rd’s Table as we consider how to become part of the solution and not make the problem worse. **Deceitfulness** means that we disguise our problems and our true feelings instead of dealing with them. It is not a sin to be angry or to have strong sexual desires; it is how we handle these raw materials which determines our spirituality. Instead of covering them up and burying them deep inside, we need to work through them and not just have the exterior appearance of spirituality. **Hypocrisy** is the final concept James uses to describe true spiritual wisdom.

In this context, I believe he may be referring to the spiritual team we are actually giving our functional allegiance to, versus the lip service and back room deals which spiritually corrupt people deny any participation in. ***Where are you really applying your spiritual time and energy? Is your wisdom carnal or heavenly? Are you prepared to move on beyond the foolishness and diabolical carnality which you correctly perceive is occurring all around you and actually produce the righteousness you are called to both sow and to reap?*** Never let anyone else’s failed “best laid plans of mice and men” cause yours to gang aft agley. ***We are building a spiritual community of integrity where leadership accountability is the norm – how about you?*** Let’s pray and prepare our hearts for the L-rd’s Table.