

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Let's talk about I-beam. It's usually made out of steel for use in construction. From the top it looks like a balance beam, the kind girls use in gymnastics. From the end it looks like the capital letter "I." Next time you drive under a bridge, look up and you may see I-beam. It may be disguised by all kinds of crisscross braces, but if you look closely, you'll find it. I-beam has to be pretty strong to hold up the bridge and all the cars and trucks that drive on the bridge.

Let's say we bring a 100-foot long I-beam to St John and lay it down on the grass in front of the school. Let's say we have a contest to see who can walk across the I-beam without falling off. At least twelve children and a dozen adults will give it a try just because it's there. At least two dozen of us will decline: too dangerous for some, too silly for others. So let's sweeten the imaginary pot: would you try walking the I-beam if you could win \$10,000? Some of you would still say, "No." So how about a million? Are we getting more takers?

Now imagine that the I-beam is suspended 100 feet in the air. Would you be willing to cross the I-beam for a million dollars now? Most of us would say, "no." But what if the person you love most in this world were being held hostage by bad men at the other end of the I-beam, and they're threatening to throw your loved one down unless you cross the I-beam? Now would you cross? This little exercise can help people examine their values. Did you

discover that you value your loved ones more than you value money or personal safety?

At your confirmation you promised to suffer all things, even death, rather than turn away from the Triune God. We made that promise because we learned that the Lord Jesus valued saving us more than he valued his position of glory as God. One of the good things that's happening at St. John's is that many of your fellow members are spending time studying the Bible to find out more about this God who loves us so much. And so the Holy Spirit is convincing more and more of us to adopt the Lord's values about everything in our lives.

Unfortunately there are lots of people in the world who don't share the Lord's values. Some of them work with us or are related to us. Others produce the kinds of television shows and recorded songs and movies and games and distractions which try to lure us away from God's values and replace them with alternate values. For instance, everyone used to say, along with God, that the lives of the elderly and the unborn should be protected until God decides to end a life. But within our lifetime the world got people to change their perspective from "Should we protect a life" to "Who gets to make the decision about whether we protect a life." In our lifetime the majority of people changed from "I'm waiting until marriage" to "I'm waiting until I'm ready." Society will let us talk about God, as long as we don't name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the only true God.

These kinds of problems aren't new. The James who wrote today's sermon text was probably the half-brother of Jesus and not one of the twelve apostles. If we're right about James, he was also head pastor of the church in Jerusalem. He didn't have internet, radio, and the silver screen to compete with, but even back then there was a struggle for hearts and minds. So he wrote a letter to his people by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, urging them to live by God's values. For James, God's values are wisdom. James lays this challenge before us today: **WHICH WISDOM WILL YOU WALK IN?** There are only two kinds of wisdom. God's, as found in the Bible, and evil, as often found in modernism, post-modernism, and whatever has come upon us since post-modernism began to fall out of favor. Evil wisdom can be found wherever Jesus is hated: humanism, macho-ism, me-ism, get rich plans, secular college campuses. **WHICH WISDOM WILL YOU WALK IN?**

It's a battle for your brain. Two sets of values are always duking it out. In this corner we have bitter envy and selfish ambition, boasting about evil, denying the truth, disorder. Let's size up the players on the opposing team. We begin with **bitter envy**. Envy doesn't usually begin bitter. At first it's just a matter of noticing that your toys, clothes, looks, car, income, house, aren't as nice as so-n-so's. Perceptive people can see envy make an entrance onto the stage of your face. Eyes narrow, head turns slightly, lips tighten, the brow furrows. If envy isn't overcome

at this early stage, it goes looking for an opportunity to compete against and perhaps even sabotage the "have mores." When envy leads you to take action such as 'telling a story to make so-n-so look not-so-good,' it won't be long now. Soon so-n-so finds out and it becomes tit-for-tat. After a few exchanges of bad behavior, the two of you look just like the Israelis and the Palestinians. Bitter envy: what a wonderful "wisdom"!

**Selfish ambition** is a kissin' cousin. It says, "I want power or pleasure. Whoever is in my way doesn't even get the courtesy of an 'Excuse me, please.' Just give 'em a little shove out of the way." You probably know someone who exhibits selfish ambition. Another "fine example" of worldly wisdom and values.

Next James lists **boasting about evil**. You've seen this. People gather around themselves a group of like-minded. They talk about their exploits, or how they got even, or how they got the advantage over someone else. Sometimes they even sing or dance about it so others can praise them for boasting about evil. And Christians are discouraged by society from speaking against these evils because "that's being judgmental." So the boasting about evil gets worse. Yet people pursue this fine wisdom.

**Denying the truth.** Most modern scientists like to do this. Science, the search for knowledge, is actually good. Data is data; facts are facts. But insisting that there is no God as the starting point is denying the truth, especially when they

start using their imagination to extrapolate beyond the data. At that point it stops being about science and starts being about their faith. They don't want to believe in a God that's powerful enough to create the universe in six days, because then they might actually be accountable to God, the same God who asserts that there is a difference between right and wrong, and states that he's not going to let anyone get away with doing wrong, not even those who follow him. Another example. God created gender in the first week of time, but one of the proponents for neutralizing gender recently wanted to refer to a class of people by their birth gender without using a gender pronoun. So she referred to the class of people as 'menstruating persons.' That's denying the truth about gender while still trying to hold on to it.

Finally, there's **disorder**. Lots of people hate to get stuck following the rules that someone else came up with. So they set aside orderly procedures to press their own advantage. Sometimes it turns into a riot or looting. <sup>15</sup>*Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.* <sup>16</sup>*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

Is anyone depressed? Let's turn to God's values. And why? because we want to establish our own goodness? No, but because the Lord, for Jesus' sake, has declared us sinners holy in his sight.

And now he wants us to pursue his kind of goodness from our gratitude. He urges: <sup>13</sup>*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

**Humility** is one of those rare values. It's like the wild animals: as soon as you catch a glimpse of them, they disappear. Humility is the opposite of pride. "Humility is recognizing that God and others are responsible for the achievements in [your] life" (Bill Gothard). "Humility is strong—not bold; quiet—not speechless; sure—not arrogant" (Estelle Smith). Humility leads us to do the jobs no one else wants to do. Humility led Jesus to leave his throne and take on human flesh so he could suffer and die in our place. Humility is a godly value.

<sup>17</sup>*The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. Pure*, the opposite of tainted. Jesus is pure; there's not a sin in him, nor ever was. When the Holy Spirit is working in us through the Word, he sweeps up the impure thoughts and words and throws them out like so much trash. Then he invites us to help him keep our minds clean. Imagine having this conversation: "Hey, that sounds like a dirty joke you're about to tell. I think I've heard this before." "This very joke?" "No, but this kind of humor. I'd love to listen to a clean joke, though, like this one. Did you hear the one about..." Purity is a godly value.

...then **Peace-loving**. This doesn't mean we give in and give in and give in. But it does mean we don't get even. When they beat Jesus, and put a crown of thorns on his head, and crucified him, he could have summoned his divine power and taken revenge. But he wanted there to be peace between us and God. So he stayed on task. Now it's our turn to stay on task. We want peace for the sake of Jesus' message. We treat people with love and respect, even when they don't deserve it. We try to reconcile our differences. If they will have none of that, then we try a little distance. And every chance we get, we try to do something nice for them, even if it's only saying a prayer. If they want to argue, we just listen. If they insult us, we smile back with love. If they make us look bad, we put it God's hands. 'Peace-loving' is a godly value.

**Considerate**. This is the opposite of selfish. It says, "What do you need?" before it says "I need" or "I want." Considerate doesn't get lost in the rush of modern life. Considerate is a godly value.

**Submissive**. A better translation would be "easily persuaded, yielding." This value comes into play when, for instance, a vote at church goes the opposite of the way you wanted it to go. When you are yielding, you say, "The majority has spoken. I will now throw my whole weight behind this decision." I heard

about a church where the vote was 51% in favor of building a garage next to the church. When the day came to build the garage, the 49% who had voted against the project were the first ones there to help. That's what it means to be easily persuaded, yielding. This is a godly value.

**Full of mercy**. Your nemesis comes to you and says, "I'm sorry for treating you badly." You forgive them because you remember how the Lord treated you for Jesus' sake. 'Full of mercy' is a godly value.

**Impartial** means you don't let your love cloud your decisions. You do what is right even if someone you love will be disadvantaged, because what is right is more important than human loyalty. Impartial is a godly value.

**Sincere**. "Always say nice things whether you mean them or not." No, always say what you mean. 'Sincere,' when coupled with 'full of mercy' and 'love' and 'humility,' will say things that are helpful.

Which wisdom will you walk in, dear friends? Worldly wisdom leads to discord and separation from the Lord. God's wisdom comes from him and leads to his glory, our joy, and our neighbors' good. <sup>13</sup>*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life.*