

Scripture Readings and Sermon

September 26, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Proverbs 1:7-10, 15-19 (Way of Wisdom)

The fear of the LORD is an important theme throughout the Book of Deuteronomy. The theme is first introduced in Genesis 22:12 when God tests Abraham, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” The absence of that fear is seen not only as the cause of the tower of Babel but also in pharaoh's heart during the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 9:30). Since the fear or awe of God is the root of wisdom, Deuteronomy repeatedly instructs the Israelites to teach it to their children. In Deuteronomy 4:10 and 31:13, it says to “Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so”. In chapter 5, verse 29, it says “If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!” Chapter six which Jesus quotes when response to the greatest commandment, it reads, “so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life”. Finally in chapter ten, verse 12, it states, “So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways...”. The entire book of Proverbs can be viewed as a father following this command and teaching his son the wisdom of walking in God's ways both fearfully and humbly.

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

What does it mean to fear the LORD?

Does this fear come from the threat of anger and vengeance?

Or, does is this fear rooted in the acknowledgment that God is eternal?

Could the root of knowledge be based upon our acceptance of mortality?

If we stop trying to be the gods of our world, what do we do with our time?

Could there be a freedom knowing that everything does not depend on us?

Commentary on James 5:13-20 (pray for the sick)

If faith must become manifest in works and those works are reflections of the Holy Spirit working inside us, what is the work of the church for James? This passage answers that question. For James, love expresses itself in prayer and praise. Prayer is not pious words but a heartfelt plea for God's help on behalf of another. It is through prayer that our hearts communion with the Holy Spirit and it is through prayer that the love of that communion is felt by others. Too often we look for the right words to say instead of the right attitude. To truly pray with someone is to both vulnerable and intimate. The intimacy comes from sharing our personal relationship to God with another person. In prayer, we become a means of grace by which God's love can be experienced by those in need. The individual see the truth of God's love in our eyes and the fire of faith and hope is rekindled. This is not our doing but God active through us.

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

Why do we say a public confession rather than a private one to a priest?

Could it be that our sin is not just against God but also our community?

Does this make more sense if, instead of community, we use the word family?

How does sin damage a family?

How can a family that prays together begin to heal?

Do formal prayers work or could praying mean an open and honest heartfelt dialog?

Commentary on Mark 9:38-50 (Do not cause stumble but salt)

Just after the disciples have been arguing about who was the greatest, they bring up the individual who is casting out demons in Jesus' name (something they failed to do in 9:17-18). Jesus' response emphasizes the universality of the "whoever" welcomes statement that precedes this passage. The passage not only warns the disciples not to stand in the way of God's work but that, if they fail to act like those they are criticizing, they could lose their saltiness. Jesus is condemning the hypocrisy of his time. The religious leaders, who focus more on the traditions than God's will, have lost their seasoning. The traditions and laws have become stumbling blocks to those who need the most healing. As a result, Jesus tells the disciples to remove anything that becomes an obstacle to God's loving grace. (Note: Only the King James and Latin version includes verses 44 and 46 which the same as verse 48)

Mark 9:42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

How do you respond to this verse?

Have you ever been an obstacle to grace?

Have your actions or in-actions ever made someone feel unloved or welcomed by God?

Was there ever a time when human emotions block Christ's love from shining?

Anger? Frustrations? Pain? Stress?

What stumbling blocks do we need to remove in our families, church, or community?

Sermon "Healing Old Wounds"

Whether we mean to or not, we are more often an obstacle to grace than a means of grace. Sometimes it is a misplaced word or a forgotten gesture that becomes a stumbling block. Even with those we love the most, how many times have we failed to convey that love. As Paul reminds us that we often fail to do the things we want to do and end up doing the very things we don't want to do. The fact is that we all fall short more often than we care to admit. While we may not intentionally place a stumbling block before one of the little children, our actions do not always reflect the love of God in our hearts.

The first step towards removing the stumbling blocks in ourselves is the fear of the Lord. We must ask ourselves what motivates our actions. Like an onion, through many tears we must peel back the layers to get at what drives us to act against our own professed beliefs. We may find old habits or world views that in the light of Christ no longer seem as noble or innocent. We may be driven by the fear of our own mortality searching for a false sense of security in money, possessions, position, or prestige. Hell is full of the rich and famous. Full of those who may have made the history books or the sports hall of fame but did very little to show the love of God on earth. What is the love of the game compared to the love offered on the cross. The fear of the Lord begins to put our priorities in line. A father who spends time with the child at a game rather than being absent is to be commended. But a father who shares a faith that will see that child through the difficulties of life is to be treasured. A mother that loves a child will be loved by that child but a mother who shares the love of God with that child will be honored for generations. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It leads us from the traps of the world and reveals hidden stumbling blocks in our lives and in our relationships.

Once those blocks are uncovered, it requires a humble and contrite heart to be willing to confess our need for help and forgiveness. To truly confess is to admit that our reactions are as important to the harm in a relationship as the original action caused. It takes both parties to damage a relationship. Confession accepts that by our actions or in-actions we either caused or enabled the damage to occur. Confession, however, is just the beginning of the conversation and not the end. Confession should

result in an open and honest heartfelt discussion as to what led to the harmful incident or miscommunication. Prayer is nothing more than a dialog where both parties are vulnerable and open to change. We must listen as much as we talk. We must not just hear the words but understand the intention behind the words. Why are they important and what do they mean to the speaker? What are they asking from us and are we willing to give what they ask? If we truly want to remove stumbling blocks then we must be willing to change at our core.

Accepting that we are flawed, setting our priorities, confessing our fault to others, and having an open dialog with a willingness to change are key to our relationship with God, our community, and our family. The more we engage our relationship with God knowing that in Christ it is a loving, forgiving, and safe space, the more we can begin to engage in our human relationships. It is not surprising that our love for God comes before we can learn to love our neighbors as ourselves. All this is possible through grace. It is by grace that we can accept our broken lives and rely upon God alone for our help. It is an act of grace to be vulnerable enough to confess to others and truly listen to others. And it is grace that seasons our lives with the salt of God's love and removes the stumbling blocks in our world. Let us always be willing to let God salt our lives with grace.