

## GOOD ADVICE

We all know and appreciate it when we receive a piece of pithy and timely advice. Sometimes it is just an off-hand observation that happens to coincide with what we're thinking. Other times it can be a direct admonition from someone who cares about our situation.

I ran across one of these pieces of advice in the Scripture recently. Psalm 34: 11-14 is a concise yet fairly comprehensive exhortation about how to have a long and happy life. It reads: "Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

God is concerned that we have long and happy lives here on earth. That does not mean we will never have affliction. Just a few verses later (v.19) it says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." We think we would be happier if we never had any trials or sicknesses, but – having made more than a few laps around this course called life – I believe a greater happiness is to be found in seeing the Lord's faithfulness to us in the midst of them.

Here then is David's first piece of advice. "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit." To be slow to speak is a great advantage. Solomon wrote, "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise" (Prov. 17:28). And the Apostle James admonished his readers to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (1:19-20). When we are tempted to spout off is precisely when we should bridle our tongues and give ourselves time to really hear – with our hearts as well as our ears – what the person is saying.

To speak deceit is to be in very bad company. The enemy of our souls is the author of deceit. His first recorded words were words of deceit (see Gen. 3:1) . "Did God really say . . . ?" His first recorded instance of deceit was when he deceived himself into thinking he, a creature, could be equal with God (see Isa. 14:13-14). The Apostle Paul warned his readers against being taken captive by deceitful human teachings which are inspired by evil forces (see Col. 2:8). And he observed to Timothy that "evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). Deception is an entanglement from which it is very difficult to escape. Sir Walter Scott aptly wrote, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

David's second piece of advice is, "Turn away from evil and do good." At first this may seem self-evident and possibly redundant, but two different things are in view here. Turning away from evil begins long before any action takes place. It begins when temptation first appears. It is not a sin to be tempted. It is when we entertain the temptation that desire is conceived and sin is birthed (see James 1:14-15). Twice in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells them to flee – to flee sexual immorality (6:18) and to flee idolatry (10:14) – to turn around and run away as fast as they can the minute they are tempted. This is what it means to turn away from evil: recognize the temptation and get the heck out of there.

Doing good is my goal as well as that of every Christian I know. But far too many times my good intentions do not translate into actual good deeds. Here again James hits the nail on the

head when he tells us to be doers of the word and not just hearers (see James 1:22-25). Our faith will stand or fall, Jesus said, based on how we act upon His words (see Matt. 7:24-27).

The final piece of advice David gives is to "seek peace and pursue it." I want all my relationships to be marked by peace. That desire is not always fulfilled; disagreements, if nothing worse, are common in interpersonal relationships. The admonition here is not just to want peace but to seek it. Look for ways to keep relations running smoothly – see the above about how to speak and act. And when they malfunction or stall, we are to go one step further by pursuing peace. To me this means I should be looking within to see if I have been offensive, repenting, and seeking forgiveness. It also means being quick to forgive when I am on the receiving end of the offense.

What really strikes me about this passage in the Psalms is that David begins by saying he will teach us the fear of the Lord. He then launches into these instructions about personal relationships as a means to obtaining a long and happy life. He said nothing about worshipping God or making any offerings. He said nothing about obeying the Law. Could it be that how we order our relationships is more of a reflection of our faith and obedience than is our church attendance and its activities? Could it be more important than exercising our spiritual gifts, praying, and working to expand God's kingdom? How could something so simple – yet at the same time so difficult – be the evidence that we do indeed fear the Lord? Short and pithy, but profoundly important advice from the One who cares about us.

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