

<sup>13</sup> *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.* James 3:13 This last section of chapter 3 defines wisdom and understanding as righteous living. The world thinks of wisdom as how to get ahead or how to resolve problems. When we think of wisdom we consider it the result of having a lot of information, facts, and theories, or as someone who knows the best choices to make in various circumstances, as if they could envision the outcome of each option and know the best one.

The Bible, however, tells us that wisdom results in a holy life. A section of Scripture is called wisdom literature, which includes Job through Song of Songs. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the most notable books on wisdom, written mostly by Solomon. Reading those, you will find the emphasis on wisdom applied to a moral way of living that is pleasing to God. It is the godly response to the situations we face. **It is not understanding everything about a situation but doing the right thing in response to it.**

The Bible tells us that wisdom begins when we reverence the Lord (Proverbs 1:7<sup>i</sup>; 9:10<sup>ii</sup>; 15:33<sup>iii</sup>; Psalm 111:10<sup>iv</sup>). The Scriptures repeatedly tell us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When we begin to see how awesome and holy God is and consider His righteous judgments, His authority and power, our attitude toward Him should be that of deep humility that He would even consider us. The psalmist asked, “What is man that You are mindful of him” (Psalm 8:4<sup>v</sup>; Proverbs 11:2<sup>vi</sup>). We should be awestruck that He could love *us*. Recognizing Him for who He is, reveals how insignificant and unimportant we are and causes us to see the wonderful glory of the gospel. The result of a greater vision of God is reverence, which is holy fear.

Wisdom begins with conversion for in conversion we find the wonder of being in Christ. He *became to us wisdom from God* (1 Corinthians 1:30<sup>vii</sup>). Taking up residence in us, His Spirit gives us those checks that are His wise and gentle directions. We often have no idea why He directs us one way or another, but to be responsive to His leading is always wise (Isaiah 30:21<sup>viii</sup>; John 3:8<sup>ix</sup>).

If you do not sense His leading or are unsure of it, do what James told us to do in the first chapter, ask God for wisdom (1:5<sup>x</sup>). In prayer we not only pour our heart out to God, but we listen for His answers. We commit our way to Him and trust that if we are in error, He will show us. The answer may come from that still small voice, or it may come through circumstances, a sense of peace or a lack of it, or a Scripture may come to mind.

Wisdom comes from God’s Word (Psalm 119:97-100<sup>xi</sup>; Colossians 3:16<sup>xii</sup>). Reading and meditating on the Word of God imparts wisdom to our souls. It directs us to the right responses and gives us guidelines on living wisely.

James has shown us that living faith results in good works (James 2:26<sup>xiii</sup>). In our passage for today he is telling us that wisdom also results in good conduct. If a person is truly wise and understanding, it is expressed in works done in the meekness of wisdom. Meekness is self-subduing gentleness.<sup>xiv</sup> In other words, the person will not boast about his good works, touting them for the respect of men. Instead, we do as Jesus taught, give without letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3,4<sup>xv</sup>). That is a way to say it is done secretly, or with as little fanfare as possible.

Jesus warned the Pharisees that when they did things to be seen of men, or for the praise of man, they had their reward (Matthew 6:2<sup>xvi</sup>). But what we do in secret is seen by

our heavenly Father. He will repay us in heaven. We get to choose which we prefer. But we know a reward in heaven is infinitely greater than man's praise. The old nature will want the praise. The new nature in Christ just wants to please God for all His goodness towards us. The new nature wants to help others because Jesus' desires have become our desires. That is wisdom, says James.

Meekness is not weakness. It is realizing both our littleness and our authority in Christ. It is recognizing how little we know and whose we are. It is knowing the power of Christ in us and the weakness of our flesh. Yet, it is not compromising to get along. It is never indecisive nor shies away from the truth. Barclay called it *a word with a caress*.

*<sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.* James 3:14 Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are signs of what James calls worldly wisdom. It is the opposite of Biblical wisdom. James began the chapter addressing the desire to be a teacher. He may have witnessed teachers in the church that put themselves in the position because of jealousy and selfish ambition (Philippians 1:17<sup>xvii</sup>).

Here at Wayside, we have only had elders who did not feel they were up to the role but were willing to serve. The only time we had someone want to take the role was because of selfish ambition. **Humility is a sign of spiritual maturity.** Wisdom cannot always be seen outwardly for it is a matter of the heart. Two individuals can do the same thing but for very different reasons. One day I can serve out of love for my Lord and others, and the next complain and whine because it is my duty to do something, but my heart is not in it. Nevertheless, I do it because of the expectation of others.

If we prefer our reward in heaven and recognize that we have a self-serving attitude, because we are in Christ, we can bring it to Him and ask Him to help us change our attitude and motivation. I find it helps to recall how gracious He has been to me and think of His great love. I ask for His desire to fill my heart. I listen to praise music, and before I know it my whole demeanor has changed.

At other times I find the struggle continues within as the flesh wars against the spirit (Galatians 5:17<sup>xviii</sup>). But as I start doing what I know I should, I start to find joy in doing it and that God answers as I step out in faith. I cannot boast, for it was the grace of God that helped me to carry through. I would be false to the truth if I described it differently. Which is to say, I would be lying.

Those leaders James warned in the first verse of this chapter who boast of their wisdom are denying the truth. The factions<sup>xix</sup> they form are works of the flesh (Galatians 5:20<sup>xx</sup>). They try to have people follow them rather than Jesus. As Jesus said of the Pharisees, *“Everything they do is to be seen by men”* (Matthew 23:5<sup>xxi</sup>).

*<sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* James 3:15 Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition does not come from Biblical wisdom. It is not from God. It is earthly, meaning of this world, animal like, the fallen nature. It is unspiritual or we could say carnal. But worst of all, it is demonic. Fallen angels love to inspire this in us. That is because it has the effect they desire: division and self-centered living. Man is even proud of this earthly wisdom and boasts about it.

While living in another culture I was asked to start an ESL class in a passive solar building I had designed for an acquaintance. Teaching was my job at the time. I found interested students and built up a class while renting the space in that building. Then one day the owner of the building said they found a new teacher to take over the class. They

wanted both the rent and the income from the students. The situation had benefited both of us, but they decided they wanted all the benefit.

I was baffled and felt betrayed. To that person's surprise, I called all the students and moved the class to a different location. Sadly, I responded to earthly wisdom with earthly wisdom. I did not show them the grace of God but acted just as unspiritual as that person. I sunk to their level. Had I responded with Godly wisdom, I would have been peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy. It could have left an impression on that person of the grace of God.

When I asked another person of that culture why someone would attempt something so underhanded, they told me it was considered to be wise. I was naive as to how the culture thought. What we call greedy or clever, they saw as wisdom.

*<sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.* James 3:16 Jealousy and selfish ambition, the me first, anything to get ahead motivations. It is the cutthroat world of climbing the corporate ladder or craving financial gain. We have seen a crypto scam that robbed people of billions, leaving investors destitute in its wake. I have heard accounts of investment scams in churches where a con artist will practice a ponzi-scheme that leaves widows without the home they mortgaged to make extra income (Mark 12:40<sup>xxii</sup>). Demonic!

But most of the time jealousy and selfish ambition are much more subtle. A power play in the church to see who will get the votes to have their way and maintain control. Politicians twist the truth or outright lie about their opponents. Earthly wisdom is how the world operates. It is a major driving force in everyone's carnal nature. It should never surprise us. We should expect it from fallen man.

James tells us that these forces bring disorder and every vile practice. We have all observed the truth of his declaration, from the adulterer who seduces another man's wife, to the developer who does not pay his naive contractor. It is the way of the world. **What is surprising is when the wisdom from above is seen in the midst of this fallen world.**

Worldly wisdom does the most damage when it splits churches. I think this is where the Devil most delights in stirring up jealousy and selfish ambition. Because sheep like to follow a shepherd, a self-asserting prideful teacher can easily sway opinions and spread dissatisfaction while promising to deliver something better. Like Absalom, they sit in judgment over situations only to give advice that gains them followers (2 Samuel 15:1-6<sup>xxiii</sup>). Then when they think they have a sufficient following they begin their coup. If they cannot have the whole church, they will take as many as they can and start something new where they are the sole authority. It happens all too often. They leave the former church with the debt they voted to incur whether it is for the building or commitment to missions. Pride, envy, or selfish ambition should have no place in the church. When we see it, we should squelch it before it spreads like a cancer. It is from below. If not confronted, it will damage and possibly destroy the church. Either way it harms the testimony of the church in that city. Those who engage in such destruction will answer to God, as we saw in the first verse of this chapter (3:1<sup>xxiv</sup>).

*<sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.* James 3:17 So how do we keep this earthly wisdom from destroying our testimony or that of the church? We counter it with the wisdom that comes from above. Let us first note that this wisdom is not natural to us. It comes from God who gives us a new nature, like His own. First, it is pure. Moral purity

must be a priority for those who would be wise. There is no deception or hidden agenda. There are not even mixed motives.

Friendship evangelism is the idea that we get to know people and become their friend so that we earn the right to be heard. It is a nice sentiment, but if we become friends with the motivation of seeing them come to Christ, and then abandon them when they reject our witness, we have gone into the relationship with mixed motives. Then they may feel you just wanted to convert them and never really cared about them. True friendship will endure. It may be years before they are ready to hear your witness.

Wisdom from above is first pure. I believe that means we do not wear a mask. We are our true selves in Christ. We do what we do just because Jesus is our Lord. What people see is what they get. Selfishness has no foothold. Love should be genuine (Romans 12:9<sup>xxv</sup>).

*James had apparently given much thought to the arrangement of the remaining six characteristics of wisdom because he has artfully ordered them so that in the Greek the first four began with the e sound and the last two with a pleasant a sound. Also, the last two have an almost metrical rhyming. He wanted his hearers to remember this wisdom.*<sup>xxvi</sup>

That wisdom from above is peaceable and gentle which is unlike worldly peace (John 14:27<sup>xxvii</sup>). We may discuss differences, but we do not argue to prove we are right. We do not raise our voice when others do. We truly want the best for others no matter where they are coming from or what kind of attitude they have. Peace and gentleness are two fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23<sup>xxviii</sup>).

We are at peace because we have peace with God and humble ourselves to have peace with man. We are blessed because peacemakers will be called children of God (Matthew 5:9<sup>xxix</sup>). We are gentle because we long for them to receive the words of truth. We know how gentle the Lord is with us when we are in rebellion. It is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4<sup>xxx</sup>). Paul told the Philippians that they should let their *gentleness be known to all* (Philippians 4:5<sup>xxxi</sup>). We should “*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:3<sup>xxxii</sup>). We should “*make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification*” (Romans 14:19<sup>xxxiii</sup>).

Godly wisdom is open to reason. I find the things of God to be quite logical. Logic tells me the description of mankind in Scripture lines up with what I observe in the world. That chance and time created order and beauty and complexity is illogical to me. When people are truly seekers, I enjoy answering their questions from the Bible, because the logic is usually quite clear. In the same way, when someone tells me I have misinterpreted a passage and they share why from Scripture, I want to be open to reason.

When I was in a cult, my brother-in-law wrote and asked me to keep an open mind. That bothered me. But then I was bothered by the fact that it bothered me. Was I open to reason? And when I began to see the bad fruit of the cult’s teaching in my own life and in others in the group, being open to reason led to freedom. Our reasoning may be right or wrong, but if we are open to reason and the Word of God, if we are seeking the truth, we can be sure that if you seek you will find (Matthew 7:7<sup>xxxiv</sup>).

Godly wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits. We express compassion toward others because we know how merciful God has been to us. That means that like the Good Samaritan, we bear the good works that results from compassion. We are to do unto others as we would have them do to us (Matthew 7:12<sup>xxxv</sup>).

Wisdom from above is impartial and sincere. James has hammered home how hypocritical it is of Christians to show partiality (2:1<sup>xxxvi</sup>). Our flesh will give us all kinds of reasons our situation is an exception. Do not listen to it! Keep that Golden Rule in mind. Remember the potential of every person to become a son or daughter of God.

Sincerity conveys. Insincerity can also easily be discerned. People usually sense if you are really listening and truly care. They can read it in our tone and expressions on our faces. **They must know how much we care before they care how much we know** (2 Corinthians 1:12<sup>xxxvii</sup>). Sometimes I must remind myself, “Jesus died for this person I am talking with, and He longs for them to know Him.” It means to put aside our immediate concerns and focus on that individual.

*<sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

James 3:18 Some commentators believe verse 18 was a common saying of the day. If so, it is an inspired one. Earthly wisdom with its jealousy and selfish ambition is bound to end up in strife and will therefore never know peace and the resulting righteousness. On the other hand, when one trusts the sovereignty of God and can forgive and allow others to have the last word because of that trust, there can be peace in their hearts and in their lives which results in a harvest of righteousness.

We should face the confrontations in life asking ourselves how we can be an instrument of God’s peace. How can we bring *shalom* into the situation. Knowing we reap what we sow can be a great motivator (Galatians 6:7<sup>xxxviii</sup>). Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God (Matthew 5:9<sup>xxxix</sup>). Godly wisdom will sow peace and light into our conversations. That will result in a harvest of righteousness. Listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as to how to sow peace. Sometimes it is simply a kind or humble, sincere response. Other times it is just to remain silent. Sometimes it is a gentle but clear rebuke out of love, or a pointed question that will stay with them long after the conversation has ended. And remember, resistance toward Christianity is often about the poor example of the church. You can always agree with that, but then point them to Jesus whose testimony is what we really want to share.

James has set before us two very different kinds of wisdom, earthly and that which is from above. One is earthly, the other is spiritual. One is demonic and the other from God. We would like to think that we always operate in the latter. But if we are honest, we will recognize we must always be vigilant to walk in the Spirit rather than the flesh (Romans 8:4<sup>xl</sup>). The more we walk in fellowship with Jesus, in the Word, and in prayer, the more we will desire to experience the peace of our Savior and the more uncomfortable we will be when we give in to the flesh.

The contrast could not have been made clearer. We can be earthly, unspiritual, demonic, jealous, selfishly ambitious, and causing disorder. We can be pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. If we are in Christ, we can choose the latter and reap a harvest of righteousness. Choose this day whom you will serve (Joshua 24:15<sup>xli</sup>). Only in Christ can we truly live out the wisdom that comes from above.

Will you pray with me right now, confessing how we too often lack godly wisdom, and asking God to grant us the wisdom that is from above (James 1:5<sup>ix</sup>)? Remember that the fifth verse in the first chapter encouraged us to make this request and tells us that God who gives generously to all will without reproach give it to us. Let us claim that promise right now! Let us go before the throne of grace for the help we need (Hebrews 4:16<sup>xlii</sup>).

## Questions:

- 1 Did this change your concept of wisdom? How?
- 2 List the ways we receive this wisdom.
- 3 How is wisdom and understanding demonstrated?
- 4 What are the symptoms of earthly wisdom?
- 5 What does earthly wisdom look like?
- 6 What proceeds from jealousy and selfish ambition?
- 7 How does this play out in churches?
- 8 What is the result of wisdom from above?
- 9 What does verse 18 convey?
- 10 How can we reap a harvest of righteousness?

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### <sup>i</sup> **Proverbs 1:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

### <sup>ii</sup> **Proverbs 9:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

### <sup>iii</sup> **Proverbs 15:33 (ESV)**

<sup>33</sup>The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

### <sup>iv</sup> **Psalms 111:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

### <sup>v</sup> **Psalms 8:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup>What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

### <sup>vi</sup> **Proverbs 11:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup>When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.

### <sup>vii</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:30 (ESV)**

<sup>30</sup>And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

### <sup>viii</sup> **Isaiah 30:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup>And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.

### <sup>ix</sup> **John 3:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

### <sup>x</sup> **James 1:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup>If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

### <sup>xi</sup> **Psalms 119:97-100 (ESV)**

<sup>97</sup>Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. <sup>98</sup>Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. <sup>99</sup>I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.

<sup>100</sup>I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

### <sup>xii</sup> **Colossians 3:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup>Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

### <sup>xiii</sup> **James 2:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup>For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

<sup>xiv</sup>Alec Motyer, *The Message of James*, p 68,69

### <sup>xv</sup> **Matthew 6:3-4 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup>But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### <sup>xvi</sup> **Matthew 6:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup>"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.



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<sup>xvii</sup> **Philippians 1:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

<sup>xviii</sup> **Galatians 5:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

<sup>xix</sup> The Greek word translated in ESV as selfish ambitions comes from the root word meaning factions.

<sup>xx</sup> **Galatians 5:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,

<sup>xxi</sup> **Matthew 23:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,

<sup>xxii</sup> **Mark 12:40 (ESV)**

<sup>40</sup> who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>xxiii</sup> **2 Samuel 15:1-6 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. <sup>2</sup> And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, "From what city are you?" And when he said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel," <sup>3</sup> Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." <sup>4</sup> Then Absalom would say, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice." <sup>5</sup> And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. <sup>6</sup> Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **James 3:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

<sup>xxv</sup> **Romans 12:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

<sup>xxvi</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James, Faith that Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), p. 157.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **John 14:27 (ESV)**

<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

<sup>xxix</sup> **Matthew 5:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>xxx</sup> **Romans 2:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

<sup>xxxi</sup> **Philippians 4:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;

<sup>xxxii</sup> **Ephesians 4:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> **Romans 14:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> **Matthew 7:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

<sup>xxxv</sup> **Matthew 7:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> **James 2:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> **2 Corinthians 1:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> **Galatians 6:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

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<sup>xxxix</sup> **Matthew 5:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>xi</sup> **Romans 8:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

<sup>xlii</sup> **Joshua 24:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

<sup>xliii</sup> **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.