

The Epistle of James

Lesson 2

Two Paths of Wisdom

Forum



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The Epistle of James

Lesson Two: Two Paths of Wisdom

Forum

With

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Question 1: What is wisdom?

Dr. Daniel Treier

Wisdom is the growing capacity to run with, rather than against, the grain of God’s created order. Sometimes the vocabulary is used in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, for something that’s merely a skill or perhaps for abstract philosophizing. But of course, that’s only going to run so far in terms of going with, rather than against, the grain of God’s creation. So, ultimately, wisdom begins where it ends, with the fear of the Lord. And it’s a growing capacity to live in light of the fear of the Lord. So, wisdom is both a *process* and a *product*. We have two ways — toward life or toward death. We’re to choose the way toward life and grow in our ability to walk in it in the right direction rather than choosing to go in a wayward direction and pursue folly. So, wisdom is communicated through tradition. The wisdom literature in the Old Testament provides us with memorable, punchy sayings that enable us to capture the best of what the community wants to pass on regarding how to live well. But wisdom involves not only tradition; it also involves inquiry. It involves ongoing reflection about how that tradition relates to present day circumstances and challenges. So, the traditional wisdom of Proverbs is balanced out by the more reflective and challenging wisdom of Job or Ecclesiastes. In the New Testament, of course, wisdom has a new dimension. It becomes more fully personal as it is embodied in Jesus Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is further democratized or spread around through the capacity we have to gain the mind of Christ by the Holy Spirit. All of God’s people can grow in wisdom rather than having wisdom be initially focused in a group of sages who are learning to teach others how to live well... The other emphasis in biblical wisdom comes in terms of virtue, and the way that moral and spiritual excellence is formed in community. Of course, ultimately our relationship to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is the center of how we gain wisdom, but Christ, by the Spirit, forms wisdom in his people as the people of God grow together in virtue over time.

Dr. Eric J. Tully

Well, when we think about the definition of wisdom in the Old Testament, we're interested in the ways that people act in ways that are skillful. So, in its most neutral sense, in its most basic sense, wisdom just simply means skill. It means doing something effectively, whether that's being a skillful carpenter and cutting wood to the correct dimensions, or whether it's being an effective stonemason and being able to cut blocks for a building to the correct dimensions. Wisdom means being skillful at something and often, the ways that we think about wisdom are ways in which we think about living life skillfully, knowing not only what to do but when to do it, knowing the proper social situation for something, living life in an effective way so that you get ahead, so that you prosper, so that you live the life that you want to live... Wisdom has a very practical orientation in the Bible. It's dealing with the kinds of things we run across all the time, whether it's relationships, dealing with authority, thinking about our use of money, thinking about relationship to our parents, in thinking about our job, and even table manners, all kinds of really practical issues like that. And then, in a broader way, wisdom is concerned with order, being able to understand life and the world correctly so that we can live skillfully. We know the kinds of pitfalls to avoid. We know the ways to get ahead in life. And it's the Bible that begins to help us understand that if we really want to live life skillfully, we have to do that in terms of the fear of the Lord. So that's where we really begin to move from the most basic sense of wisdom as being something that you're good at, even if it's wrong or neutral, to being something that is related to our relationship with the Lord and recognizing that he is the Creator of the entire world, and that if we are properly related to him, then that is what will help us to live life skillfully.

Question 2:

Why does James give so much emphasis to the challenges facing poor believers?

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

James gives us very practical advice about how we are to live as Christ's community in this age, and one of the emphases of the book of James is having a concern for the poor. Why would James tell us that we should be concerned about the poor? Well, we should think back to the teaching of Jesus at this point and remember that when Jesus came, his message can be described as a gospel of good news for the poor. And in fact, when Jesus was explaining to the messengers of John the Baptist that the kingdom of God had been inaugurated, he reminds them that good news had been preached to the poor. Why is it that the poor are given such a prominent place in the preaching of the gospel? Well, it appears to be that the poor are paradigmatic heirs of the kingdom of God because they have nothing to rely on except God himself. And, in fact, if we look at the Old Testament precedence, we can see that even King David could describe himself as "poor" because he was relying on God and trusting in God for intervention and salvation, and he was not trusting in his own abilities or his own

resources. And in the book of James, he reminds us of the teaching of Jesus that his message is a gospel of the poor, and in chapter 2, he tells us that God has chosen the poor to be rich in the kingdom of God. What is the practical implication of this? The practical payoff is those of us in Christ's kingdom, who are a part of his church, should have particular care for those who are poor because we, first of all, want to have compassion on them as Christ tells us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, but also because the poor have a particularly important role to play in illustrating for us and for the world the nature of the kingdom, as we rely on God for salvation and not on our own resources for salvation. And so, the way we treat our brothers and sisters who may not have as much in the church, we should treat them with the utmost respect and not treat those who are wealthy, in the worldly terms, we should not treat them with more dignity or more respect than we do with the poor, because God has chosen the poor to be rich in the kingdom of God.

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

The book of James is a great aid for us in understanding just how important caring for the poor is in the heart of God. He equates genuine religion, or one of the marks of it, is our care for the poor. Such as here again in 1:27:

Religion that ... our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this:

— and what we might think is, “doing these certain things” or “knowing these certain things” — the way he defines it is:

to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27, NIV).

Following a similar idea to Christ in Matthew 25, that the way that he recognizes those that are his, chosen before the foundation of time, is that they care for the sick and the poor and the prisoner and the orphan, and so on. And then, even in chapter 2, when he talks about favoritism, and then he goes into his famous description of faith versus deeds, the examples that he uses are care for the poor. That's how faith is expressed most genuinely, and how faith is seen is in care for the poor. It's not enough just to say that we care for the poor, that someone should do something about it. Faith is expressed in actually doing it. But in fact, he goes on and describes the poor as being those who are honored in the site of God in their state. We might look at the poor and think, oh, you know, they're cursed by God. But God says we look, and we should learn from the poor. Jesus doesn't say that it's harder for a poor man, or it's easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle than a poor man inherit the kingdom of God. He uses a rich man because that wealth can cause us to rely on ourselves. But one of the things the poor understand is their need for God. There's no pretense. And so, all of us can learn from that.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

There's a very important question for any society that James deals with in his treatment of the poor, in the way that he aids our understanding of this theme. He

candidly addresses this issue in a powerful way in chapter 2 of his epistle when he says:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory (James 2:1).

When we distinguish between people, there can be a lot of prejudice and hypocrisy. People treat some people gently and with honor, while others they treat with humiliation, contempt, and apathy. This is unacceptable in Christian life. And James gives an example about the poor by saying:

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place” [in this prestigious place] while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there” (James 2:2-3).

Here we can see the hypocrisy, partiality, discrimination, perhaps racism. Sometimes we treat others according to their knowledge, their background or nationality, their age, gender, or financial or social position. James says this is not the way it should be in Christian life. Notice where the problem is. He puts his finger exactly on the issue by saying:

[H]ave you not then made distinctions among yourselves [Have you not examined yourselves? Do you not see what you are doing?] and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:4).

Discriminating between one another, unequal treatment of people, humiliating the poor, all come from evil thoughts. This indicates the depravity of the heart, and it also indicates something very dangerous, that our way of thinking is in opposition to God's. We think in one way, and God thinks in another way. Notice how James puts it:

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man (James 2:5-6).

This is the way God thinks. He turns the standards of the world upside down. He puts down the mighty and exalts those who are lowly. So, when we discriminate against and humiliate the poor, we are responding in a way that is opposite to God's way. That is why James focuses strongly on this theme.

Dr. Dan McCartney

James is very concerned for the poor because, as James says in 2:5, they are the ones, the poor are the ones, who are rich in faith. God has chosen them to be rich in faith

and to be inheritors of the kingdom. That's actually in the context of a deep concern that James has in the church or churches to whom he is writing, because apparently people were showing favoritism towards the rich people, which is a very common thing to do... There's just a natural instinct that people have to show favoritism towards the rich, and James says that's way out of character with God. And, in fact, that is a dishonoring of the poor. And if God actually favors and blesses the poor, then it's very strange, it's very out of character for somebody who claims faith in Christ, as he says in 2:1, to show favoritism. Now, that doesn't mean that simple economic poverty is an automatic ticket to eternal life. That's not what he's getting there. He's rather focusing on the fact that those who are poor both economically and in other ways disenfranchised or oppressed, they are much more likely to lay firmly hold of the kingdom of God because they don't have money or power that they could hold onto instead, and as a result, God favors the poor. He's the one who takes care of them, and therefore, those who are God's people must respect the poor because God does. And also, there's the dimension that any believer should know that he or she, himself or herself, is very poor and very needy when it comes to their relationship to God. So, it really is an insult to God himself to kowtow to a rich person and to disrespect the poor. If the poor are really important to God, they had better be important to us as well.

Question 3:

What can we learn from James about the need to grow in Christian maturity?

Dr. Jimmy Agan

James has so much to teach us about Christian maturity and Christian growth. One of the ways he's going to challenge many believers is to show us that doctrine and duty go hand in hand. Sometimes we emphasize belief in right doctrine, but we don't emphasize right practice as much. And James won't let us get away with that. He insists that we turn our belief into action. Another way that James helps us think about spiritual growth and maturity is he challenges a dichotomy between personal piety and care for others. And sometimes as believers we could say, "You know, as long as I'm walking with Jesus, as long as I'm growing with the Lord, and I'm reading Scripture, and I'm praying, then everything is good. I'm growing in holiness." And James wants to say, no, real holiness is going to go hand in hand with mercy toward those in need — the orphans, the widow, the poor. So, James is going to challenge us to a model of spiritual growth that's not just about us, but about others around us as well. And then, personally, I'd have to say the book of James challenges me to grow in holiness in the sense of seeing my need of God's mercy, because I see more clearly the depths of sin. If you want to know how serious sin is, read the book of James, because he's going to tell you things like this: If you break one of God's commandments, you've broken all of them. James is going to tell you it's a sin not only to do what's wrong, but to know what's right and fail to do it. And James is

going to tell you that if you speak negatively about a brother, you're actually criticizing God himself as the giver of his perfect law. And so, James has a radically serious view of sin, and therefore, he's exposing our need for God's grace and mercy, and it makes us just eat up the promise he gives us, that mercy triumphs over judgment.

Dr. Dan McCartney

James is very helpful in our growth into maturity for a number of reasons. He is very clear about how the life of the believer is one of commitment, which he underscores, for example, in 1:5-8. He shows how the life of the believer is growing in humility and meekness in many places — in James 1:9-11, and 2:1-4, and 3:13 and following, and most of chapter 4, and the later part of chapter 5. So, he's very deeply concerned with this aspect, something often missing from our life as believers. Thirdly, he points out the danger of anger and how anger does not work the righteousness of God... There's also the danger of a loose tongue that is something that mature Christians need to make sure that they have control of their tongue. James is concerned with patience in the midst of suffering, and there's a recognition by a mature Christian that suffering is part of life and especially the Christian life, and it's how one responds to suffering that determines one's growth in Christ, one's growth in knowledge of God. And above all, there's a general awareness of a dependence on God's mercy. Over and over again that mercy theme is in James, a recognition that our lives are very and constantly dependent on mercy. So faith, in James, which, as I mentioned, is a deep concern to James, is a commitment to be like Jesus, and Christian maturity is basically a growth in being like Jesus. And so, as we are like Jesus, in his mercy, in his showing of compassion, in his perseverance in the midst of suffering, that is the way in which James helps us time and time again in our growth in Christ.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

What can we learn from James in regard to growing in Christian maturity and producing fruit in the Christian life? Well, James deals with real life. He's very practical. He's neither theoretical nor romantic. And James' point concerns everyone, regardless of who they are. His point is about how to respond to trials, how to *correctly* respond to trials. He simply says that in order to respond positively to trials, we need a special kind of wisdom, a wisdom that comes from God. So, when a trial comes, we should face it with wisdom without falling into sin or iniquity because of it. Then, as we conquer the trial, we become better and stronger instead of allowing the trial to defeat us and make us worse. He says this happens first through prayer, prayer that does not doubt God, his attributes, his ability, his benevolence, his love, and his goodness. James speaks about asking God for wisdom, asking with confidence and faith in God. So, he first addresses prayer, then he mentions Scripture. He says, "[B]e quick to hear" — run to hear — "slow to speak." ... Let us listen to what God is saying. Do not rush! Instead of responding angrily to trials, let us calm down and listen to the Word speaking to us. We need wisdom when trials come, but where do we get wisdom? Prayer is an up arrow and Scripture is a down arrow in which God speaks to us. I speak with him, and he speaks with me.

Question 4:**Why does James need to remind his audience to put what they've been taught into practice?****Dr. Stephen J. Bramer**

I can think of a number of reasons that James needs to encourage his audience, his readership, to put into practice what they've been taught... James grew up in the first century in Palestine, and he would have been aware that there were many, many teachers at the time who were hypocritical in what they taught and then how they acted. His brother, Jesus Christ, pointed that out numerous times to the Pharisees, and so James is well aware that you could be a religious person, be teaching things or being taught things, and not necessarily practicing them. I also think that James was well aware of his own personal experience. We don't know how much he heard his brother teach, but from James, he quotes from the material that we later find in the Sermon on the Mount quite a bit, so I think he heard his brother teach. So, he'd been taught, but he hadn't responded in faith or in action to that until after the resurrection. So, he knew from personal experience, you could have a head knowledge and not necessarily, then, be putting it into practice. And I assume that James, as a good teacher of the church, observed people's personal reaction to the teaching that was occurring in the church, and recognizing sometimes the hardness of the human heart, sometimes just the inability of humans to remember what they've been taught and act on it, being a little inconsistent, that he felt it was important to remind them that it wasn't enough to have just heard it or even to have learnt it, but then to take that and to put it into practice.

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

One of the themes of the whole book of James is, faith is seen in what we do in response. In 1:22:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves. Do what it says.

And then he gives this great analogy:

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it — not forgetting what they've heard but doing it — they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:22-25).

And the way he describes the law there, and even doing the law, is that it's a law of freedom, and we need to continue in that law. We might think that following the law

or doing the word is a form of slavery, but the way he describes it is that's where freedom is really found, so that we're not enslaved by other things. And it's not enough just to know about the word or what the word says. Again, an indicator of what's really in our hearts is whether we do the word or not. If it's just in our heads, then it hasn't sunk down far enough. It has to be seen in what we do.

Rev. David Lewis

There are several important reasons why James needs to exhort Christians to live out their life and to take what Jesus has taught and to put it into practice in their real lives. And one of these reasons, a very practical reason that all believers have to deal with, is even though I have been declared righteous by God, and I've received the Holy Spirit, and I've been called to be one of God's people, I still struggle with sin. And this is a part of our life and our reality, until Jesus comes again, until the resurrection of the dead on the last day, is I must struggle with sin, and so I need to be exhorted. I need to be reminded of what God wants me to do. And so, this is a very important point that every Christian in this age needs to deal with. It's good that James and Paul and Jesus and the other apostles exhort us to live a certain way, because we struggle with sin, and we need to be reminded of this.

Another reason is, something many of us may forget about, but those who are new to the faith, who have accepted the gospel that Jesus has come to save them from sin, death, the power of Satan, they believe in him, they're now incorporated into the people of God, they may not know the very next day what it is God wants them to do. And so, in the New Testament we find the apostles and James and the other writers exhorting Christians to live a certain way. It could well be because many of them don't know what is a God-pleasing life. Yeah, we've got the law written on our heart, but that's not always so clear, so to hear externally God's chosen teachers telling us how we should respond, that's of great value... There are certain things that show that you're a Christian. The law itself has a value, especially when it tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and so James is actually addressing a problem that I think has peaked up in the history of the church repeatedly, and it's out there in Christianity today, this idea of "cheap grace," gospel reductionism — "the only thing that's true is the message of salvation, so I can dismiss any of the moral demands of God that I find uncomfortable at this moment." And to this, James is saying, "Absolutely not." This is one of the main contributions of this book in the New Testament, is he's the guy who forcefully says to a cheap-grace understanding of the gospel, "No way, this is not what Christianity is about."

Dr. Dan McCartney

James regards it as rather indispensable to genuine faith that that faith be put into practice. There is a poisonous toxin that has always been in the church of what one author called "easy believism," that is, this notion that if you somehow just think that certain doctrines are true, or if you follow certain formulas, or utter certain liturgies, and at the end of the day your ethical life doesn't matter. That's not a genuine faith at all, and in fact will result in condemnation despite your conforming to certain ideas or your giving assent to certain thoughts. Jesus actually attacks that same thing. He lays

it in pretty hard on the Pharisees for being hypocrites. A hypocrite is somebody who is pretending to hold to certain things, but it doesn't actually affect his life. And it's worth remembering that most hypocrites do not know that they are hypocrites... They have somehow deceived themselves — and by the way, self-deceit is another very interesting thing that James talks about — but hypocrites have deceived themselves into thinking that they are believers, when actually they aren't. The key, James says, is whether you actually act out that faith in what you do. A genuine faith, says James over and over again in chapter 2, is active. It's not something that just nods the head then goes to sleep. In fact, acknowledging certain things to be true is something that even demons do, James says, but what good does that do them because even though they "believe" in the sense of they acknowledge that there are certain things that are true, they're still demons. They're still under condemnation. And James even goes so far as to say that kind of faith is like a corpse. He uses the word that would be offensive to a Jewish reader and probably even Gentile readers in the same way that we kind of have an adverse reaction to a corpse; we wouldn't want to have anything to do with it. And that's what James says a faith that actually doesn't act out that faith is like. It's completely dead. It has no value whatsoever, in fact, it's repulsive.

Question 5:

Why does James differentiate between two types of wisdom?

Dr. Jimmy Agan

In James 3, James mentions two different kinds of wisdom. One is earthly and unspiritual; that comes from the Devil. The other is heavenly; it comes from God, and it yields abundant fruit of peace and joy in the lives of the people who receive it. There's kind of a question as to why James might do that. Why contrast two different kinds of wisdom? And James is the Proverbs of the New Testament. In the book of Proverbs, you don't get a contrast between the two kinds of wisdom. In Proverbs, you get a contrast between wisdom and folly. So, that raises the question, why would James do this kind of interesting move to contrast two kinds of wisdom, and my hunch is this. In the book of Proverbs, you have parents teaching children. You have a mature group teaching a group of people who know they're not as mature as the teachers. James, contrasting two kinds of wisdom, seems to be assuming an audience in which all his readers would want to be known as mature and wise. They would want to say, "Yes, we have wisdom." And James seems to be going with their argument and saying, "Okay, have it your way. You're all-wise, but some of you, you're getting your wisdom from the Devil. You're getting your wisdom from the wrong source, and you need to turn from that kind of wisdom to the kind of wisdom that can only come from God, the kind of wisdom that comes from heaven. And so then James shows, you know, this worldly wisdom that comes from the Devil, it manifests itself in your relationships. It's going to show up in all kinds of envy and discord and strife as you relate to other people. The wisdom that comes from God is going to do just the opposite. It's going to produce harmony and love and peace as

you relate to other people. So, James contrasts these two kinds of wisdom and says, “You know what, everybody wants to be wise. Not everybody wants to reflect true wisdom in the way they treat other people.” And so, James is pointing us right back to this wisdom that comes from God that’s going to have a powerful transforming impact on the way that we treat other people every day.

Dr. David W. Chapman

James talks about two different kinds of wisdom in his book, which is often about wisdom, the book of James is, and when he speaks of wisdom, he speaks of a wisdom that is from above, that is a holy wisdom, that is wise and understanding. And he speaks of another wisdom, which he calls a wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, [and] demonic.” And when he describes that second kind of wisdom, he talks about a wisdom that is jealous and seeks its own self-ambition. And we can think of people in our lives who have a kind of earthly wisdom, a wisdom that has managed to help them succeed in life, a wisdom that’s enabled them to accomplish their ends and their ambitions and that’s accomplished their purposes, but often has injured other people in the process. And so, James contrasts that kind of wisdom with:

The wisdom [that is] from above [that] is ... pure [and] peaceable [and] gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:17-18).

And all of those things have a lot to do with our relationships with one another. And so, we see that this wisdom that’s from above is primarily one that’s oriented towards loving our neighbor and the royal law.

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

In chapter 3 of James, he differentiates between two types of wisdom. This is actually something wisdom teachers do. They compare things. They say, “This is what the life of the unrighteous looks like. This is what the life of the righteous looks like. This is the wicked. This is those who believe in God,” and they’ll do these kind of polar opposites to compare things. It’s a literary tool to make things clear, to impact his readers. Paul also, by the way, compares two types of wisdoms. He talks about wisdom from God, heavenly wisdom, which is foolishness to the Gentiles; it’s actually shameful to the Gentiles, a stumbling block to the Jews. So, he compares two types of wisdoms as well. He’s doing something different there. James in his focus is on conduct, okay? So, in James 3, he says this:

Who is [the] wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom (James 3:13).

And so, he uses that language of wisdom to talk about the way we conduct ourselves, our lifestyle. And in that section, his focus is primarily upon not how you spend your private time, not how much Bible reading you do, but how you behave in social context. So, the wisdom that is from God is kind, it’s peaceable, it’s merciful, it

doesn't get bent out of shape when somebody treats you badly. But the wisdom that is demonic is always argumentative, quarrelsome, and it's divisive. So, he's really concerned there with how you behave in social context, how you behave at church, how you behave among the Gentiles, among the unbelievers. That's his focus, and the reason he compares them along two angles is to show you the results of folly in your relationships. What will folly do to your friendships, to your conduct, to your relationship with those around you?

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

I think James does a great job of pointing out the difference between "worldly wisdom" and wisdom that's from God. I think there's a temptation when we have a lot of education and knowledge to equate that with being wise. But the thing that he talks about here in chapter 3 is, really, you can recognize both kinds of wisdom, whether it's worldly wisdom or godly wisdom, by the fruit of it. For example:

Who is wise and understanding among you? ... But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic (James 3:13-15, NIV).

But then he goes on in verse 17 to talk about the wisdom that comes from God, and again, it's not measured so much by theological degrees or how big the words are that we use. He says it's:

... first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness (James 3:17-18, NIV).

And so, keeping in line with James' idea of "Be a doer of the word and not just a hearer," is he applies that in wisdom, and he talks not just peace-knowing, but peace-making, taking that knowledge and applying it in relationship with other people. That's where wisdom is really seen.

Question 6:

What is the relationship between wisdom and righteousness?

Dr. Eric J. Tully

In the Bible, there's an important connection between wisdom and righteousness. That's not true in other wisdom texts of the ancient Near East, whether they're texts from Mesopotamia or texts from Egypt. These are practical sayings that have to do with having good table manners or responding correctly to the king or to someone that's higher in authority. It's very much about the kind of skillful living that you would expect to be present in a really practical text. But the specific contribution of

the Bible is that if we truly want to be wise, if we want to think about life as it really is, then we have to consider God as the Creator of the world. It's creation theology which really undergirds wisdom literature in the Old Testament. And that's why it says in the book of Proverbs, and it says in Ecclesiastes, and it says it in the book of Job, that if you really want to be wise, you have to fear the Lord, because it's the Lord who set up the world the way that it is. It's his character and his value system that is sort of built into the world, and therefore, the more that we are aware of that and the more that we live a life that is in correspondence to God's values, then the wiser we will be. So, it's not neutral. It's not just simply a matter of skill. It's a matter of skill that comes because we are relating our lives to God and to his values. Here's an example. In Proverbs 10:27-28, there's one example of this. It says in 10:27:

The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short (Proverbs 10:27).

And why would that be true? Why would that be true that the fear of the Lord prolongs life? Well, it's because as we fear the Lord and as we take on his value system and live our lives according to his value system, then we will be living a life that's in sync with the way that he made us to be, and therefore, we will not experience negative retribution, and instead we will be beneficiaries of his blessing. It says in the next verse, in 28:

The hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish (Proverbs 10:28).

Here you have this opposition in Proverbs between the righteous and the wicked. And so, if we want to be truly wise, then Proverbs would say that it's not just about being observant, it's not just about having a lot of brainpower, but it's about our faith. It's about living a life that corresponds to the way that God actually created us, and that means living righteously.

Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

Wisdom is sure to encompass righteousness. If a man is wise, but he is not righteous, there must be some deception in his wisdom, some selfish desires, biases, or unrighteousness. So, for instance, when Solomon judged between two women who should have the child, he used wisdom to judge and the result was righteousness. He gave the answer from the perspective of truth. God's revelation tells us that these two — wisdom and righteousness — are not to be separated.

Dr. Ryan O'Leary

I think the relationship between wisdom and righteousness is that we need wisdom in order to live a righteous life. Wisdom is practical knowledge to please God, and righteousness is really living in a right relationship with God.

Dr. Daniel Treier

The relationship between wisdom and righteousness in Scripture involves partial

overlap, not total identity. In the Old Testament there's a sense that wisdom does begin with the fear of the Lord, and it's obviously strongly associated with righteousness in the way that it helps us to have a growing capacity for living well in accordance with God's design. But there's also a sense in which even those who do not fear the Lord can avoid the most extreme examples of folly, particularly physical and spiritual adultery. They can avoid the kinds of basic traps that would simply destroy their lives because God has communicated enough of his design for creation that people can recognize parts of it and live in partial relationship to it, or at least avoid self-destructive folly, even if they're not particularly righteous. In the New Testament, of course, Jesus Christ is not only wisdom for us, but our righteousness and holiness and redemption. So, there's a strong association again between wisdom and righteousness... One other point that might be worth making about wisdom and righteousness and how they relate is that much of biblical wisdom focuses on how we use our money and how we use our mouths. And those are aspects where wisdom particularly is manifested in righteous living in New Testament material such as the book of James.

Question 7:

What is James' understanding of the uses and function of the law in the life of the believer?

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

One thing we see in the book of James is that the law has a continuing relevance in the Christian life. And even though James does not focus as much upon the work of Christ and what he has done to save us, he clearly believes in the work of God that comes outside of us and saves us from our sin. However, he emphasizes the imperative of how a Christian is to live in light of the coming of Christ. And when James teaches us about how we are to live, he does speak of the law. He might describe it as "the royal law," "the law of liberty," or "the perfect law." So we might ask, what law does he have in mind? I think it's helpful to think of the law in terms of the relationship of the Old Testament law to Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of the law, and when Christ came and spoke about his kingdom, he helpfully summarized the law for us in two main ways. First, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second great command from the law is we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. These come from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. And as Jesus told us these two great commands, what he was, in effect, doing was summarizing the law of God and showing us how we are to live in light of God's commands in the kingdom era that Christ himself had inaugurated. And when we come to the book of James, we see that Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. That is why the law is the perfect law. It is the royal law because it speaks of the kingdom of God, and it is a law of liberty because we do not save ourselves by keeping the law, but as Christ redeems us from the curse of the law, we are enabled to walk in God's commands... And so, the two great commands that

Jesus gives us from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 as a summary of God's law in connection to God's kingdom that comes through Christ, these two texts are important for the exposition of James and are fully consistent with what Jesus told us when he told us to love the Lord our God above all and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

The use and the function of the law in the life of the believer is a really important question, and it's a little tough to answer with James, because the first kind of sub-question that comes to mind is, which law is he talking about? Is he talking about Torah, the first five books of the Bible? Is he talking about the Ten Commandments? It's not altogether clear, but he calls this law, throughout the book where he's talking about it, he calls it a "law of freedom," he calls it a "royal law." And what he seems to be indicating is that the law he's referring to, the law which is very useful for the life of the believer, is the law which comes from Christ. It is the law, the Old Testament law, fulfilled in the teachings and instructions of our Savior Jesus Christ. And so, the law is incredibly useful in that regard, but you have to be clear what we're talking about. We're not talking about the ceremonial circumstances of Israel. We're not talking about various rules and regulations. We're talking about the wisdom that Jesus is sending to his church. In this regard, it's really interesting, James seems to talk about the law in a similar way that Paul talks about the law of the Spirit, the law of the Spirit of life, the law of Christ. It is extremely powerful; it is useful. It's not just legal commands. It's, according to James, it's actually implanted in us. It is implanted — and we can say by the Spirit — in us and it flourishes and it cultivates in the life of the believer in such a way that it works out in daily practical ways in our life. So, what would James have us do with the law? He would have us consider the Old Testament, read it, study it, and study it particularly in light of the instructions that we have in Jesus Christ and the way in which we are to use those things for the life of the church.

Rev. David Lewis

James' primary understanding of the use and function of the law in the life of a believer is that the law is a guide for the believer in how to live their life in a way that pleases God and in a way that serves their neighbor and their fellow believers... We Lutherans like to distinguish three uses or functions of the law in the lives of believers. One function is that the law functions as a curb to keep sin in check. That would be sort of like your red light use of the law, your stop sign. If you didn't have red lights, people would be bashing into each other in the intersection. You need sort of a stop sign to keep people in check. The second use is the law as a mirror, shows us our sins. And the third use is the law as a rule and guide to the believer on how to lead a God-pleasing life. And this seems to be James' primary understanding of the role that the law plays, what I would call the third use, but basically the law tells believers how it is that they would lead a God-pleasing, faithful life in this time and place. And with this ... it's important to see what James actually understands the law to be. He refers once in chapter 2 to the "royal law." And the royal law is the command to love your neighbor as yourself. And so, it seems that for James, the law,

in a sense, boils down to what Jesus calls the second greatest commandment in the Gospels: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” You know, James seems to be reflecting his brother’s teaching here, that if you want to understand what God really wants from you, his people, he wants you to love him with your whole heart, and he wants you to love your neighbor as yourself. And this, especially, becomes the rule and guide for the Christian in how they’re supposed to treat their fellow believers and their neighbors, and then this would come out in very practical ways. For instance, don’t show favoritism to the rich over the poor. In fact, show concern for the poor. Help the widows and the orphans in their affliction. It would come out in very practical ways. Don’t say things that are going to be destructive. Don’t use your tongue to speak evil of your brothers or to curse people. And notice that all of this is sort of guided by what James calls the “royal law” — “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And so, I think, for James to say “law,” I think James is taking the entire Torah of Moses, and he’s doing what our Lord did, what his brother did. What are the most important commands in this whole edifice of laws and commands? It’s no longer something like circumcision or eating kosher or observing purity, it becomes love your neighbor as yourself. And James would argue this is a rule and guide for how Christians are to live out their faith, to conduct their lives in this time and place. And so, just to give James a bit of a break, he doesn’t harp on the entire Torah of Moses. He basically focuses upon that one command that is one of the commands our Lord focuses upon and says, “If you want to live as God’s people, this is what you take to heart.”

Dr. Dan McCartney

The law functions in the life of the believer in several ways in James... James calls it the “royal law” — it is the law of the kingdom. I think it’s broader than just Leviticus 19:18, but in any case, this is the perspective that James has on the law. It’s the law of Jesus’ kingdom. And certainly, that means that the law, as James sees it, is not a set of rules. It’s not a series of do’s and don’ts. Rather, James sees the law as a revelation of God’s character, and therefore, James is not really interested in the kinds of questions that many Jewish interpreters of the law were interested in. He never mentions circumcision. He never talks about the Sabbath. He doesn’t talk about the ceremonial law. He’s not interested in food laws. Rather, James is interested in the big issues: showing mercy, caring for the poor and respecting them, showing genuine humility, endurance in the face of suffering, and perseverance in prayer and such things. Furthermore, James indicates that he’s concerned with the way the law as a whole functions, and that means that you don’t get to pick and choose which laws you command. He says if you don’t commit adultery, that’s fine, but then if you go and commit murder, then you’re still a lawbreaker. James seems to conclude that with a focus on the thing that most counts, which is showing mercy. He even says mercy triumphs over condemnation, because it’s God’s character of mercy that really is the controlling feature, the controlling idea of the law as God gave it. James also refers to the law as a “perfect law” in 1:25, which he says is a law of freedom. So, this is by no means an enslaving use of the law such as Paul condemns in Galatians. James sees this law as a revelation of God’s character, as something which is liberating. And the reason it’s liberating is because, somewhat like a mirror, James says, it’s where you

can see the character of God, where you can see genuinely God's image. If you look into an actual mirror, what you see is a reflection of somebody who is made in God's image — yourself — but is a very poor reflection in many ways. But when you look into the perfect law, what you see is a reflection of the image of God as he actually is. And as we gaze at that image in faith, we are transformed into that image, and thus we gain the character of God and then the blessing of God.

Question 8:

What is the relationship between faith and works in the Christian life?

Rev. Larry Cockrell

The relationship between faith and works is that they are companions. I would consider them to be twins. There is a saying that goes, "Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone." And so, the idea of partnership, of companionship exists in that. Primarily, when Paul deals with faith in Ephesians 2:8, he recognized that one can only come to salvation through *faith in Christ*. But then James goes on and he, I won't say "takes it to another level," but he provides for us the reality that if one is saved, then that salvation should be authenticated by works, meaning by the character, the lifestyle of that person, also by the kind of service that that person renders to his neighbor. If they are saved then, again, they will authenticate salvation by the kind of works that they do. He goes on to say, "Show me your faith without your works, and I'll show you my faith by my works." And so, again, they are twins. They do go together. If one is saved, then they will, by the grace of God, produce good works, authenticating that salvation has come to that heart.

Rev. Clete Hux

The relationship between faith and works is that they're not opposed to one another as so many people think that they are. And it almost seems, however, that it's paradoxical for the Scripture to teach that we're saved by grace — free gift — rather than works, and then on the other hand, say that faith without works is dead. But the two really go together. As a matter of fact, if we go back to Ephesians 2:8-9, we need to look at verse 10. It says, "For we are ... created in Christ Jesus to [perform] good works." So, we're not saved by works. We're saved by grace through faith that produces works and conforms us more and more to the image of Christ.

Question 9:

What are some common ways that contemporary interpreters misunderstand the relationship between faith and justification in the epistle of James?

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

Sometimes people can misunderstand the teaching of James and think that he may be teaching a different view of faith or a different understanding of justification than we

have elsewhere in the New Testament. But, in fact, James is fully in accord with what we have, for example, in Paul's letters. The whole book of James is concerned that our faith is legitimate faith; it's real faith. And what can be confusing is sometimes James can speak of faith that is not a saving faith. There is a type of faith for James that is not a real faith. And so James can use the term to refer to both genuine, saving faith and to faith that only claims to be genuine. And when one reads Paul, for example, and compares Paul to James, Paul generally refers faith to refer only to genuine, saving faith. And so, in James 2, whenever he critiques those who say they have faith but have no works, what he is really critiquing is those who only claim to have faith. And in fact, if you look at James and Paul, they have many similar things to say about faith and works and justification. In fact, both James and Paul look to Abraham as an example of faith, and both James and Paul quote Genesis 15:6 to illustrate faith that believes God in his Word and acts. Paul himself also believes that faith must be active. So, when we read the book of James, and he says that our faith must be genuine, he says that our faith must have actions that flow from it. And when James says that faith must have works, we must understand very clearly that these are not the works that Paul himself says are inadequate to save us. James would agree that our works cannot save us, but the works that he commends to us are works of Christian obedience that flow from a genuine faith. When Paul critiques works, he is actually critiquing "works of the Law," which is a technical phrase to refer to Jewish ritual observances that some people were thinking modified or advanced their standing before God if they kept them. James and Paul would agree that genuine, saving faith trusts Christ with empty hands, as we trust Christ to be the perfect sacrifice in our place. This position of a faith that must be active is, in James, in full agreement with Paul's emphasis on justification as a free gift of God... The differences and similarities between James and Paul were helpfully summarized by New Testament scholar J. Gresham Machen. Machen said, "As the faith which James condemns is different from the faith that Paul commends, so the works that Paul condemns are different from the works that James commends." What that means simply is the works that Paul condemns are works of the Law. The works that James commends to us are works of obedience that come from real faith in Christ. And the faith that James says is inadequate is a faith that does not act; whereas, the faith that Paul speaks about is a genuine, saving faith that actually does also lead to good works that are wrought by God's grace in us.

Dr. David W. Chapman

I think because we so often use certain terms in certain ways in the Christian church, we think that they always mean that and have always meant that in different ways. So, for instance, we'll use the term "justification," and by justification we often and rightly mean in our systematic theology that one has been reckoned righteous by the imputation, or by the giving to us, of the righteousness of Christ. And if we read James' discussion of justification of faith and works in that light, we will misunderstand what he means. And so, what we need to recognize is that the term "justification" in the Bible has several different senses, and one is just that, the idea of reckoning one person's righteousness to another, receiving a righteousness that is not ours. But another meaning of justification is a meaning that indicates that our actions,

at the end of the day, show that we are indeed a follower of God, that we are faithful to him. And so, when he's concerned about justification, he's often concerned more about that notion of our actions displaying a faith, and he's not trying to say that our works themselves save, but the faith that shows itself in works receives the gracious work of God and thus receives justification.

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

Well, there are two kinds of misunderstandings that people can make when it comes to faith and justification in the epistle of James. One has to do with faith. The other has to do, unsurprisingly, with justification. The one with faith is people can assume that the faith that James opposes, the faith that James says does not save, is the same kind of faith that Paul says *does* save, so that there's this conflict between James and Paul because they're talking about the exact same kind of faith. And that's not true. James actually highly qualifies the kind of faith that he's talking about. He's talking about faith which is mere belief. He's talking about faith which doesn't work. He's talking about a faith which is just words. It's similar to walking down the street and telling a poor person, "Go and be warm and filled," and not giving them anything, not helping them at all. It's a hypocritical faith. And at no point does Paul say a hypocritical faith, and a hypocritical faith alone, will save you. So, there's a misunderstanding about faith that's happening there. James is raising a caricature, defining faith in a certain way and saying that that kind of faith, the faith that is just words, doesn't save you.

The other mistake that we can make is with regards to justification. The assumption here is that whenever you see the word "justification" in Scripture, it has to mean exactly the same thing. Justification isn't a technical term, at least not yet. It becomes a technical term, and we typically use it as a technical term, and we should respect that as we talk about justification. In Scripture, it's not yet a technical term. It can be used in a variety of different ways, and in the context of James, I think it would be better to translate that something like "vindicate," that our faith is vindicated, or proven, or demonstrated by our works. So, the faith which saves is a faith which is at work in the conduct of the believer. And again, that is very similar to actually what Paul tells us. Paul tells us in Galatians that the faith that we have produces conduct. There is an obedience of faith, an obedience that inevitably and invariably comes from faith, which we should cultivate. James is concerned with that as well. He wants us to cultivate our faith and develop our maturity, particularly in a context of trial and temptation.

Question 10:

In what ways did James and Paul complement each other when they discussed faith and justification in their letters?

Dr. Dan Doriani

It's rather famous that Paul and James appear at first blush to contradict each other

because Paul says that we're justified apart from works, and James seems to insist the opposite, that we're justified, he almost says, by our works. Maybe I can read the key text. And, of course, James knows we're justified by faith, and he says that. He says in chapter 2:

[T]he Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God and it was counted [or "reckoned"] to him as righteousness"

So, that's the language of forensic justification. He believed, and as we know from the background of that text, he believed at a low point when he was kind of talking back to God and saying, "Hey, where's that son you promised," and God said, "Look, I know you don't have any yet, but look at the stars. So shall your offspring be." And he believed it, and it was reckoned as righteousness to him. That's justification by faith. James knows that quite well. But almost as if to push his audience on the importance of works, he then says:

— and he [Abraham] was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out ... another way? (James 2:23-25).

So, James knows we're justified by faith, but he then says "by works." So, what would the work be for Abraham? Well, it's kind of close to what Paul says in Romans 4, that he kept on sleeping with his wife. As Paul says it, he saw or considered the fact that his body was as good as dead, but he kept on sleeping with his wife, so that's believing that God would give him children and acting both. The Rahab case is very similar. I mean, she heard about the God of Israel who was sending his people into the Promised Land, and she believed it. But what good would her faith actually have done her in that instance when they came, if she hadn't acted on it? So, the deeds vindicate or verify her faith. And that is a use of the word justification too if someone is justified, sometimes they're vindicated. So, Jesus says in one place, "Wisdom is justified by her deeds," meaning vindicated. That is to say, you know wisdom is truly wisdom when it works, when we practice it. In the similar vein, you know faith is really faith as opposed to false faith when it proves itself by deeds. So it was with Abraham. He's justified by faith; he trusts God. And then we have proof that he really believes in God when he keeps sleeping with his wife so he can have children. And Rahab really believed in God, the God of Israel, and it's proven or demonstrated when she sends the spies out another way... Faith without works is dead. James says that three times over, and then he illustrates real faith by saying, okay, here's the faith of Abraham, here's the faith of Rahab. They said they believed, and they proved it by their deeds. And that's the way it should be for us. You know, our deeds sometimes lag behind our faith, but there should always be some deed, some tangible proof that we're not just saying the words, we're actually following God in our bodies, in our hands, in our feet, in our mouth, in our head, on our backs, in all that we are and all that we do.

Dr. Dan McCartney

You may know that James is very famous for apparently, on the surface, being opposed to what Paul says about justification, and in fact Martin Luther famously called it an “epistle of straw” because he saw it as a contradiction. And indeed, if you look at 2:24, it does appear, on the surface, to be directly contrary to what Paul says, because James says, “So you see then that a man is justified not by faith only, but by works,” specifically looking at Abraham. So, on the surface, it looks like James is contradictory to Paul. But if you look closely at what problems James is addressing with a kind of faith that is actually not a real faith at all and therefore, very dangerous, and what he means by works, which is obedience that is flowing out of a heart of faith, that’s very different than the concerns that Paul has, which is with a kind of works which is seeking one’s own righteousness before God. And Paul doesn’t even address the question there in Galatians of genuine versus un-genuine faith. So, the issues are very different, and it’s only in a superficial way that they appear to contradict. In fact, James is actually very, very concerned with real faith, with *faith*, and it’s precisely because he is so deeply concerned with faith, the faith that saves, that he is concerned that it be genuine faith, because, as we noted already, it’s very easy to convince yourself you have faith even though you don’t. And James wants to make sure that this faith is the kind of faith that really is an expression of confidence and commitment and trust in Jesus. So, it’s interesting to note how James uses certain examples of this real kind of faith. He refers first of all to Abraham, and he actually quotes the same verse that Paul does with regard to justification by faith, that Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness. And James points out that Abraham’s faith is a kind of faith that is so committed, so trusting, that it will go all the way to his obedience, even to the offering of his son. And therefore, they both agree Abraham was justified by faith. The issue is what kind of faith for James. Furthermore, James refers to the kinds of examples of works with reference to what Abraham did, first in his willingness to offer Isaac, but very interestingly in the example of Rahab, because Rahab was, first of all, a Gentile; she wasn’t even Jewish. And secondly, she was a prostitute. And yet, here she demonstrated a kind of faith, a real belief in God in that when she saw the Israelites there, she somehow knew, “God is for this people, and I want to put my trust in that God.” So, she’s willing to take a risk in sheltering the Israelite spies, and therefore, was saved. That’s a kind of faith that actually acts because you really believe that something is true. And that’s the example that underscores what James really indicated there. It’s not following all the jots and tittles of commandments. It’s rather, recognizing that God is the true God and casting yourself entirely on him. This is something that we might overlook if we didn’t have the book of James. I think you can find that requirement of obedience even in Paul, because if you keep reading in Galatians and in Romans, you get to the later chapters where he talks about the necessity of obedience, and you won’t inherit the kingdom if you don’t live a life in accordance with that faith. But evangelicals sometimes have tended to overlook that aspect, and if we didn’t have the book of James, we might miss some of that, so I’m very thankful for this book. It makes me uncomfortable as I read it, but that’s good because it reminds me of just what God expects of a life of faith.

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

Now, many people think James and Paul are at odds in the way that they talk about justification by faith, that Paul talks about being justified by faith apart from works, and many look at what James says as contradicting that and saying that we are justified by works. But in reality, that's not at all what James is saying. They're showing two sides. Where Paul talks about justification by faith alone, what James talks about is, justified faith is not alone. It's demonstrated. When there's real faith, when there's true faith, it's demonstrated in our works, as he talks about here in chapter 2:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

And he's not saying that their faith is what saves them, but he's saying their faith, and their actions demonstrating faith, demonstrate that there's a work of salvation, that they're justified already, that God has done something in their heart to move them, to act in faith.

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17, NIV).

And again, he uses the poor as an example, and our faith is demonstrated often in how we respond to the poor. The examples that James uses here in the second part of chapter two are of Abraham and Rahab, which is interesting because in Hebrews 11 they're two people that are featured in the hall of faith, of a whole chapter of people who demonstrated their faith by what they did, which is what James is talking about here. And this is not a contradiction from Paul. Paul even describes ... we're not saved by works, but by grace through faith. But again, we're not saved by our good works, but we're saved for good works. Paul talks about the good works that are prepared in advance for us that we might walk in them. And so, he and James are not in disagreement. They're in agreement. They're talking about two different sides of the same coin. So, we're justified by faith alone, but faith that justifies is not alone. It is accompanied by deeds. And that second part is what James is focusing on here.

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