

The Epistle of James

Lesson 2

Two Paths of Wisdom

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

At one time or another all of us have faced challenging situations that have been confusing and discouraging. And in those circumstances we've often wished that we could find a friend who understood what was really going on and who could give us some practical advice to follow. Such a friend would be a source of wisdom that would bring us great joy.

In many ways, this is how it was for the early Christians who first received the New Testament epistle of James. They faced challenging circumstances that had left many of them confused and discouraged. And James wrote to give them wisdom. He wrote to remind them of God's *good* purposes for their circumstances. He let them know that God offered reliable guidance that they should follow. And he assured them that if they would embrace the wisdom of God, they would experience great joy.

This is the second lesson in our series on *The Epistle of James*, and it focuses on one of the main, unifying themes of James. We've entitled this lesson "Two Paths of Wisdom," because we'll be exploring how this book offered two types of wisdom from God to the early church. And, we'll see how it provides similar directions to us as followers of Christ today.

In our previous lesson, we saw that both the structure and content of James reflect well-known Jewish wisdom literature from the first century. And we summarized the original purpose of the epistle in this way:

James called his audience to pursue wisdom from God so that they would have joy in their trials.

James actually used the terms "wisdom" — *sophia* (σοφία) in Greek — and "wise" — *sophos* (σοφός) in Greek — in only two portions of his letter. We find these terms in 1:2-18 and then again in 3:13-18. These passages are particularly important because they each refer to one of the two paths of wisdom James called his audience to follow.

Now, we should note that when some people think of wisdom in the book of James, they think of James' distinction between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. And we'll explore both these types of wisdom later in this lesson. But for our purposes, we'll focus on the two main paths of wisdom commonly distinguished within Jewish wisdom traditions. The first is what we may call "reflective wisdom," and the second we'll call "practical wisdom."

Reflective wisdom is represented most clearly in books like Job and Ecclesiastes. These books search for insights into God's purposes behind trials and troubles. Practical wisdom, on the other hand, appears most prominently in the book of Proverbs. This is a book devoted primarily to advice and guidance for everyday life.

As we explore these two paths of wisdom found in the book of James, we'll consider first the way of reflective wisdom. And second, we'll look at the way of practical wisdom. Let's begin with James' attention to reflective wisdom.

REFLECTIVE WISDOM

All of us have faced situations that we think we understand, only to find out that we were mistaken. We often have to look beyond appearances and take a second, more careful look to see what is really going on. In many ways, this is how James began the main body of his book. He called on his audience to look beyond the appearances of discouraging circumstances, and to gain insights into what was actually happening in their lives.

We'll explore how James dealt with this kind of reflective wisdom in three ways. First, we'll note the need of his audience. Second, we'll see the guidance that James offered them. And third, we'll note the connection between reflective wisdom and faith. Let's look first at the need James' audience had for reflective wisdom.

NEED

In our previous lesson, we learned that the original audience of this epistle consisted primarily of early Jewish Christians. They had most likely been forced out of Jerusalem by waves of persecution following Stephen's martyrdom. And it's clear from what James wrote that many needed help with discouragement and confusion as they faced serious trials in the lands to which they'd been scattered.

In James 1:2, we can see that James was preoccupied with these needs. Immediately after the opening verse of his letter he wrote:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds (James 1:2).

To understand the need of James' audience, it will be helpful to look at two dimensions of this passage. First, we'll examine the challenge of trials. And second, we'll explore the many kinds of trials that James' audience faced. Let's begin with the challenge of trials.

Challenge of Trials

In James 1:2 the term translated "trials" is the Greek noun *peirasmos* (πειρασμός). This term can be translated "trial," "temptation" and "test." In a similar way, its verbal form *peirazō* (πειράζω) can be translated "to try," "to tempt" and "to test." Understanding

the range of these possible translations helps us grasp the circumstances facing the original audience of this epistle. In effect, they faced difficult *trials*, and these trials brought *temptations* their way for the purpose of *testing* them.

Unfortunately, modern Christians often diminish the significance of what James had in mind because we treat trials, temptations and tests as entirely distinct ideas. But, Scripture, especially wisdom literature such as the book of Job, presents these concepts as facets of every challenging circumstance that God's people face.

Challenging circumstances are trials because they are difficult and require endurance. But such circumstances are not morally neutral. They are temptations to react in wrong or sinful ways. And challenging circumstances are also tests from God. They are the means by which God tests and proves the condition of our hearts.

Keeping in mind the need resulting from the challenge of trials, we should also note that in 1:2 James mentioned many kinds of trials.

Many Kinds of Trials

When James spoke of many kinds of trials, he pointed to a number of difficulties that involved turmoil and controversies between poor believers and wealthy believers in the early church.

On the one side, James wrote a lot about the challenges facing poor believers. According to Acts 2–6, there were many who were poor in the early church in Jerusalem. And because James wrote to believers that had been scattered from Jerusalem through persecution, the number of poor had most likely increased.

In 1:9 and 4:6, James called these Christians the “humble,” or *tapeinos* (ταπεινός) in Greek. This term meant “of low social status.” In 2:2, 3, 5 and 6, he also called them “the poor,” or *ptochos* (πτωχός) in Greek. This term meant “economically deprived.” In 1:27, he referred to “orphans and widows.” The Scriptures often identify this group as particularly vulnerable to poverty and mistreatment. In 2:2, James indicated that some of these impoverished believers wore “filthy old clothes.” And according to 2:15, at least some of them were so deprived that they were “without clothes and daily food.”

James places a heavy emphasis on the poor. It's easy to short-circuit what James is trying to tell us by assuming that what he means is poor in spirit. He certainly means that we should be humble, we should be poor in spirit, but he is addressing the needs and the circumstances of the physically poor. Similar to Luke in his version of the beatitudes, it's “blessed are the poor.” And what James, at least, means by that is the physically, the materially poor. Well, why would they be particularly blessed? Well, it has to do with the way the kingdom works. The kingdom is all about exalting the weak and humbling the strong. You can do that in this life. You can humble yourself if you are rich, if you are powerful, if you are influential. The goal for James is to cultivate a sense of humility, of poverty, to be poor in spirit. But

it also has a lot to say about people that are actually poor, that your treasures are in heaven, that your kingdom is in heaven, that your reward, that your resources are all heavenly in character. And so there's a great eschatological reversal that's coming, one which will make the weak strong — God will gather in the remnant, he will gather in the sick, he will gather in the poor, and he will exalt them in his kingdom — and one which will humble the strength of the proud.

— Dr. Thomas L. Keene

James mentioned a number of specific challenges facing the humble and poor in the church. To name a few, in 1:9, he noted that some of them were tempted to self-denigration. They had failed “to take pride in [their] high position” as people chosen by God for the glory of eternal salvation. According to 3:9, their circumstances often tempted them to curse others, even as they professed honor to God. In 3:14, James warned that some were tempted to “harbor bitter envy” toward others and to become consumed with “selfish ambition.” As a result, 4:1 addresses the temptation to become involved in “fights and quarrels” within the church. And in 5:7, James challenged the poor to avoid impatience by calling on them to wait patiently for the Lord’s return.

On the other side, wealthy believers also faced trials. According to Acts 2–6, at least some in the early church in Jerusalem had enough wealth to care for their poor brothers and sisters in Christ. And apparently, even though they’d been scattered through persecution, there were still many in the church that were considered well-to-do.

James described these wealthy believers in a number of ways. In 1:10, 2:6, and 5:1, James simply referred to them as “the rich,” or *plousios* (πλούσιος) in Greek. This was a common term for the upper class of society. According to 2:6, their social status was high enough that they regularly took others into court. Chapter 4:13 tells us that they traveled on business to make money. Chapter 5:2-3 indicates that they took pride in their clothes and their gold and silver. And in 5:5, at least some of them could be described as living “in luxury and self-indulgence.”

James knew that wealth brings its own challenges. According to 1:10, the rich were tempted to take pride in themselves by forgetting the humility that had overtaken them as repentant sinners. Chapter 1:27 tells us that their wealth tempted them to become “polluted by the world.” Chapter 2:7 indicates that they were tempted to blasphemy by bearing false witness in court. In 2:16, James said that they were inclined to do nothing for the poor. According to 3:9, along with the poor, they cursed others as they pretended to honor God. In 3:14, we learn that they harbored their own kinds of “bitter envy” and “selfish ambition.” They also engaged in fights and quarrels according to 4:1. Chapter 4:13-16 tells us that they were tempted to live as if they were independent of God. And 5:3 mentions that they hoarded wealth.

Clearly, both rich and poor believers in James’ audience faced a number of challenges. And both needed the wisdom James offered in his epistle.

Now that we've seen how James' attention to reflective wisdom stemmed from the need created by the trials his audience faced, we should turn to a second issue: how James offered guidance for those trials.

GUIDANCE

We can understand many facets of Christian theology simply through our daily experiences as followers of Christ. But other Christian teachings aren't as simple. If we want to go behind the curtain of our experiences into a deeper awareness of God's hidden purposes, we need guidance. And James offered penetrating insights to help us acquire reflective wisdom — the ability to discern God's purposes behind the struggles and trials in our lives. Listen to James 1:3-4 and the way James described the insights he wanted his audience to embrace:

You know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:3-4).

There are many ways to summarize James' guidance in this passage, but for our purposes we'll draw attention to four elements. First, James said that their challenging circumstances were testing their faith.

Testing

When James described the challenges that his audience faced as “the testing of your faith,” he used the Greek term *dokimion* (δοκιμιον). This term means “testing” in the sense of determining or proving the genuineness of something. In this case, James had in mind proving the genuineness of their faith.

In effect, James explained that God's purpose for the many trials that his audience endured was to determine the true condition of their hearts. Their “testing” confirmed whether or not their faith was genuine. This perspective on God's purpose for trials was not something new to James. It appears numerous times in both the Old and New Testaments. For instance, in Deuteronomy 8:2, Moses said this to the people of Israel:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart (Deuteronomy 8:2).

It's clear from the rest of Scripture that God knows all things, including the hearts of all people. But this and similar passages illustrate the biblical truth that, as God interacts with his people in history, he often uses difficulties to prove or display what's in our hearts.

As James offered guidance, he not only established that his readers' challenges were testing their faith. He also indicated that their trials were designed to produce perseverance.

Perseverance

James wrote that testing produces perseverance using the Greek term *hupomoné* (ὕπομονή). Much like our English term "perseverance," *hupomoné* means to bear up under difficulty. So, James explained that trials proved the sincerity of faith by enabling God's people to endure and continue in faithful devotion to Christ.

In general terms, New Testament teaching on Christian perseverance is twofold. On the one hand, perseverance is a gift of God's grace. Passages like Romans 6:1-14 teach that followers of Christ are able to endure or persevere in their faith because the Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus to new life, empowers us to walk in newness of life and faithful obedience. So, although perseverance requires human effort, we need to remember that we only persevere by God's ongoing grace at work within us.

But on the other hand, the New Testament also makes it clear that perseverance is a necessary requirement for eternal salvation. In other words, those who have exercised saving faith will, of necessity, persevere in their faith. Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 1:22-23:

But now [God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight ... if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel (Colossians 1:22-23).

Here Paul affirmed that the Colossian Christians had been reconciled to God. But they could be confident that this was true only if they continued in their faith. This requirement of perseverance was not contrary to the message of salvation by God's grace. Rather, it was the hope held out in the gospel.

In his guidance, James not only discussed the testing of faith that produces perseverance. He also went on to speak of the maturity that would result from perseverance.

Maturity

James is a book that's all about Christian maturity. Some can approach it and think this is a book about legalism; it's about rules; it's about doing exactly what I need to be doing. But it's actually a book that's intended to help you develop as a Christian, particularly as a Christian living in all of the difficult social contexts in which we live. The church can be a difficult place to be in; James recognizes

that. And what you need to do to survive in this world, in the church, to flourish in this world and this church, is maturity; you need to be perfect and complete. And James actually tells you how to do that, how to go about this life of becoming mature, ready for whatever the world, whatever the Devil, whatever the flesh might try to throw your way. And it begins, what's interesting about James is it actually begins with suffering. Suffering is the crucible; it's the context; it's the gym within which Christian maturity takes place. That's where your faith is cultivated and grows and is prepared for what is to come. As you endure suffering, temptation, and trial, and survive, your faith, through the Spirit, working in the Word, through Christ and his law and his wisdom, your faith is increased, strengthened, and prepared for the trials to come.

— Dr. Thomas L. Keene

Listen again to what James wrote in 1:4:

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:4).

Because trials and perseverance produce maturity, James told his audience to let perseverance finish its work. Perseverance would make them mature, complete, not lacking anything.

Now, we have to be careful here. James didn't have in mind completeness or lacking nothing in the sense that we can reach moral perfection in this life. We know from passages like 1 John 1:8 that, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But James did have in mind that we'd continue to grow in obedience to God, and, at the judgment to come when Christ returns, we'd have nothing lacking in our lives that would disqualify us.

After offering guidance with regard to testing, perseverance and maturity, James indicated that, at the end of this process, there would be a great reward.

Reward

He mentioned this reward in 1:12 when he said:

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).

As James explained here, everyone who perseveres under trial will have stood the test. And they will receive the crown of life, the crown of eternal life in the glorious

kingdom of God that [the Lord] has promised to those who love him. In bringing all of these perspectives together, James offered his audience penetrating, reflective wisdom. He gave them guidance for understanding the trials they faced. In reality, every trial was a gift from God, designed for their eternal good.

One of the things that James talks about from the beginning of the letter, and that theme occurs throughout, is the importance of enduring in suffering. And that’s really what he talks about leads to Christian maturity. In the beginning of chapter 1 he says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” And then he describes why: “Because you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” And then he goes on: “Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” And so, we might think that suffering is a sign that God is not with us, but James looks at suffering as a sign that God is going to work, not just in spite of our suffering, but through our suffering to make us who he wants us to be. And that’s where we really grow in maturity. He goes on to say, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because having stood the test” — this is in verse 12 of chapter 1 — “that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” And so he gives us a different paradigm for thinking about suffering. It’s actually something that shouldn’t be avoided, not sought out, but in our culture we think of success as avoiding suffering, but here he describes it as an opportunity to grow. It’s a crucible for Christian maturity being worked out.

— Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

James’ focus on reflective wisdom addressed his audience’s need in their trying circumstances. It also offered them guidance. But now, let’s turn to how the path of reflective wisdom required faith.

FAITH

When you think about it, the insights James gave his audience into their trials were common Christian teachings. But we all know that when troubles come into our lives, we can become so overwhelmed that we find it hard to hold onto even the most basic Christian beliefs. And apparently James feared that this was true for his audience. So, he immediately indicated that embracing the insights that he’d just offered them required them to turn in faith toward God. In James 1:5 we read these words:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

James knew that if we want wisdom to understand God's often-hidden purposes in trials, we must "ask God" for it. But following this, in 1:6-8, James also connected prayer for wisdom with *faith* when he said:

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts ... must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (James 1:6-8, ESV).

As we see here, James urged that prayers for wisdom must be in faith. Otherwise we will be double-minded people.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians have misunderstood James' instructions to ask in faith and not to be double-minded. They think that James referred to having confidence in particular prayer requests we make. All too often, Christ's followers believe that if we simply have enough faith, God will answer our prayers in the way we desire. But this isn't what James had in mind. For James, to ask "in faith" meant to be "faithful to God." We know this because James described the opposite of asking "in faith" as being "double-minded." And for James, to be double-minded was to be in serious rebellion against God. Listen to 4:8-9 and the way James spoke of the double-minded:

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom (James 4:8-9).

Notice here that double-minded people are not merely those who fail to have confidence when they pray. They are sinners who must purify their hearts. Their infidelity is so serious that mourning and gloom are appropriate for them.

So, in the context of James' letter, he didn't have in mind someone who merely lacks confidence that God will answer a prayer. He had in mind a fundamental denial of the goodness of God. Apparently, some in James' audience blamed God for their failures. They reasoned that God had sent their trials, so God must be evil because he was tempting them to sin. This type of flagrant rebellion against God was what James referred to as being "double-minded." Listen to 1:13-14 where James addressed this serious misconception:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (James 1:13-14, ESV).

It's important to note that the Greek term translated "tempted" here is the verb *peirazō* (πειράζω), the terminology translated "trials" in 1:2. But James insisted that [God] himself tempts no one. This translation rightly reflects the intensive use of the

Greek pronoun *autós* (αὐτός) or “himself.” It does not simply say that God “tempts” — or tests — “no one.” It literally says, “[God] *himself* tempts no one.”

As we learn from the first chapters of the book of Job, God is in control of all trials, tests and temptations. But, in the drama of the heavenly court, it becomes clear that God’s purpose for Job’s trial was for Job’s good, not for his harm. Satan, not God, used Job’s trial to tempt him to sin.

So, to pray for wisdom in faith and not be double-minded is to affirm one of the most basic of all biblical teachings: the goodness of God. We must not doubt the goodness of God as we seek wisdom from him in trying circumstances. Otherwise, we have no reason to believe that God will give us wisdom. As James put it in 1:17:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17, ESV).

God is “the Father of lights.” He only gives “good” and “perfect” gifts. So, his purpose for our trials is always good and perfect. This must be our firm commitment of faith as we pursue the path of reflective wisdom.

In our study of the two paths of wisdom found in James, we’ve considered James’ focus on reflective wisdom. Now we’re in a position to move to our second main topic: practical wisdom. What does this New Testament book have to say about putting wisdom into practice?

PRACTICAL WISDOM

At one time or another we’ve all met people who are very knowledgeable. They impress everyone with how many things they know that others don’t. But sometimes, these same people don’t know much about practical life. They don’t know how to put their insights into right actions and attitudes. In many ways, James addressed this problem in his book. As we’ve seen, he opened his epistle with an emphasis on *reflective* wisdom. He knew how important it is to have insights into God’s hidden purposes for the trials that we face. But he also stressed *practical* wisdom — the ability to put this knowledge into the kinds of actions and attitudes that please God.

For the sake of simplicity, we’ll deal with practical wisdom in ways that parallel our earlier discussion. First, we’ll see the need for practical wisdom. Second, we’ll note how James gave his audience guidance. And third, we’ll look into the relationship between faith and practice. Let’s look first at how James stressed his audience’s need for practical wisdom.

NEED

As we saw earlier, James only used the terms “wisdom” and “wise” in two contexts. The first of these is in 1:2-18 where James emphasized reflective wisdom. The second is in 3:13-18 where James emphasized the need for putting wisdom into practice.

James is a very practical letter, and he’s really wanting to make sure that people put into practice what they believe. Where does he get this from? Well, again I think the answer is Jesus himself. I mean, Jesus himself had told parables about building house on sand or on rock, and the determining factor is, “Are you doing what I’ve commanded you? Are you putting into practice what I’m teaching?” That’s what Jesus was looking for. He was looking for people doing what they believe, putting it into practice. He also warned against the Pharisees, you know, “Be careful to do what they say but not imitate what they do because they don’t practice what they preach.” So, Jesus had been very hot on this issue of putting things into practice, and I think, therefore, James, in one sense, is just imitating his brother, Jesus, in saying this is really important. Perhaps there’s a second reason, again, that we can conjecture from the early church, and that is that maybe James had already begun to see how damaging it is to Christian witness when some of the Jewish Christians in his congregation were not actually showing the life of Jesus. You know, they had these great doctrines about Jesus, but they weren’t actually living it out, and the criticism may have come in, “You don’t practice what you preach,” and that would give the Christian message a bad name... Jesus himself said, “Be ye perfect,” and James repeats that teaching. He wants people to put things into practice, and that’s the emphasis we see.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Listen to 3:13 and the way James introduced the basic principles of practical wisdom:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom (James 3:13).

When we remember that many in James’ audience were Jewish believers familiar with the Old Testament, it’s not difficult to understand why at least some of them claimed to be “wise and understanding.” But James insisted that if this claim was genuine they would “show it by their good life.” In other words, they needed *practical* wisdom. Under

the influence of Old Testament teaching — especially the book of Proverbs — James knew that wisdom was far more than deeply penetrating theological insights.

Those who had wholeheartedly embraced understanding from God would live a “good life” that “comes from wisdom.” But James also pointed out that this good life involves “deeds,” or “works,” as it may be translated. And it entails certain attitudes, like “humility.” As we’ll see, right actions and attitudes are both essential to practical wisdom.

To explain the need for practical wisdom further, James contrasted two types of practical wisdom that we mentioned in the beginning of this lesson. He first referred to earthly wisdom. And then, he spoke of heavenly wisdom. Let’s look first at earthly wisdom.

Earthly Wisdom

In 3:14-16, we find this description of earthly wisdom:

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. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (James 3:14-16).

As we saw in the first half of this lesson, James was deeply concerned with the turmoil between poor and wealthy believers in the church. And in 3:14, he brought up the fact that many in the churches “harbor[ed] bitter envy and selfish ambition in [their] hearts.” And according to verse 15, at least some of them had justified their practices by calling it “wisdom.” But James warned them not to boast about what they were doing or to deny the truth that he was about to explain to them.

Many modern Christians have difficulty grasping why James was so deeply concerned about the conflict between the poor and the wealthy in the early church. The church today continues to have poor and wealthy believers, especially when we compare Christians in different countries. But in the modern world, local congregations tend to be much more socially homogeneous than they were in the first century. Wealthy Christians tend to go to church with others who are wealthy, and poor Christians tend to go to church with others who are poor. But imagine if your own local church had extreme poverty and extreme wealth within it. How much friction would it create? Some believers would come to church in rags, not knowing where their next meal was coming from, while others would sit in the same room dressed in expensive clothes, with their pockets full of money. If this were the case in your local church, your church would be in turmoil.

The conflicts between the poor and the rich in James’ day were causing great damage in the churches he addressed. Apparently, the poor felt perfectly justified, even wise, in their envy of the wealthy. They knew Old Testament proverbs that instructed the rich to be generous to the poor. So, their Christian brothers and sisters should share what

they had with them. And the wealthy felt perfectly justified, even wise, in being selfish. They could quote Old Testament proverbs that blamed poverty on sloth and explained wealth as the reward of hard work.

But James pointed out that this kind of wisdom was much worse than simply being mistaken or misguided. It was earthly, unspiritual, or natural, and demonic. And the evidence of this demonic origin was unmistakable. It had led to disorder and every kind of evil practice within the church.

I think everyone is familiar with people who consider themselves wise in their own eyes, and that wisdom is often marked by arrogance, a hostile nature, a desire to be a contrarian. And James says that's not the wisdom of God. As a matter of fact, that kind of wisdom, that worldly wisdom, or what he calls wisdom from below, is actually not merely dangerous or un-useful — he actually calls it “demonic.” Whereas, wisdom from God is a wisdom that springs out of the fear of the Lord, and as a result, it is marked by humility; it's marked by compassion; it's marked by faithfulness to the Lord, as one who recognizes that the wisdom is not their own production, but rather it's the production of God himself who has given it to them generously, as James says. That's the kind of wisdom that Christians, that followers of Jesus Christ, the great wise sage — the sage greater than Solomon — that's the kind of wisdom that his followers are supposed to express in their lives.

— Dr. Scott Redd

In the end, rather than furthering the work of God, the body of Christ had become divided, at war with itself. The congregations to whom James wrote had fallen prey to the demons who sought more than anything else to destroy the work of God. And it was this destruction that drove James to insist that his audience needed practical wisdom. After dealing with the need for practical wisdom by rejecting destructive, earthly wisdom, James turned immediately to the alternative, what he called heavenly wisdom.

Heavenly Wisdom

In 3:17, James described this positive heavenly wisdom:

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:17).

Here we see that James had in mind wisdom from heaven, meaning wisdom that comes from God. This wisdom is peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy

and good fruit, impartial and sincere. In other words, wisdom from heaven doesn't falsely justify envy and selfish ambition, neither in the poor nor in the wealthy. True wisdom from God promotes a love for peace. And God's people demonstrate this peace by being considerate of others, submissive to others, and merciful. They bear good fruit and don't show partiality to one group or another. And all of these actions and attitudes rise from a sincere devotion to Christ.

The wisdom from above, which comes from God — because it's above — of course, is a reflection of God's own attributes. James says that it's pure, it's peaceful, it is gentle, it's full of good fruits, it's merciful, and it is unwavering, and it is sincere, or un-hypocritical in other words, which of course are attributes that describe Jesus. Jesus was those things. And James says those are the sorts of things — they won't get you ahead in life, they won't make you successful, they won't mean you'll live in a bigger house, but it does result in, James says, righteousness and peace; in other words, real shalom, real peace. And it's interesting that everybody really wants shalom, wholeness, fullness, peace. They want those things, and they think that it's the earthly wisdom that will get it for them, but actually that kind of peace-result only comes from the wisdom that is above, that doesn't seek one's own advancement, but, James says in verse 13 of chapter 3, that it is characterized by meekness, humility, not seeking one's own advancement, but rather the health and the wellbeing of others.

— Dr. Dan McCartney

In 3:18, James referred his audience to what was most likely a well-known proverb:

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness
(James 3:18).

Much like Jesus blessed peacemakers in Matthew 5:9, James made it clear that the poor and rich in the church would receive a great reward for their righteousness — if they became those who make peace in the church.

Now that we've looked at practical wisdom and seen the need that motivated James to spend so much of his epistle on this subject, we should turn to the guidance he gave his audience for how they should put God's wisdom into practice.

GUIDANCE

It's common for Christ's followers to talk a lot about the need for practical theology. We want sermons that are practical. We want lessons that tell us how to live.

And in many parts of the world, there are reliable materials available that give us guidance for nearly every area of life. But the book of James reminds us of standards and priorities that are often forgotten as we pursue wisdom for our daily lives.

The epistle of James has a lot of specific things to say about guidance for practical living. But, we'll limit ourselves to just two considerations. First, we'll note how James upheld the standard of God's law. And second, we'll see that James promoted certain priorities of God's law. Let's look first at the standard of God's law.

Standard of God's Law

Most modern Christians are aware of cautions that the New Testament raises about God's Old Testament Law. For one, we know that salvation is by grace, through faith, and not by works. And we rightly follow the emphasis of Paul in books like Galatians by standing against every attempt to earn salvation through obedience to the law.

Additionally, we know that we mustn't apply God's law as if we were still living in the days of the Old Testament. We rightly follow the emphases of books like Hebrews and apply God's law in ways Christ and his apostles and prophets taught us to apply it in the New Testament age.

Now, as important as these cautions are, we don't find them in James' epistle. Instead, James referred to the law of God in very positive terms. He emphasized what traditionally has been called the "third use of the law." We follow the law as an expression of our gratitude for the mercies God has shown us in Christ.

Law that Gives Freedom. James' offered two descriptions of the law of God that are unique to his epistle. In the first place, he called it, the law that gives freedom.

James spoke of the law giving freedom in 1:25 and 2:12. There he said that the law sets us free from bondage to sin and its devastating effects. When we follow the law out of gratitude to God, it actually gives us freedom. Jesus referred to this same outlook in John 8:32 where he said:

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).

In Romans 7:7-13, Paul described the law as something sin uses to quicken evil desires within us to make us slaves of sin. But when James called the law, the "law that gives freedom," he described how the Spirit of God uses the law in a positive way as our authoritative guide for practical wisdom.

As we've seen, many of James' readers were entangled in webs of sin that were harming the church and leaving them discouraged. And, as long as they continued to follow their own ideas of wisdom, they were unable to escape the frustrations, troubles and harm sin brought to their lives. But just as God's word first set them free from the penalty and tyranny of sin, the word of God also charted a course for practical daily life that would set them free from the turmoil and discouragements of sin.

The law certainly guides, chastises, corrects — right? — the believer’s life and tries to bring it back into harmony with God’s will. And yet, ultimately, also though, I think that’s why James called it the law of liberty, of freedom, and that we will be judged by the law of freedom. I take that to mean the freedom that Christ has given us, and so, therefore, we are to live and deal with one another. We are to be judged by that law in which God shows no partiality and gives his grace freely, and so, we are to give that same grace and impartiality to one another, rich and poor, old and young, slave and free, male and female, just as St. Paul actually says.

— Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs

This is why James insisted in 1:22-25:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says... Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it — not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it — they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:22-25).

Royal Law. In addition to speaking of God’s law as the law that gives freedom, James also referred to God’s law positively as the royal law.

James called the law “the royal law” in 2:8. This terminology drew attention to a point of view on God’s commands that appears throughout the Old and New Testaments. God’s law was his royal decree. It came from the Supreme Ruler to his people as the citizens of his kingdom.

Now, in the modern world we often have difficulty understanding the significance of this royal imagery. Few of us live in nations with powerful kings ruling over them. But James’ audience lived under the authority of the Roman Emperor. They knew what it meant to call God’s law, “the royal law.” Put simply, they knew that God’s law is not something to be taken lightly. It’s not something that we can take or leave as we wish. It comes from the divine King of the universe. And as such, every part of it has absolute authority over us. Listen to a portion of 2:8-10 and the way James elaborated on the authority of God’s royal law:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture ... you are doing right... For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:8-10).

Many, if not most, of James’ Jewish-Christian audience understood that God’s law was important. But as we see here, they’d submitted themselves to the law

selectively. They'd kept some portions of it and ignored other parts. So, James reminded them that the law is "the royal law found in Scripture." It came from their divine King. And for this reason, "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

It was unacceptable to ancient human kings for their citizens to keep only the laws of the land *they* found convenient or pleasant. And in the same way, it was unacceptable for followers of Christ to keep only the laws of God's kingdom that they found convenient or pleasant. Ancient human kings treated such selectivity as rebellion against their royal authority. And God considered such selectivity as rebellion against his royal authority. The law of God is the standard of practical wisdom, and it will bring freedom to all who sincerely seek to obey all of its royal precepts.

Now that we've seen how James insisted that guidance for practical wisdom is found in the standard of God's law, we should turn to the ways he emphasized certain priorities of God's law.

Priorities of God's Law

Let's face it, whenever Christians speak of keeping *all* of the commandments God has given us, we run into a very practical problem. There are just too many commandments to remember, much less obey them all. So, by the limits of our finiteness, we're forced to concentrate on just this one or that one. And, of course, then it becomes easy to fall into the trap of disregarding the authority of God's word by focusing only on those parts of the Scriptures that we want to obey. To avoid this problem, we need to recognize the priorities that the law itself gives us. And we must always give priority to the more important dimensions of God's law.

You'll recall that Jesus dealt with the priorities of God's law in Matthew 22:34-40. In these verses, he identified the two greatest commandments. He declared, in no uncertain terms, that the command to love God, from Deuteronomy 6:5, was the most important principle to keep in mind. And he identified love for our neighbor, from Leviticus 19:18, as the second most important principle.

The apostle Paul clearly understood that love for God was the greatest commandment. But in Galatians 5:14, he also said that the whole law is fulfilled in the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Interestingly enough, James did the same. Listen to the rest of 2:8-10 and James' particular emphasis on the second greatest commandment:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:8-10).

Notice here how James summarized the priorities of the royal law in the words of Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s no mystery why James did this. The turmoil between poor and wealthy believers in the church resulted from their oversight of this second greatest commandment.

As James noted here, those who “show favoritism” for the rich are “convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” And this is no small matter. Everyone who ignores just this one law while keeping the others “is guilty of breaking all of [the law].” So, the law of God, the authoritative guide for practical wisdom, gives top priority to our love for each other, second only to loving God with all of our hearts. As James reminded the wealthy in 1:27:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27).

So, what’s the test of true religion? Well, not that you do good things that are moral, that make you look good in society, but the real test is following God’s ways — God cares for the orphan; God cares for the widow — when nobody’s looking, when you get nothing back. Who’s an orphan? Who’s a widow? It’s a person who can’t give back to you. So, an act of kindness to your neighbor or to your boss doesn’t count as a proof of true religion. But, you know, God loves the poor; God cares for the weakest of the weak and doesn’t receive anything back in return materially for himself. He receives our praise, of course, and takes pleasure in the good that we do. But caring for those who can’t give back, that’s a huge test.

— Dr. Dan Doriani

James emphasized the need for the wealthy to follow the priorities of God’s law by loving their poor neighbors. But love for neighbor was of such importance for practical wisdom that James emphasized how it also applied to the poor. To mention just a few examples, throughout his epistle, James made it clear that loving our neighbors means to use our tongues as instruments of blessing.

In 1:19, James called people to “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” with each other. In 4:1-3 James insisted that fights, quarrels and slander should not exist among God’s people. In 4:11 he condemned “slander.” And in 5:9 James ordered, “Don’t grumble against each other.” Instead, according to 5:16, they were to “confess [their] sins to each other and pray for each other.”

If believers in James’ audience wanted to show that they had wisdom from heaven, they would devote themselves to the standard of God’s law. And they would do this fully recognizing the priority God’s law placed on their love for each other.

Now that we've seen how James' emphasis on practical wisdom addressed his audience's need and offered guidance, let's look at a third major issue he raised: the relationship between faith and practical wisdom.

FAITH

If there is one thing that is at the center of Christianity, it would have to be faith. We speak of Christianity as “our faith.” We speak of Christ as the object of our faith. We affirm the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* or justification by faith alone. The prominence of faith that we recognize today is rooted in the centrality of faith in the New Testament itself. Faith was also at the center of first century Christianity. And for this reason, to impress the importance of practical wisdom for his audience, James raised the issue of faith.

Time will only permit us to mention two ways in which James connected practical wisdom and faith. First, James explained the relationship between faith and works; and second, James explained the relationship between faith and justification. Let's look first at how he treated faith and works.

Faith and Works

James began his discussion in 2:14 with a straightforward question:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? (James 2:14).

And of course, the answer to James question was, “No.” Faith that is not accompanied by deeds cannot save.

“Faith” or “believing” translates the Greek noun *pistis* (πίστις) and the verb *pisteuō* (πιστεύω). This family of words appears hundreds of times in the New Testament. But much like “faith” and “believing” in English, these words signified a number of different concepts.

To mention just a few, sometimes in the New Testament, faith and believing referred to mere intellectual agreement that something is true. At times, they referred to temporary endorsement. And at other times, they referred to what theologians often call “saving faith.” Saving faith is a wholehearted, life-long trust and reliance on Christ as the way of salvation. James acknowledged that “faith” and “believing” can mean many things. And, because of this, he called for his audience to examine the kind of faith they had. For instance, in 2:19, James challenged his Jewish-Christian audience with these words:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder (James 2:19).

When James conceded that his audience believed — from the verb *pisteuō* (πιστεύω) — that there is one God, he alluded to what's called the *Shema*. This ancient Old Testament confession of faith, in Deuteronomy 6:4, tells us, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” From James’ point of view, it was good that his audience gave intellectual assent to this fact. But as good as this was, this kind of belief or faith would not suffice because “even the demons believe that.” In fact, the demons shudder in fear when they think about it. But it does them no good. Mere intellectual agreement without obedience isn’t saving faith. Or as James expressed succinctly in 2:26:

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead
(James 2:26).

With this basic concept of faith and works in mind, we should also mention James’ treatment of faith and justification.

Faith and Justification

The question of who was justified, or righteous before God, was a matter of some controversy among Jewish teachers in James’ time. And it continued to be a central issue within the first century Christian church as well. Who is counted as justified? Who is considered righteous? In 2:21-24, James answered these questions in this way:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ... You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:21-24, ESV).

Here James spoke of being justified, using the Greek verb *dikaioō* (δικαίωω), which means “to declare righteous,” “to justify,” or “to vindicate.” He argued that Abraham was justified or vindicated as righteous by works, the work of offering his son Isaac to God in Genesis 22. And on this basis, he concluded that no one is justified or vindicated by faith alone. Everyone that God accepts as righteous is justified by works.

James’ statement has raised all kinds of controversy through the centuries primarily because it appears to contradict what the apostle Paul taught about justification. In 2:24 James said:

A person is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24, ESV).

By contrast, the apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 2:16:

A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16).

In reality, there is no contradiction here. Rather, James and Paul used the same term *dikaioō* (δικαίωω), or "justified", in two different ways. In Paul's technical theological vocabulary, he usually reserved the word "justified" for only one thing. For Paul, "justification" referred to the initial declaration of righteousness for all who have saving faith in Christ through the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

James, however, spoke of justification in a different way. James used the term *dikaioō* (δικαίωω) to mean something like "proven to be right" or "vindicated." He didn't deny that there is an initial imputation of Christ's righteousness when a person first exercises saving faith. But, for James, the term *dikaioō* applied to a person who has professed faith in the Lord Jesus and is "proven to be right", or is "vindicated" by the work of the Spirit in his or her life. From James' point of view, the Spirit's empowerment leads to faithful devotion to Christ. No matter what a person may claim, if they don't demonstrate their faith through good works, then in the end they will not be vindicated. So, James spoke of this relationship between faith and justification as a way to highlight the importance of practical wisdom for his readers.

The seeming conflict between Paul and James on the issue of justification by faith alone is really the major issue, I think, in the book of James. It comes up... There's probably been more ink that has been spilled over that particular issue than any other in the book. First of all I'd like to say that the Greek word *dikaioō* sometimes means "the act of justification," which, if I were to make it as simple as I can, is that justification is basically two sides to the same coin. You have, on one side, you have forgiveness — God forgives us. That's the subtraction side. On the other side you have an addition, which is the imputation of righteousness. And then there's that declaration of "you are justified in my sight." And so, by faith we are justified, and that's one use of the word justification. On the other hand, we can use justification to mean "to vindicate" or "to be shown to be righteous." And so Paul is using it in the forensic way, and then we also have James using it in the sense of a works example, a showing to be righteous, in other words... So, if we were to summarize, it would be, Paul's use of justification is the priority of faith, and James' way of looking at justification is post-conversion or the proof of faith... So, James' question is, "Who should be considered righteous? One who says he believes in God or one who lives a life based on his profession and his belief in God?" And for James and Paul, faith must work. Can I say it again? Faith must work. It must produce. It must be visible. Verbal faith is not enough. Mental faith is insufficient. Faith must move into action. It endures trials, it obeys God's word, it produces doers, it harbors no prejudice, it controls the tongue, it acts wisely, it provides the power to resist the

devil, and here, the most important, it waits patiently for the coming of the Lord. And both James and Paul taught exactly the same thing.

— Dr. Larry J. Waters

Listen to the way James applied this principle in 2:15-17:

Suppose a brother or a 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 is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:15-17).

It would be difficult to imagine James making his point more forcefully than this. His audience needed to address the turmoil in their churches by practical obedience to the law of God, especially the command to love each other. No matter what claims they made about their faith, they would not be vindicated as righteous in the eyes of God without the practical good works of love.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we’ve looked at two paths of wisdom in the book of James. We’ve seen how James pointed his audience toward reflective wisdom by highlighting their need for reflective wisdom, offering guidance, and making the connection between reflective wisdom and faith. And we’ve also looked at how James directed his audience to pursue practical wisdom by showing them their need and guiding them to apply God’s truth in faithful, humble service to God and to his people.

James called on first century Jewish Christians to follow two paths of wisdom. And the same must be true for you and me today. We also need both reflective and practical wisdom. To receive these gifts from God, we must submit ourselves to the guidance James offered. And we must ensure that we do so in full faith and devotion to God. In a time when we easily follow the way of earthly wisdom, we must take the book of James to heart and follow the paths of wisdom that come from God.

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GLOSSARY

dikaioō – Greek word (transliteration) meaning to declare righteous, to justify, to vindicate

earthly wisdom – “Wisdom” that is unspiritual and demonic, characterized by envy and selfish ambition that leads to disorder and every kind of evil practice (see Jam. 3:14-16)

heavenly wisdom – Wisdom from God that bears good fruit and promotes a love for peace, submission to others and mercy (see Jam. 3:17)

justification – Initial declaration of righteousness when a believer is acquitted of the guilt of sin and is credited with the righteousness of Christ (as per Paul); proven to be right or vindicated (as per James)

peirasmos – Greek term (transliteration) that can be translated “trial,” “temptation” and “test”

pistis – Greek term (transliteration) for “belief,” “faithfulness,” “lovingkindness”

practical wisdom – Advice and guidance for everyday life

reflective wisdom – Insights into God’s purposes behind trials and troubles

royal law – Expression in the epistle of James referring to the idea that God’s law was his royal decree; also associated with Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

saving faith – Assent to the truth of the gospel and a wholehearted, life-long trust in Christ to save us from our sin

Shema – Ancient Old Testament confession of faith found in Deuteronomy 6:4

sophia – Greek term (transliteration) for “wisdom”

sophos – Greek term (transliteration) for “wise” or “skilled”

third use of the law – Use of the law as a guide or rule to show faithful Christians how to live a more ethical life; also called the “normative use”