

The Epistle of James

Lesson Guide

LESSON
TWO

TWO PATHS OF WISDOM



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

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

James referred to the paths of wisdom he called his audience to follow in 1:2-18 and 3:13-18.

Paths of wisdom commonly distinguished within Jewish wisdom traditions:

- Reflective wisdom (as in Job and Ecclesiastes) – insights into God’s purposes
- Practical wisdom (as in Proverbs) – advice and guidance for everyday life

II. Reflective Wisdom (3:22)

A. Need (4:13)

James' audience consisted primarily of early Jewish Christians forced out of Jerusalem by persecution.

James wrote to help with the discouragement and confusion they faced (1:2).

1. Challenge of Trials (5:17)

James' terms for trials:

- "peirasmos" (πειρασμός) – “trial,” “temptation,” “test”
- "peirazō" (πειράζω) – “to try,” “to tempt,” “to test”

James’ audience faced difficult *trials* that brought *temptations* for the purpose of *testing* them.

Challenging circumstances are:

- trials that require endurance
- temptations to react in wrong or sinful ways
- tests from God

2. Many Kinds of Trials (6:59)

James addressed turmoil and controversies between poor believers and wealthy believers in the early church.

- Poor believers

Many in the early church were poor (Acts 2–6):

- “the humble” (ταπεινός) – of low social status (1:9; 4:6)
- “the poor” (πτωχός) – economically deprived (2:2, 3, 5, 6)

- “orphans and widows” (1:27)
- those who wore "filthy old clothes" (2:2)
- those "without clothes and daily food" (2:15)

The poor were tempted to:

- self-denigration (1:9)
 - curse others (3:9)
 - harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition (3:14)
 - fights and quarrels within the church (4:1)
 - impatience (5:7)
- Wealthy believers

Some in the early church had enough wealth to care for poor believers (Acts 2–6):

- referred to as "the rich" (πλούσιος) – upper class of society (1:10; 2:6; 5:1)
- took others to court (2:6)

- traveled on business to make money (4:13)
- took pride in their clothes, gold and silver (5:2-3)
- lived "in luxury and self-indulgence" (5:5)

The wealthy were tempted to:

- pride (1:10)
- become "polluted by the world" (1:27)
- blasphemy by bearing false witness in court (2:7)
- do nothing for the poor (2:16)
- curse others (3:9)
- harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition (3:14)
- fights and quarrels (4:1)
- live independently from God (4:13-16)
- hoard their wealth (5:3)

B. Guidance (13:26)

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).

1. Testing (14:39)

James used the term "testing" (δοκίμιον), in the sense of proving the genuineness of their faith.

As God interacts with his people in history, he often uses difficulties to prove or display what's in our hearts (e.g., Deuteronomy 8:2).

2. Perseverance (16:14)

James wrote that testing produces "perseverance" (ὑπομονή), meaning "to bear up under difficulty."

New Testament teaching on Christian perseverance is twofold:

- Gift of grace – Christians can persevere because the Holy Spirit empowers us to walk in faithful obedience (Romans 6:1-14).

- Necessary requirement – those who have exercised saving faith will, of necessity, persevere in their faith (Colossians 1:22-23).

3. **Maturity (18:24)**

Maturity is the result of perseverance (1:4).

"Completeness" or "lacking nothing" does not mean that we can reach moral perfection in this life (cf. 1 John 1:8).

If we continue to grow in obedience to God, when Christ returns, we'll have nothing lacking in our lives to disqualify us.

4. **Reward (21:14)**

James indicated that, at the end of this process, there would be a great reward (1:12).

Every trial was a gift from God, designed for their eternal good.

C. Faith (23:43)

If we want wisdom to understand God's often-hidden purposes in trials, we must ask God for it (1:5).

Prayers for wisdom must be in faith; otherwise, we will be double-minded people (1:6-8).

To ask "in faith" meant to be faithful to God. To be double-minded was to be in serious rebellion against God.

Double-minded people:

- sinners who must purify their hearts (4:8-9)
- fundamentally deny the goodness of God
- blame God for their failures
- reason that God sent their trials, so God must be evil because he was tempting them to sin

James insisted that God *himself* tempts no one (1:13-14).

As in the book of Job, God is in control of all trials, tests and temptations, but Satan, not God, used Job's trial to tempt him to sin.

To pray for wisdom in faith and not be double-minded is to affirm the goodness of God (1:17).

God only gives "good" and "perfect" gifts so his purpose for our trials is always good and perfect.

III. Practical Wisdom (29:23)

A. Need (30:34)

James emphasized the need for putting wisdom into practice (3:13-18).

If James' audience's claim to be wise was genuine, they would "show it by their good life." (3:13).

Right actions and attitudes are both essential to practical wisdom.

1. **Earthly Wisdom (34:01)**

Many in the church harbored bitter envy and selfish ambition in their hearts and justified it as wisdom (3:14-15).

Conflicts between the poor and rich in James' day caused great damage in the churches:

- The poor felt justified and wise in their envy of the wealthy.

- The wealthy felt justified and wise in being selfish.

To James, this kind of wisdom was "earthly, unspiritual, and demonic," and it led to "disorder and every evil practice" (3:14-16).

This destruction in the church drove James to insist that his audience needed practical wisdom.

2. **Heavenly Wisdom (38:51)**

Wisdom from heaven is wisdom that comes from God (3:17).

Heavenly wisdom is:

- Peace-loving
- Considerate
- Submissive
- Full of mercy and good fruit
- Impartial
- Sincere

These actions and attitudes rise from a sincere devotion to Christ.

The poor and rich would receive a great reward if they became peacemakers (James 3:18; Matthew 5:9).

B. Guidance (42:12)

1. Standard of God's Law (42:56)

We know that salvation is by grace, through faith, and not by works.

We apply God's law in ways Christ and his apostles and prophets taught us to apply it in the New Testament age.

James emphasized the "third use of the law" – following the law as an expression of our gratitude for the mercies God has shown us in Christ.

James' descriptions of the law of God:

a. Law that Gives Freedom

The law sets us free from bondage to sin and its devastating effects (James 1:25, 2:12; John 8:32).

The Spirit of God uses the law in a positive way as our authoritative guide for practical wisdom.

b. Royal Law

God's law was his royal decree to his people as the citizens of his kingdom.

God's law is not something to be taken lightly, that we can take or leave as we wish (2:8-10).

The law of God is the standard of practical wisdom, bringing freedom to all who sincerely seek to obey all of its royal precepts.

2. **Priorities of God's Law (49:47)**

Jesus identified the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:34-40):

- love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) – the greatest commandment
- love neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) – the "royal law" (Galatians 5:14; James 2:8-10)

The law of God gives top priority to our love for each other, second only to loving God with all of our hearts (1:27).

Love for neighbor applied to the poor and wealthy alike:

- use tongues (words) as instruments of blessing
- be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger (1:19)
- avoid fights, quarrels and slander (4:1-3, 11)
- do not grumble against each other (5:9)
- confess sins to each other and pray for each other (5:16)

To show wisdom from heaven, believers must devote themselves to God's law and recognize the priority of love for each other.

C. Faith (55:14)

1. Faith and Works (56:14)

Faith that is not accompanied by deeds cannot save (2:14).

"Faith" and "believing" (*πίστις* and *πιστεύω*) appear throughout the New Testament signifying many concepts:

- mere intellectual agreement
- temporary endorsement
- "saving faith" – wholehearted, life-long trust and reliance on Christ as the way of salvation

James called for his audience to examine the kind of faith they had (e.g., 2:19).

Mere intellectual agreement without obedience isn't saving faith (2:26).

2. Faith and Justification (59:10)

The question of who was justified, or righteous before God, was a matter of some controversy in James' time.

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

James' statement in 2:21-24 appears to contradict what Paul taught about justification in Galatians 2:16.

In reality, Paul and James used the same term for justification (δικαιόω) in two different ways:

- Paul – justification: the initial declaration of righteousness for all who have saving faith in Christ through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.
- James – justification: a person who has professed faith in Jesus is “proven to be right” or “vindicated” by the work of the Spirit in his or her life.

For James, no matter what claims his audience made about their faith, they would not be vindicated as righteous in the eyes of God without the practical good works of love (2:15-17).

IV. Conclusion (1:05:32)

3. How does asking God for wisdom require us to have faith?

4. In order to explain the need for practical wisdom, James contrasted "earthly wisdom" with "heavenly wisdom." Describe both types of wisdom and the outcomes of each.

5. Much of James' practical guidance focused on obeying God's law. Explain how the law of God is the standard of practical wisdom and how it brings freedom to all who sincerely seek to obey all of its royal precepts.

6. James's perspective on faith and works has caused some controversy. Describe James' teaching on faith and works. How do we know that James did not contradict Paul's teaching on justification?

Application Questions

1. Do you face any of the same temptations as those of James' original audience? Which are most challenging for you individually? Which are most challenging for those in your area of ministry?
2. God often tests his people's faith through trials. Have you experienced a particular time of testing in your life? How did it change you?
3. Have there been times when you doubted God's goodness or wisdom? What were the circumstances? How did you get through those times of despair?
4. James condemns the idea that God tempts us to sin. How would you answer someone who blames God for their failures?
5. Earthly wisdom divides God's people. Has your church or ministry ever experienced division? What methods, if any, did you find that brought healing to the situation?
6. James confidently claimed that the law gives freedom. How can an obligation to follow God's law provide freedom?
7. Which of Jesus' two greatest commands do you tend to focus more of your energy toward – loving God or loving our neighbors as ourselves? How can you observe both more faithfully?
8. James said that true religion is “to look after widows and orphans ... and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27). What does this mean to you? How can we put James' words into practice?
9. James' discussion of faith and works is one of the most challenging passages in his letter. How much do you think our actions matter to God?
10. Are you ever tempted to minimize the importance of obedience because of Paul's doctrine of justification? Explain your answer.
11. What strategies can you develop to help you faithfully examine your life, both your faith and your works? What are some ways you can share these with others that you disciple?
12. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?

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”