

Ask for Wisdom (James 1:5-8)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely practical letter to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In the prior message, we discussed:
 - i. Why this letter was so disparaged by Martin Luther, the founding father of modern Protestantism. Luther said things like:
 1. “St. James’ epistle is really *an epistle of straw*...it has nothing of the nature of the gospel in it.”
 2. “Someday I will use James *to fire my stove*.”
 3. “[The epistle of James] has *no value*.”
- c. The author of the letter is only introduced as “James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” While there is more than one ‘James’ in the New Testament, it has been held traditionally that the author was ‘James, the brother (or relative) of the Lord,’ the leader of the early church in Jerusalem.
- d. The first main point made by the author (in **James 1:2-4**) is that we should rejoice when facing various trials. God is using those things to perfect or complete our faith, so that we should no longer be spiritually lacking or immature.

II. Background – The Importance of Wisdom

- a. First, let us consider the importance of growing in spiritual wisdom.
 - i. The Christian life cannot be reduced to nothing more than mechanically following a set of rules that have all been spelled out. We need spiritual wisdom every day to make decisions, choose between competing priorities, and select (hopefully) the best way forward.
 1. Wisdom will teach us the fear of the Lord, will keep you from all kinds of sins, and will preserve you for eternal life.
 2. Many things in life, even those with massive consequences, are judgment calls (no clear black-and-white right or wrong). Wisdom is needed to make everyday decisions, such as:

- a. Especially needed for men leading churches, and for parents.
 - b. Where to live (city, church, rental apartment or home ownership).
 - c. Career, education, jobs to pursue.
 - d. Married or single? Who to marry or to reject for marriage?
 - e. How to allocate our money.
 - f. How we invest our time, including who we spend time with.
 - g. In reaching out to the lost, assessing who is serious about pursuing God.
 - h. Regarding children: how many to have, how to discipline them, how to prepare them for adult life. (Since each child is different, wise parenting is NOT strictly “one size fits all.”)
 - i. Medical decisions that need to be made for ourselves or on behalf of family members
 - j. Ordering the competing priorities in our lives.
- b. Let us start by considering what the Scriptures say about the importance of seeking wisdom.
- i. Read **Proverbs 1:20-35**.
 1. At the beginning of the **Book of Proverbs**, Solomon explains that he has written this book for the purpose of helping young men to gain wisdom.
 2. Solomon uses a literary device to personify ‘Wisdom’ as a woman who is inviting all to the banquet she has prepared. However, only a few accept her invitation.
 3. Those who refuse the invitation to partake of wisdom will face utter destruction.
 - a. These fools don’t fear God and won’t heed the counsel of wisdom.
 4. Those who seek the restraint that comes from wisdom will be protected by her.

- ii. Read **Job 28:1-2** and **28:12-23**.
 1. Where can a person go to find wisdom? (The question is raised, without a clear answer being provided.)
 2. It is more valuable than gold or precious stones.
- iii. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 1:1-8**. (This is in one of the Deuterocanonical Books that are included in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Also, these books were well in the King James Bible from its inception in 1611 until about 1885.)
 1. God is the source of wisdom, which He had from the beginning.
 2. He gives His wisdom to those who love Him.
- iv. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 7:7-10** and **7:24-30**. (This also is from the Deuterocanonical Books.)
 1. The author prayed to God requesting wisdom, and he says, “the spirit of wisdom came to me.”
 2. Wisdom is of surpassing value, above all the things of this world (more precious thrones, precious stones, gold, etc.).
 3. In every generation, wisdom passes into holy souls.
 4. Evil cannot be overcome by wisdom.
- v. Read **Isaiah 11:1-3**.
 1. This passage enumerates the characteristics of the Holy Spirit (with seven characteristics provided in the LXX account).
 2. The very first characteristic of the Holy Spirit that is mentioned here is “the Spirit of wisdom.”
- vi. Also, let us recall that Jesus is described as “the wisdom of God” in **1 Corinthians 1 and 2**.
- vii. In **Matthew 12**, Jesus describes Himself as the one *having even greater wisdom than Solomon*.
 1. “The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; *and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.*” (**Matthew 12:42**, NKJV)

III. Ask God for Wisdom

- a. Read **James 1:5-8**.
 - i. Main points of this passage include:
 1. Ask God for wisdom, to know what is best to do.
 - a. This is a prayer that God appreciates when those who follow Him request it.
 - b. Consider how the Lord responded when Solomon, when given the opportunity to request whatever he wanted, asked God for wisdom. (See **2 Chronicles 1:6-12**.)
 2. Don't be double-minded when we ask.
 - b. Some believers (including groups such as Word of Faith, and those who preach various forms of the so-called 'Prosperity Gospel') use passages such as this one to claim that our faith has power in and of itself, almost like a force of nature or something that is automatically guaranteed. They assert *that if we believe anything strongly enough, without doubting* (and some would add if we forcefully speak it out loud, can we make it materialize. That would include good health, wealth, and worldly success.
 - i. Other passages from the Bible that are often used to support these claims include:
 1. "So Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea," *and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done*, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.'" (**Mark 11:22-24**, NKJV)
 2. "*The tongue has the power of life and death*, and those who love it will eat its fruit." (**Proverbs 18:21**, NIV)
 - a. Some take this passage out of context to claim that if we speak something, we can create it (as the Lord spoke the universe into existence, from nothing).
 - i. However, while God can speak things into existence, we are not God!
 - b. (Also, note that in the NKJV this passage reads, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue...")

- ii. We cannot just take one or two passages on prayer in isolation and assume they contain the totality of what God has to say on this subject. The Bible does not teach “magical thinking,” that if we just believe enough, we will automatically get *whatever* we ask for. ALL the Scriptures on prayer must be considered, together, to get an accurate and complete understanding.
 - 1. For example, in this letter, James cautions against asking with the wrong motives.
 - a. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.” (**James 4:3**, NKJV)
 - i. We can’t expect God to answer prayers that are based on gratifying our own selfish desires.
 - 2. God answers the prayers of those who are righteous.
 - a. “...The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (**James 5:16**, NKJV)
 - i. God listens to the prayers of those who live according to righteousness (and does not listen to the unrighteous).
 - ii. Peter taught the same thing in 1 Peter 3, pointing back to **Psalm 33/34**.
 - 1. “Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, *that your prayers may not be hindered.*” (**1 Peter 3:7**, NKJV)
 - 2. “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For ‘He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. *For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears*

are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.” (1 Peter 3:8-12, NKJV; where Peter is quoting from Psalm 33/34:12-16)

- a. Clearly, the “righteousness” that Peter and James refer to is personal righteousness (living according to God’s ways), rather than the righteousness of Jesus being somehow imputed to us.
3. We need to ask for all things *in accordance with God’s will*.
 - a. Recall how Jesus taught His disciples to pray.
 - i. “In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. *Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven....” (Matthew 6:9-11, NKJV)*
 - b. “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything *according to His will, He hears us*. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.” (1 John 5:14-15, NKJV)
 - c. Recall that Jesus asked in His prayer in the Garden that the cup of going to the cross be taken away, but ONLY if it could be in line with His Father’s will.
 - i. “He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.’” (Matthew 26:39, NKJV)

IV. Conclusions and Closing Challenges:

- a. Seek wisdom. Value it as a great treasure that, in the end, is absolutely worth whatever effort it takes. Follow the positive example of Solomon in asking God for wisdom.
 - i. Resist the temptation to accept shortcuts for the lazy, such as wanting to have someone else tell you what to do. Or just following the crowd or your feelings.
 - ii. See God as the source of all wisdom. Ask God for it in prayer. Pray for more of it all the time. This is a prayer that the Lord is happy to honor

(clearly it is according to His will, and we are not doing it for selfish reasons).

- b. Keep in mind ALL the spiritual laws of prayer we find in **James** and throughout the Scriptures. God answers the prayers of the righteous.
- c. Never forget that the Holy Spirit, who is the *Spirit of Wisdom*, cannot tell us something that contradicts a clear command of the Spirit-inspired Scriptures.
 - i. If you are getting a message internally that contradicts what the Scriptures say, it can't be from the Holy Spirit. Must be from somewhere else!
 - ii. So we DON'T 'pray for wisdom' regarding whether you should marry a non-Christian, or cover up your sin, marry a divorced person, (women) wear a head covering while praying, or go fight in Iran with the US military.
 - 1. The Holy Spirit has already told us what we need to do in those areas of life, through the inspired Word of God.
 - iii. *If we aren't willing to do what the Spirit has already clearly spelled out, why should we expect the Spirit to give us any additional insight?*
- d. Finally, when we ask for wisdom in prayer, we can be confident that the Lord will answer us and give us what we have requested.