

“When You Need Wisdom (Part 3)” – James 1:5-8

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in James 1...

While you are turning there, let me remind you that next week is a special week for us as a church because next Sunday, Lord willing, will be our first Sunday of transitioning back to corporate, in person, worship. We are taking a multi-phased approach, but Sunday, May 24, will be the start of Phase 1. That means that next Sunday we'll be having three modified, worship services at the church. We have added the extra service to help us get the distancing right in the sanctuary and, as people return in greater numbers, we may even have to add a fourth later.

So next week those service times will be at 8:15, 9:45, and 11:15 in the morning. The first of those services will be reserved for those who are 65 and older and those who fall into one of the more at-risk categories for Covid-19. You don't have to attend that service if you are over 65, but that is the service we would recommend for you. As for the other services, we have recommendations for Sunday school classes and departments as to which service to attend. We did that because it makes our numbers a bit more predictable. Of course, if you don't have a class or cannot make that time, you are welcome to the other service.

In any case, we are excited to give it a go and have been giving a lot thought to how best ensure the safety and comfort of all those gathered. But you don't have to come next week. If you are sick or one of those considered at an increased risk of this virus, then by all means stay home. We will still be posting the service; it'll just be posted later and will have a different format to it. You can come when you are comfortable. And when you come, we will be glad to see you. So keep your eyes on our communication channels for more information. And pray for all of us as we begin our transition back.

Now then, let's look at our text in James. If you've tuned in lately this will sound familiar to you. But let's do the most important thing and read the text. Follow along as I begin reading in verse 5. This is God's Word...

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (James 1:5-8)

Let's pray...

This will be our third and final week considering these verses. Week one we considered the character of God that stands behind the promise and how His character encourages us to take seriously this promise and draw near. Last week we looked at the commitment expressed in verse 5 (i.e., ask for wisdom and you will receive it) and offered some clarifications on its meaning as we explored some common misunderstandings of that verse. Today I would like to consider the remaining verses in a similar fashion. This time, instead of moving from the commitment to clarifications, I would like us to move from the condition to some points of clarification. So let's begin with the condition...

The Condition:
Believe and Don't Doubt

After assuring us that God will give wisdom to those who ask, James conditions that promise in verse 6 with these words: *“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting”*. Then he tells the reader, in verse 7, that the one who fails to ask in faith *“must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord”*, which in context means that he will not receive the wisdom he asks for.

Once again this is consistent with Jesus' teaching on prayer. You might remember, for example, Jesus once cursed a fig tree and it withered. The disciples saw this, and they marveled at the sight. Observing their reaction Jesus said,

*“Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen.
²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”* (Matthew 21:21-22; cf. 9:29; Mark 9:23; 11:22-24)

James is echoing Jesus' words with a narrower focus. Whereas Jesus was making a point about prayer in general, James is making a point about prayers for wisdom—they, like all prayers, should be offered up with wholehearted faith, without doubt. So if verse 5 held before our eyes “the unquestioned sincerity of God” in answering our prayers for wisdom, verses 6 and following call into question our own sincerity in making the request.¹ Do we truly believe that God will answer our request for wisdom because we truly believe God is a giving God? If the answer is “no,” then we are not asking in faith. And if we are not asking in faith, then, according to James, we should not presume that God will grant us the wisdom we seek.

You might recall that I recently preached a series, based on Hebrews 11, called “The Cloud.” Chapter 11 is all about the nature of faith and what faith looks like in action. The author of Hebrews fills the chapter with biblical examples of people who walked “*by faith*,” and that would be a good place to look if you are wanting to see faith illustrated. The opening verse famously states: *“faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”* (Heb. 11:1; KJV). A few verses later we are reminded that...

“...without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

That is an interesting statement because it reminds us how faith is an essential ingredient to every action that pleases the Lord. But it's also interesting because it depicts faith as a drawing near to God and an embrace of truth about God. Consider both of those elements.

First, drawing near. Drawing near is itself an evidence of God's work in our lives. Even if the prayer is *“help my unbelief”* (Mark 9:24), the sincerity of the request can only flow from some measure of belief. “A dead person can't ask a doctor to make her well; there must be life in her to do that.”² So even if the only prayer we can muster is the prayer on the lips of the father who came to Jesus—*“I believe; help my unbelief”*—that is a good sign.³ It's a sign of life. It's a sign of God's grace in our lives. For as Jesus Himself said, *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out”* (John 6:37). What good news!

Second, embracing truth about God. Drawing near implies an object, a personal being to whom we are approaching to present our request, in this case, God. He is the object of our faith. We draw near because we believe He exists. And we draw near because we believe certain things about Him. That's what both James and the author of Hebrews suggest in their own ways.

A couple weeks ago we talked about all the ways we try to talk ourselves out of drawing near to God. We are factories generating excuse after excuse of why God would be annoyed with our drawing near. “Unfortunately, we spend a lot of time staring at ourselves to see how we feel about him and acting as if our feelings have any authority over truth and falsehood. As if taking our temperature tells us anything about God.”⁴ What we should be doing is embracing what God has revealed about Himself, like what James says in verse 5, that He is a “*God, who give generously without reproach*” or what the author of Hebrews said in 11:6, “*that he rewards those who seek him.*” He is a giving God. He loves to be asked because He loves to give. And our asking brings Him glory since it acknowledges that we are not the answer to our problem. He is.

What you notice about both of these elements—drawing near to God and embracing truth about God—is that they have to do with the object of our faith, not the degree of our faith. I believe that is also true with our present passage in James. And with that, it’s time for us to pivot into some clarifications about what James *is* saying and what James is *not* saying.

Clarification:

What He’s Not Saying and What He Is Saying

First, it’s worth noting that this is not the only qualification we find to answered prayer in the Bible. This is not the time to go through a detailed study on what the answers to our prayers may be conditioned on or influenced by, but a more exhaustive treatment would show that it’s certainly more than faith that is required (though certainly not less).

For example, in 1 John 5:14 we are told that we must ask “*according to [God’s] will*” in order to have the assurance that “*he hears us.*” Clearly, James has shown us, it is God’s will for us to ask Him for wisdom. But, as we saw last week, it may not be His will to grant wisdom *when* and *how* we want to receive it. James will touch on this in chapter 4, where he discusses both God’s will for our lives and how our motives can shape the answers to our prayers (e.g., James 4:3, 13ff). These are just a few of many biblical examples of things that can determine how and if our prayers are answered. Our job today, however, is to focus on the importance of faith because that is the focus of our text.

So let’s start with what I believe is the most pressing question for many of us: When James conditions our reception of wisdom on prayers offered in faith and without doubt, is he not demanding that we possess a perfect faith? I certainly hope not. Does anyone among us ever possess a perfect, unwavering faith? Did Abraham?⁵ Or Moses? Or Daniel? Certainly not. But we would be comfortable saying that they possessed a true faith, as the Bible itself attests (cf. Heb. 11). It wasn’t perfect, but it was genuine.

Perhaps the clearest instance of this point is the one I’ve already alluded to, the father who came to Jesus to request that He heal his sick child. Jesus says to him, “*All things are possible for the one who believes*”, and the father replied immediately, “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” In response, Jesus grants the man’s request and heals the boy (Mark 9:23-29). When I read that story, I am so grateful that Jesus didn’t say, “Come back and ask Me when you believe fully.” No, He received the man and granted His request. He’s a giving God, remember, who gives without reproach. The request itself was evidence of faith and the man clearly saw his unbelief as a hindrance he needed deliverance from. So he took his request to Jesus, the Deliverer. The object of His faith—even if it was just a modicum of faith, a mustard seed, if you will—was the determining factor. Jesus was honored by the request and He granted the man’s desire. But why? Was it the perfect character of his faith? No. Was it the perfect measure of his faith? Not at all. He confessed his shortcomings on both fronts. So what was it? It was that his sincere faith had the right object—Jesus Christ.

And here is how this relates to the teaching of James, in the words of Robert Plummer:

“When James calls for faith, he is not calling for Christians to work up some sort of invisible faith-o-meter so that they ‘feel’ the prayer being answered in an overly specific way. Rather, Christians are to approach God trustingly—knowing he is powerful, good, and kindly disposed to them because of the relationship secured through Christ’s perfect life and atoning death. The opposite of such faith is to believe that God does not really care, is not good, and does not keep his fatherly promises in Christ.”⁶

That’s what asking “in faith” looks like when read against the context of the previous verse. This is not some modern “name-it-claim-it” nonsense. This is not prosperity teaching. This is not that word of faith garbage. This is not working yourself up into a frenzy of wishful thinking. This is belief anchored to the character of the God before whom we lay our request for wisdom.

I think that this is important for some of you to hear this morning because you may be one of those who is quite prone to fret a good bit over whether or not you prayed with enough faith for God to answer your prayer. You are looking for ways to beat yourself up because you have a really sensitive conscience. You’re like that character John Bunyan calls “Much-Afraid” in part two of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. But James has his eye set on another kind of person here. “James is rebuking the presumptuous and erratic petitioner who seeks to live independently of God but, when desperation or inclination strikes, offer up a quick, unbelieving plea.”⁷ That’s not really the prayer of faith. That’s trying to cover all the bases. That’s a different kind of person than the person who struggles periodically with questions about God and His ways. “James is not saying that we must never have had a spiritual question or struggled to understand the ways of God, or wrestled with parts of the Bible’s teaching” and he’s certainly “not saying we need to have worked ourselves up into a state of absolute belief.”⁸

Nevertheless, the passage is unsettling to many of us because he does say that we must not “doubt” when we ask for wisdom. Isn’t a weaker faith itself evidence of the presence of doubt and unbelief? Yes. But I don’t think that is the kind of doubt that James has in mind.⁹ And I think his clarifying remarks help us see that. James says that the doubter he has in mind “*is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind*” and “*double-minded*” and characteristically “*unstable*”.¹⁰

The key term there is “*double-minded*” and it’s a Greek word that James may have coined as there is no evidence of its use in Greek literature prior to its occurrence in verse 8 (and then again in 4:8). The word literally means “double-souled” or “with divided soul”. Some have described it as “two-faced,” but I think that can be misunderstood since James is not really talking about the duplicitous (which is usually what we associate with someone who is “two-faced”). But if by “two-faced” we means someone facing in two directions, divided, or of two minds (like Bunyan’s “Mr. Facing Both Ways” character in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*), then that could fit the sense here.¹¹ One commentator, I think rightly, describes the person James has in mind as one having their “soul divided between faith and the world.”¹² Another writer sums it up with the phrase “split loyalties.”¹³ Here’s how Jesus got at the same idea:

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24)

Interestingly, James will restate that same idea in chapter 4, in the same context where he uses the term “*double-minded*.” This is how he puts it there,

“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” (James 4:4)

In other words, you don’t get to serve multiple masters. Sooner or later they are going to conflict and you will have to choose which one gets to receive your loyalty. You’ll love the one and despise the other. You’ll treat one as friend and the other as enemy as it relates to your dreams and pursuits. And I think that’s the kind of doubter that James has in mind in chapter 1. It’s the “*double-minded*” individual, the one with split loyalties.

And what does that person look like in practice? Like someone who is blown back and forth by the waves of their circumstances. They are unstable. They have one foot in one boat and one foot in another. It's not that they never come to God for help, it's that their posture toward God is undecided. It lacks conviction. They don't really know if they really believe that God is a giving God, but they'll ask and hedge their bets just in case and in the meantime they'll pursue other options too. Or they are not really sure if they believe that God is wise. They want to hear His wisdom and then decide if it meets with their approval. They ask without the intention of obeying. That's the kind of doubter that James has in mind. The doubter "whose allegiance wavers, not one tormented by speculative intellectual questionings".¹⁴ The doubter who's trying to have it both ways. I'm not sure I can sum it up better than Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell have:

"...these are people who are unwilling to let go of the world and truly follow Christ, torn between sin and obedience, reluctant to let go of the pleasures of the world for the sake of discipleship. This description hits close to home in an age of nominal Christians who attend church from time to time, perhaps even regularly, but who refuse to let God interfere with their daily lives and goals."¹⁵

And "*that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord*", says James.

So, in sum, if I were trying to identify what kind of doubter James has in mind here, I would say it's not the kind of person who has genuine questions about God and His ways that surface from time to time, but it is the kind of person who fits one of two patterns of asking. On the one hand, there is the person who asks, but doubts the character of the one who is asked. They are not really convinced that He is by nature the giving God who loves to give to those who ask. They ask without conviction about His character. They doubt the Lord's character. And, on the other hand, it's the kind of person who may genuinely believe that God will give wisdom generously, but asks without the settled conviction that the answer He gives is the best course of action. They ask God because they want to compare notes with the world. They may follow God's wisdom, but they want to see it first before they lay their yes on the table. They doubt the Lord's wisdom.

Do either of those kinds of people describe you? Then what is the solution? In both cases the solution is the Gospel. You must believe the Gospel. To those of you who doubt the generous character of God and therefore don't ask or don't ask with expectation, you must remember the ultimate depiction of His generosity toward you. It was the giving of His Son. The Father sent the Son to earth to be offered up as an atoning sacrifice for your sin. The Son willingly came and was obedient to death, even death on a cross, where He bore our sin and the wrath of God that sinners like us deserved to bear. We didn't deserve that. We didn't even ask for that. It was freely orchestrated and given by the Triune God for everyone who would believe. The cross proves that God is generous. And the resurrection proves that complete satisfaction for sin was made when Christ died as our substitute on that cross. There could be no greater demonstration of love and generosity than that. For if we would turn from our sins and trust in Christ to save us through His work on our behalf, then we are forgiven our sins, brought into a right relationship with God, and given eternal life with Him. Seriously! It's not too good to be true! Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. So call upon Him. Turn from your sin. Trust in Christ alone as your only hope in life and in death. He will save you.

And if you have experienced that, then listen to the reminder that Paul gave to the Romans.

"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

What's Paul saying there? He's saying that when we remember the Gospel—the good news of what Christ has accomplished to make things right for sinners like us—then our doubts about His generosity begin to evaporate. How can we believe that the same God who was willing to send His very own Son to die in our place, would then, once we were purchased by His blood, leave us hanging and get stingy with His gift of wisdom? That just

doesn't make sense. If I was willing to give you a million dollars, do you think I would be unwilling to let you share a meal at my table. Of course not! The extravagant gift makes the miniscule one seem like a given.

And so it is with wisdom. God is a giver. Don't doubt His generous nature when you ask for wisdom. That's nothing for Him. And if you ever doubt, then remember the gift of Jesus. Remember the Gospel. *"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* Remember your Savior, your Great High Priest who is seated at the right hand of the Father interceding for you, pulling for you.

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-16)

These are the kinds of Gospel realities that shape the way we ask for wisdom. These are the kinds of Gospel realities that remove all doubt about God's character when we come to Him for wisdom.

But what about for those people whose doubt is expressed in your "split loyalties"? You come and ask for wisdom, but you are trying to keep one foot in the kingdom and one foot in the world. You ask but you haven't really settled if you really want to obey God's answer. What's the only hope for you? That same Gospel. When you consider all that God has done in Christ for your salvation, then why would you ever doubt that God had your absolute best interests at heart. Yes, there are times where God's ways don't make sense to us. There is wisdom we encounter in His Word that seems so counter to the world and the politics of the day. But the world is not your friend. It will chew you up and spit you out. But God, in Christ, brings you into the family. You have a loving Father who stands behind every answered prayer. Has the work of Christ not demonstrated that He has our best interests at heart, even before we ask? Do we really believe then that He who arranged all history to bring us Christ, somehow doesn't know how to manage our lives and give us appropriate wisdom?

In that same passage where Jesus tells us to pray in words that are reminiscent of James' words here, Jesus states this:

"Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:9-11)

Now take those words and apply them more narrowly to the sincere prayer offered up to God in faith and for wisdom. If you are His child now, in Christ, then you should expect always for Him to give us what is appropriate when we ask of Him. That's not to say that it will always feel appropriate in the moment. But every parent knows that sometimes what our children want and what they need (and, therefore, what the parent gives) are two different things. The child's desire is rooted in foolishness. The parent's response and gift is rooted in love, even if the child is too immature to recognize it yet. *"If you then, who are evil,"* Jesus says, *"know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"* And the thing that most compellingly proves to us that He has our best interest at heart is the Gospel. We look at what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have orchestrated for our salvation and we keep looking at it until we can't escape the conclusion that God is good. All the time. And all the time, God is good.

With that conviction in hand, we can let go of our split allegiance and even before we ask for wisdom, believe that the wisdom God has for us is what is best for us. We put our yes on the table. And we ask for wisdom. And God gives it, because, as James will say later in the chapter, *"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). He is not double-minded, so we shouldn't be when we come for wisdom. He's not unstable, so we

can be settled on His answer even before He gives it. He has our best interests at heart as Christ's work has proven once for all, so we can trust Him. For as long as you are hedging your bets—vacillating on the waves between the shores of two masters—you should not expect Him to answer your prayers for wisdom.

I'll leave you with these questions and insights from J. A. Motyer that I believe get us to the heart of our text this morning:

“Is our heart *one* with God (not ‘right with God’, for that has been eternally secured for us by Christ), without any division of loyalty? And a second question follows: are we proving the reality of that sole allegiance to God in the place of prayer—not in the public place of confrontation with the world (that will come later), but in the secret place of prayer? For out of this will emerge that wisdom which unifies the personality and holds us on a steady course in the storm.”¹⁶

Let's pray...

¹ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 39-40.

² Barnabas Piper, *Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt Is Not the Enemy of Faith* (The Good Book Company, 2020), 74.

³ Frederick Buechner wrote, “‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief’ is the best any of us can do really, but thank God it is enough.” Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (HarperCollins, 1985), 35.

⁴ N. D. Wilson, from the “Foreword” in Barnabas Piper, *Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt Is Not the Enemy of Faith* (The Good Book Company, 2020), 11.

⁵ “Abraham becomes the prime biblical example of faith (see esp. Ro 4:20; Heb 11:8–10), and he clearly at times doubted God's promises. Still, over the years he displayed far more trust than doubt in God. It is this sort of overall integrity of faith throughout life that God is looking for in his followers.” Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 52 n. 47.

⁶ Robert L. Plummer, “James,” in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 231. Similarly, “James does not demand that a believer never question what God gives them, lest their faith prove null and void. Rather, given the context, he maintains that we should not doubt the character of God as one who gives unflinchingly. To doubt his character can also imply that a person is unwilling to trust God with their life or that they do not believe that he is who he claims to be.” Blomberg and Kamell, 52.

⁷ Plummer, 232.

⁸ Sam Allberry, *James for You* (Good Book Company, 2015), 22.

⁹ “In itself [the word ‘doubt’] does not necessarily have a bad meaning. It means ‘to know how to decide as between alternative interpretations’ (Mt. 16:3) or ‘to argue/discuss the respective merits of two points of view’ (Acts 11:2); or ‘to be hesitant how to decide a matter’ (Rom. 14:23). Basically the thought is that of making up one's mind between alternatives. But then the bad meaning come in: it is to be a person in two minds, one whose allegiance is not committed either way.” Motyer, 40.

¹⁰ “James calls this double-minded person ‘unstable’ (ἀκατάστατος), a word that some argue has overtones of rebellion but probably has more to do with unsteadiness. A double-minded person is ‘unstable, restless, [or] vacillating.’ Such people may not be willfully rebellious, but they are often unwilling to commit to anything and thus prove unreliable. One cannot necessarily depend on them. The last phrase, ‘in all their ways’ (ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτοῦ), shows them to be consistently inconsistent throughout their lives.” Blomberg and Kamell, 54.

¹¹ Motyer, 40.

¹² James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1916), 143.

¹³ Allberry, 22.

¹⁴ Ropes, 140.

¹⁵ Blomberg and Kamell, 54.

¹⁶ Motyer, 42.