

“When You Need Wisdom (Part 2)” – 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 your Bible and meet me in James, chapter 1...

We are going to look again at the passage we considered last week. As usual we are taking our time on the introduction of the book so we can understand the contents that are coming later. I promise, I fully anticipate us picking up the pace eventually. Just not this week. And probably not the next. In any case, let's do the most important thing and read the text. I'll begin reading in verse 5 and I invite you to follow along with me in your own Bible. 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...

So last week we spent our time on verse 5 and the wonderful commitment we find there...

The Commitment: *Ask and You Will Receive*

In a very real sense, the commitment expressed in verse 5 is a restatement of Jesus' teaching elsewhere on prayer, more narrowly defined to the topic of wisdom. In the now famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the radical promise,

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

James' words are no less radical, but they are more limited in their focus. Ask for wisdom and God will give it. What a wonderful assurance. And the foundation of it is the wonderful God who has committed Himself to its fulfillment, which was our focus last week. James reminds us that our God is “the giving God,” the God “*who gives generously to all without reproach*” (James 1:5). The God who knows everything about us and still assures the approaching sinner “*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out*” (John 6:37). What a God! And His commitments flow from His character. His character is unchanging, so those commitments are equally certain.

Therefore, when James says, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God...and it will be given*”, we can take that promise to the bank. So to speak. Maybe not to a literal bank to cash in on your monetary and worldly aspirations. And that leads us to the first of several clarifications I'd like to consider with you today...

Clarification:

What He's Not Saying and What He Is Saying

Just like Jesus' promise in the Sermon on the Mount, James' words here can easily be misunderstood and misconstrued. When James says that "*it will be given*" it begs the question of what will be given. The answer is: wisdom. But "*wisdom*" can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. And a lot of people's assumed connotations when they hear the word are not very compatible with the biblical conception of wisdom.

For example, many of us hear the promise of verse 5 and conclude that we are being given a way to fill in the gaps of our knowledge about our future. There are some uncertainties looming in our life, we desire the answers, we come upon verse 5, and we conclude that God will answer all those curiosities that are presently stunting our decision making.

But then what happens? We ask God for "*wisdom*," which we equate with "answers," and God doesn't give us what we want. The result usually follows one of two tracks: we get mad at God for failing us or we conclude that we must be doing it wrong (i.e., doing the "asking" wrong). Related to the first of these reactions, God has only failed us if our definition of "*wisdom*" is God's definition. I would argue, in this case, it's not. We have adopted a worldly definition without calibrating it to the Bible's own teaching on the matter. Yes, God has promised to provide us "*wisdom*," but He has *not* promised us all the answers we crave to make decisions within the range of our comfort levels. "There is a difference between receiving wisdom and feeling wise", as Sam Allberry points out.

"James is not saying that the moment we come to God, earnestly seeking his wisdom and guidance, we will experience a sudden flash of insight and feel as though we know exactly what we need to do....It may well be that when we pray for wisdom, we feel none the wiser for having done so. But that is not the same as saying we have not received wisdom. Verse 5 is a promise. When we ask with the sincerity of heart that James urges, 'it will be given'. This means that God's wisdom will direct us in the decisions we then go on to make. We may not feel any more confident, but God will protect us from folly. Whether or not we feel or perceive it at the time, God will have given us wisdom."¹

Yet, having said that, when we equate wisdom to answers, we may end up feeling shortchanged when we "*ask God*" and He doesn't spell out the particulars we seek to our satisfaction. We feel jipped because the path forward is still laced with uncertainties. But in this case the failure is not on God's part to answer, but on our part to adopt a biblically informed view of wisdom.

Related to the second of the reactions I mentioned—maybe I didn't pray right—it's the condition of verse 6 that trips us up. We'll unpack that later, but James essentially states that when we make our request to God we must do so in faith. But if we begin with the wrong definition of wisdom and God doesn't give us the answers we seek, then there's a chance we will chalk up the reason to some defect in our faith. There is a certain kind of person who will then put all kinds of undue pressure on themselves because God's silence on some matter of curiosity must indicate, they conclude, that they must not have prayed with enough faith. But, again, the problem may not be your degree of faith, but your definition of wisdom.

So let me state it clearly—when God promises wisdom, He is not promising to answer all your questions. And since He usually doesn't provide us with complete clarity on the future, we cannot assume that our decision making will always be a breeze. But what we can assume is that God will provide us access to "the practical knowledge and understanding we need to endure our trials when we ask the God whom we know gives without [reproach]." We can assume that He will give us "the ability to discern how he would have us live" here and now.² And this, brothers and sisters, is biblical wisdom.

As Craig Blomberg explains, “In the Bible in general, wisdom does not equate with mere knowledge or intelligence but adds the practical element of living out what one believes, and James holds true to that tradition.”³ True wisdom, from a biblical point of view, cannot be possessed apart from “allegiance to God and moral living.”⁴ This is why at the heart of the Bible’s wisdom literature, we read,

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”
(Proverbs 9:10; cf. 1:7; Psalm 111:10)

And in the New Testament we find the authors, especially Matthew and John, personifying Jesus as wisdom (see, e.g., Matt. 11-12 and John 1).⁵ True wisdom cannot be detached from Him. “Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of the wisdom of God, and if we know him, we receive and are changed by his wisdom.”⁶ So I ask you, do you know Him? Not *about* Him. Do you know *Him*?

As with wisdom, there are different ways to use the term “knowledge.” You can know of someone intellectually. You can spout off the facts and details about that person’s life and work. But that’s not the same thing as knowing the person personally, is it? The same is true when the Someone is the Lord Jesus. You can know lots about Him intellectually. You can tell me the facts about His life. You can even be convinced in your heart that they actually happened and that He actually exists. But if that’s where it stops, then your knowledge of Him is, at least in one sense, to put it bluntly, demonic. But don’t take my word for it. Listen to James:

“You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19)

Demons don’t possess saving faith. But they possess knowledge of God. They believe in God on an intellectual level. But they don’t have a right relationship with God. And neither do you if your belief stops there. Saving faith is more than just assenting to the facts of who Christ is and what He has done. It’s trust in His person and work as the sole basis of your salvation. It’s arriving at that place where your heart’s cry is “My only hope in life and death is You, Jesus!” That’s the disposition of saving faith. That’s the onset of a personal and right relationship with Jesus. Is that what you possess by grace, through faith, now?

Jesus came and died on the cross because God loved you and this was the way for your sins to be forgiven. God is holy and just. He will not ignore sin. Justice must be served. But God made a way for you to be forgiven and saved on the cross, where Jesus hung and died, becoming a curse in the place of sinners like you. What happened on the cross was a substitution. His life for ours. Though He had never sinned, He willingly took our place and died the death that we deserved so that we could be freely given the life that He deserved. That’s what was happening on the cross. And in this way God shows Himself to be both the “*just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*” (Rom. 3:26). Amen! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

But the faith by which we received the free benefits of Christ’s work—His life, death, and resurrection—is not just a belief that these things happened. It’s a trusting in Jesus to save you through His work. That is the way of salvation. And when we turn from sin and trust in Him, we come into fellowship with the Lord. Right relationship. All is forgiven. All His wrath and condemnation are removed. That is really good news. That is the Gospel. So trust in Christ. Ask Him to save you. Why not now? He will. All you need is need. Bring it to Him and He will change your life forever.

And what does this have to do with wisdom? That depends on who you ask. If you ask the world, they’ll say it has the look of foolishness. Listen to these words from the apostle Paul...

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... And because of [God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,³¹ so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 30-31)

I hope that is your boast. It's the boast of wisdom. Why? Because Christ Jesus "*became to us wisdom from God*" (1 Cor. 1:31). You'll never possess true wisdom until you have a personal relationship with the one Paul calls the very "*wisdom of God*" (1:24). So, again, we must conclude that true wisdom cannot be detached from Him.

This is one of the reasons it is a mistake to equate knowledge with wisdom. There are lots of smart people in this world—people who have garnered much success and more degrees than Fahrenheit—who, from God's perspective, are utter fools. As King David reminds us in the psalms, "*The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'*", but those who truly possess understanding are those "*who seek after God*" (Psalm 53:1-2; cf. Psalm 14). Here again Blomberg's comments are on point:

"James's use of 'wisdom' (v. 5) gives the lie to so many worldly definitions of the concept, both ancient and modern. Not a mere intelligence quotient, accumulation of knowledge, critical acumen, practical expertise, or life experience, wisdom from a biblical perspective begins with following the God who has now revealed himself in Jesus Christ. It then proceeds with godly living. A person who does these things is truly wise, whether any of the commonly held attributes of wisdom are present or not. Conversely, the smartest, most skillful and critically honed person who rejects the Lordship of Jesus cannot be said to be wise in the fullest sense of the word."⁷

Still, it would be wrong to conclude that just because someone identifies as a Christian that they possess wisdom. I've seen lots of worldly counsel thrown around in church settings, even from people considered to be leaders. Ask yourself, who would be a better candidate for leadership on a church committee, (a) the person who has an established record of success in the business world or (b) the person working at a fast-food drive-through on Broadway? I know what most people would say. But the right answer is (c) not enough information. It could be either individual. The most important question has yet to be asked—do person (a) and person (b) fear the Lord?

Trust me, I've seen many self-professing Christians, who are experts in their field, who show themselves to be fools through their neglect of God's Word and selective application of its instruction. They seem to think they know better than God. And God won't stand for that. As Jesus said, "*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled*" (Matt. 23:12). And James will soon say, "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*" (James 4:6), but we are getting ahead of ourselves. The point is simply that knowledge is not the same as wisdom. It's not enough to be wise in your own eyes. As Proverbs says,

"*Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.*" (Proverbs 26:12; cf. Isaiah 5:21)

Therefore,

"*Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.*" (Proverbs 3:7)

So do you possess wisdom? The wisest among us would likely say that they don't possess the wisdom they ought. They are still lacking in wisdom. And James says, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God...and it will be given*" (1:5).

Notice though that the text doesn't say *when* God will provide us wisdom. It just says He will. And we all know by now His timing is not always ours. Therefore, the Christian life can often feel like a waiting life. We will often find ourselves "*living through those moments when you do not understand what God is doing and you have no power to change your circumstances for the better.*" In other words, life can be really hard. And this is, at least in part, because waiting is hard. As Paul David Tripp points out,

“So much of our daily comfort comes from the fact that we are able to make sense of our circumstances. Sensible things usually aren’t so difficult to deal with. Being able to wrap our minds around a situation makes us feel as if we can control it, or at least that control is possible. We don’t tend to get as anxious about things that we think can be understood and altered.

We all want life to make sense, and we want it to yield to our efforts to improve it. These desires are not bad in themselves, but the struggle comes when these desires are not met, forcing us to wait. The struggle is really what it is all about. To understand your struggle with waiting, you must begin here: waiting will always reveal the true character of your heart.

Sometimes, the trial of waiting exposes a lack of *saving* faith in someone who was behaving culturally Christian but had not come to trust God for salvation. But among those who truly have been saved, waiting in the face of challenging circumstances exposes our *level* of faith, our capacity to truly leave things up to God, our ability to rest in God and God alone.”⁸

Ouch! But He’s not wrong. When we ask God for wisdom and He says wait, do we rest in the truths that James revealed in verse 5. Do we think, “Well, I don’t really want to wait, but I know you are a giving God and you are not disappointed in me asking for wisdom. I know that you have promised and so wisdom is coming because you give generously to all without reproach.” That’s faith. But is that your usual response when God has us wait for wisdom? “When forced to wait, we may find that what has given us peace and rest is not a solid, functional confidence in God’s presence, promises, power, wisdom, and love”, but instead our peace seems to really be tethered to “our ability to figure life out and our seeming power to control our circumstances, whether through intelligence, determination, prosperity, or something else.”⁹ Clearly Tripp is right, “Waiting will always reveal where you have placed your hope” and “Your heart is always exposed by the *way* you wait.”¹⁰

So what are we to make of the difficulty of our waiting? We are to make of it what James said at the beginning of this letter.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

Don’t forget the previous sermons. Waiting tests the faith because waiting forces us to walk by faith and not by sight. If God has promised wisdom and yet makes us wait a little longer for it, then we can rest in knowing He has His reasons and at least one of those reasons is that He desires to work in us in the waiting. Do you believe that? To the degree that you do you will begin to see waiting as God’s grace to you. “Waiting is about what you will become *as* you wait.”¹¹ That’s the beautiful implication of those opening verses. “Waiting is about understanding that you and I desperately need to change, and that waiting is a powerful tool of personal change.”¹² So if we knew what God was up to in our waiting, my suspicion is we would want Him to make us wait.

But here’s the thing. When God says wait, we can still wait productively. And if you find yourself really struggling because God has put you in a season of waiting, let me recommend that Paul David Tripp book I quoted from earlier. It called *Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad*. The reason you may find that resource helpful is because he dedicates an entire chapter on learning to wait well. He draws together much of what the Bible says about why God may ask us to wait. And then on the backend of that chapter he offers 7 ways that we can wait productively. They are so good and I can’t do them justice this morning, but let me just reproduce them, offer a quick overview, and focus especially on how they relate to these opening verses in James. “So what does it look like to wait in a way that makes you a participant in what God is doing rather than someone who struggles against it?”¹³

1. Remind Yourself You Are Not Alone in the Wait.

God does not have some grudge against you. You are not the only one who God has made to wait. He is not singling you out. Go back and read Hebrews 11. Be reminded of all those men and women from the Old Testament who God called to walk by faith and not by sight, which is to say those whom God called to wait on the fulfillment of His promise. You may be surprised just how often the tension in their stories is created by those seasons of waiting. But God didn't leave them hanging. He gave them wisdom while they waited. And He gave them wisdom to wait on more wisdom. It's hard to read those stories openly and not come away with the conclusion that "waiting is not an interruption to God's plan. It *is* his plan." And the glorious good news is that while they waited, God was with them. He's not like the busy doctor whose plate is so full that you have to wait for an appointment before He will tend to you. "No, God is near and he provides for you all that you need to be able to wait."¹⁴

2. Realize That Waiting Is Active.

It's not a waste of your time. Tripp writes,

"The sort of waiting to which we are called as Christians is not inactivity. It is very positive, purposeful, and spiritual. To be called to wait is to be called to the activity of remembering: remembering who I am and who God is. To be called to wait is to be called to the activity of worship: worshiping God for his presence, wisdom, power, love, and grace. To be called to wait is to be called to the activity of serving: looking for ways to lovingly assist and encourage others who are also being called to wait. To be called to wait is to be called to the activity of praying; confessing the struggles of my heart and seeking the grace of the God who has called me to wait. We must rethink waiting, and remind ourselves that waiting is itself a call to action."¹⁵

That's what you call "active waiting." Waiting is not a call to paralysis and stagnation. It's a call to action. Just a different kind of action.

3. Celebrate How Little Control You Have.

Do you realize that waiting can actually be a relief? Why? "Because your constant striving to be a little god over some corner of creation is draining and exhausting" and waiting reminds us that we are not God and our little world is in far more capable hands.¹⁶ I don't have to be God. He's been doing it eternally, so I'm pretty sure He doesn't need someone like me telling Him how to God. Far better for me to acknowledge those God-given responsibilities He has entrusted to me without pretending that I need or possess absolute sovereignty in any area of my life. I know the kind of man He has called me to be since that is revealed in His Word. That's my job description. And thankfully I am not called to do His.

4. Celebrate God's Commitment to His Work of Grace.

In other words, go back and reflect on James 1:2-4. Even if it doesn't make sense to me now, my circumstances can actually demonstrate that God has not forsaken His gracious work in my life. And He hasn't in your life either. "He simply loves you too much to exchange temporary gratification for eternal glory!" Praise Him!

5. Let Your Waiting Strengthen Your Faith.

That's basically what James said in verse 4—"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Do that and I promise you will not ever want to trade the person you become on the other side of the wait for the person you were at the onset.

6. Count Your Blessings.

Are you going to let grumbling and complaining hijack those seasons of waiting? Tripp wisely points out what we all know from experience, namely, that “waiting often becomes for us an exercise in reminding ourselves of what we don’t have. How much better, how much more fruitful, how much more joyful, to take waiting as an opportunity to recount the many, many good things in our lives that we have been given—things we could have never earned, achieved, or deserved.” You might say, far better for us in that trial of waiting to “*count it all joy*” because we know that God is working in our lives something good (1:2-3).

And, finally...

7. Long for Eternity.

One last quote from Tripp:

“Waiting is meant to remind you that you live ‘between the already and the not yet.’ Yes, there are many, many things for which to be thankful in this life, but this place is not your final home. You are in a temporary dwelling in a temporary location. In everything you experience here, there is one aspect or another that can remind you this is not home. The hardship of your present world speaks clearly: this is not the final destination. Waiting is meant to produce in you a God-honoring dissatisfaction with the status quo. Waiting is meant to make you hungry, to produce in you a longing. For what? To be home—home with your Lord forever, home where sin is no more, home in a world that has been made completely new. As you wait, keep telling yourself, ‘This is not my final destination.’ ...tell yourself again and again: *Waiting is not just about what I get at the end of the wait, but about who I become as I wait.*”¹⁷

So if you are anything like me and you find waiting difficult and trying, something that tests your faith, then know that it was for precisely times like this that James 1 was written. God is at work. He is with you. He has begun a work that He is faithful to complete. And He has promised wisdom. So ask. You may have to wait on some insight that you need to sort out the problem you are facing. But He’s given you grace for the day and wise counsel into who He wants you to be today. That’s not a mystery. It’s revealed in this book, the Bible. Maybe it’s time to pick it up. And when you do, ask God to give you wisdom as you read it. He’s a giving God. He’s promised to respond with the gift of wisdom.

But just as our text this morning doesn’t say *when* God will give us the wisdom we need, it also doesn’t specify *how* God provides us wisdom. It just states that He will. His means can be multifaceted. He can use our circumstances. He can use the counsel of other godly individuals. It can be books, like the one I’ve drawn heavily from this morning. He can work on our hearts to constrain us from or compel us toward certain ends. But we dare not trust any of these subjective means alone when God has given us access to His objective Word. Don’t be lazy. Don’t just ask God for wisdom and neglect to mine the treasure trove of wisdom God has already given you in His Word.

My kids regularly ask me to give them something to eat or drink and my first thought is often “I already did. It’s called the refrigerator and pantry!” They’re not babies anymore. They range from 8 to 14 and have been blessed with healthy and functioning minds and bodies. But instead of accessing what I have provided, they call to me from the comfort of the couch as though their hunger and thirst for a snack is the result of my neglect. It’s not. It’s their neglect, their laziness, that’s to blame. Mom and dad have the receipts to prove that we put in the work to provide them something to eat and drink. They just have to get off their hindquarters and pick it up.

Here’s the point. There is an adult version of this phenomena that predictably plays out when many of us are hungering and thirsting for wisdom. God may have provided more wisdom than you realize, you’ve just not picked it up. Could it be that, at the end of the day, you don’t just want wisdom, you want wisdom packaged in

your preferred way of consumption? You want wisdom that requires little to no effort on your part. But God has never promised that. He promised wisdom. The packaging of that gift is His prerogative. But we never have to wonder the primary source of His wisdom to us. It is His Word. And we must learn to always test the subjective sense of God's leading against the objective source of His Word. The former will never contradict the latter. But the latter can help confirm the former.

With that we will have to close things out today. We have considered the commitment of verse 5 and clarified some potential misunderstandings. It remains for us to consider the condition of verse 6 and clarify how it does and does not relate to the commitment of verse 5. That, Lord willing, is what I hope to explore with you next week.

Let's pray...

¹ Sam Allberry, *James for You* (Good Book Company, 2015), 23-24.

² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 50-51. "This sense is thoroughly Jewish, and there is a consistent tradition that it comes only from the Lord; cf. Pr 2:6; 8:22-31; 9:10; Sir 1:1; 24:23; 39:5-6; 51:17; Wis 8:21; 9:6. Martin (James, 17) points out that wisdom differs from intelligence in that it has both moral and experiential overtones. Proverbs 1:7 implies 'devotion to Yahweh and a resolve to walk in the ways of his law' as the source and definition of wisdom." *Ibid.*, 50 n. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works* (PW; Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1991), 28.

⁷ Blomberg and Kamell, 62.

⁸ Paul David Tripp, *Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2011), 114-115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² *Ibid.* These are just a few insights as to why God might have us wait, but Tripp outlines several others from God's word in this same chapter.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 118. The following points are drawn from pages 118-123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122-123.