

Wisdom

James 1:5-8

It's not hard to define wisdom, nor to distinguish it from mere knowledge. Knowledge, by itself, "puffs up," as we read in 1 Corinthians 8:1. That is, knowledge without love. This is what happens without love, as Paul continues,

1Cor. 8:2 "And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know."

Similarly,

1 Cor. 13:2 "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

So the goal of our faith, the goal of our study of God's word is not mere knowledge. The goal is not merely knowledge. But rather, that goal is wisdom. Wisdom refers to what you do with knowledge, how you apply it to all the everyday details of your own life.

It's not hard to see the evidence of that difference between knowledge and wisdom in many people. I have certainly known a number of people who were obviously book smart, very highly educated, very high intelligence or IQ. They were smart. And sometimes, not very wise. They made bad decisions. They made a mess of life and failed in life's most important relationships. So "smart" doesn't necessarily mean successful! Or even prosperous.

I've also known a number of people who weren't necessarily very intelligent, in an academic kind of way, not highly educated, maybe just a high school education. Maybe less. But when it

came to knowing how to live, how to make good decisions, how to build healthy relationships, even how to make money and be successful in a professional sort of way, they were obviously successful! That's what wisdom does.

So we come this morning to a text about wisdom, and James, as much as or even more than any other New Testament book, is a book about wisdom. In the Old Testament, the preeminent book of wisdom is, of course, the Proverbs, but James sets out to write a comparable book of wisdom for us in the New Testament. In chapter 3, he gives us a much more detailed explanation of that wisdom,

James 3:13 "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy."

He introduces that subject of wisdom to us in our text this morning, with these encouraging words,

v.5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

That is quite an abrupt transition from last week, so I want to take the time this morning to further define wisdom before we go any further.

I. THE DEFINITION OF WISDOM.

Last week, if you remember, was about the blessing of

endurance. Perseverance. Steadfastness. I made reference to all those English words last week, noting the Greek is often also translated patience. The point of James is endurance, however. Perseverance, even in the midst of the trials and troubles of this world.

v.2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

To accomplish that great goal, however, that you may be perfect and complete, mature, as I expressed it last week, to gain that maturity, you need first to gain wisdom. So we need to define what it is you want to gain. I’ll start with the most basic definition. Wisdom is...

A. The practical application of knowledge.

The Bible isn’t critical of knowledge, not true knowledge, godly knowledge. The Bible is certainly not critical of the knowledge of God, quite the opposite, in fact. Even more broadly, we all need knowledge, but not “mere” knowledge, the sort of knowledge that is isolated from the practical realities of life. So wisdom is best understood in this way, as the application of knowledge. Using what you know in useful, practical ways.

We could use the words “prudent.” Or “sensible.” For example,

Mat. 7:24 “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: 25 and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.”

Wisdom means you build your house on a foundation of rock!

As opposed to those who build their houses in the sand!

Or the exhortation of,

Eph. 5:15 “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.”

You are to walk circumspectly. Discreetly, cautious, prudent, guarded, careful, vigilant. Wisdom refers to all those things. And with reference to the Proverbs, we read things like this,

Prov. 4:5 “Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. 6 Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; Love her, and she will keep you. 7 Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. 8 Exalt her, and she will promote you; She will bring you honor, when you embrace her. 9 She will place on your head an ornament of grace; A crown of glory she will deliver to you.” 10 Hear, my son, and receive my sayings, And the years of your life will be many. 11 I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths. 12 When you walk, your steps will not be hindered, And when you run, you will not stumble. 13 Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go; Keep her, for she is your life.”

That’s the definition of wisdom, the practical application of knowledge. But don’t miss this, either,

Prov. 9:10 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

Thus, if you want to define wisdom, you have to include this central idea God is wisdom. But let me be very clear here, that this wisdom is not merely the practice of common sense. This

wisdom isn't the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin or that which might be found in the Farmer's Almanac. The wisdom to which James refers, the wisdom which I preach to you this morning, is...

B. The practical application of the fear of God.

In other words, wisdom cannot, must not, be separated from the God of all wisdom. As the Proverbs proclaim so plainly,

Prov. 9:10 "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

Thus wisdom is living out the knowledge of God. Wisdom is putting into practice what it means to give honor and glory to God. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." That whole book of Proverbs begins with these words,

Prov. 1:1 "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: 2 To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding, 3 To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; 4 To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion—5 A wise man will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, 6 To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles. 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction."

Plainly and clearly, wisdom must begin with the fear of God, with the willingness to reverence and honor the one true and living God. True knowledge must begin with the knowledge of God! Thus, as James makes so plain in our text, God is...

II. THE SOURCE OF WISDOM.

v.5

Where do we get wisdom? What is the source of it? God

himself is. God himself is wisdom, it is an essential aspect of his glory. As we read in our shorter catechism definition of God, question 4, "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." So God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable—in his wisdom! That is his glory.

A. God is wisdom in the glory of himself.

Scripture even uses wisdom as the personification of himself, with particular reference, I believe, to Jesus.

Prov. 9:1 "Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; 2 She has slaughtered her meat, She has mixed her wine, She has also furnished her table. 3 She has sent out her maidens, She cries out from the highest places of the city, 4 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 5 "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Forsake foolishness and live, And go in the way of understanding."

So God himself speaks to us. Jesus speaks to us. Wisdom speaks to us. "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed." Ultimately, that is nothing less than the invitation of the gospel itself. It is the invitation to live, to receive eternal life. It is the invitation to believe in Jesus and to trust in him for the forgiveness of sins.

In other words, wisdom is not just about how you should live. Rather, wisdom is all about how you should glorify God as you live. Wisdom is all about how you should honor God, how you should serve him, how you should worship him. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." God himself is wisdom. And, therefore,

B. God gives wisdom to those who ask.

And that is obviously what this text is actually all about.

v.5

All of us lack wisdom, of course. None of us are perfect and complete in the exercise of wisdom. We are not infinite in wisdom, but very, very finite. Limited. Lacking. So we must ask for the wisdom which we do not have! And God gives it to us!

This asking must be earnest and fervent. The pursuit of wisdom must be done with diligence and effort, commitment and devotion. So again, the Proverbs.

Prov. 2:1 “My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, 2 So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; 3 Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, 4 If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; 5 Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. 6 For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

Seek wisdom as you would silver! Search for wisdom as you would look for hidden treasure. You get the idea. It’s not a mechanical transaction, but rather a description of life and death. And it isn’t some sort of mystical or mysterious pursuit. For wisdom is to be found in God’s words, and if you ask God for wisdom, as you should do, then pursue his answer in that which he has already revealed in his Word! So ask God for wisdom, then search the Scriptures to find it!

You don’t need to go to college. You don’t need to read a book. You don’t need to ask someone else for help. You don’t need to be particularly smart, as the world defines that. You don’t need to be a certain age. Just search the Scriptures. God is the source of wisdom, and “gives to all liberally,” verse 5. Freely, without restraint or constraint. You see, God is a liberal! He gives

liberally to all who ask. Generously, the ESV and NASB translate it.

And God gives “without reproach.” Without finding fault. There is no rebuke, no criticism, no condemnation, no reviling. He just gives wisdom fully and freely. And he calls us to ask for it. So ask God for wisdom, then search the Scriptures to find it!

v.6 “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting.”

Thus we see that,

III. THE POSSESSION OF WISDOM REQUIRES TRUE FAITH.

This wisdom not something that is separate from faith. These words of James are not intended just as good counsel, they are given to Christians, to believers, as we saw in verse 1. They are written “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” In other words, to the whole church.

So ask for wisdom, you believers! Ask for wisdom, you who trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. Ask in faith. You cannot escape,

A. The necessity of true faith.

Now, let me be sure you understand the meaning of the word faith here. It is not a reference to some sort of emotion, or some ecstatic experience. This is not some sort of reference to the name-it-and-claim-it notion of the so-called Word of Faith movement. This is not a reference to some sort of energy produced by your faith that accomplishes whatever it is you want. The idea is much simpler. Faith means to believe that what God has said is true. Faith is to believe that what God has revealed in the Bible is true. Faith is to believe that God himself is true, as he has revealed himself in the Bible. And faith is to trust that what

God has revealed, the wisdom which God has revealed, is sufficient. Faith is to trust God, in this sense, that you will rely upon him for wisdom and not upon yourself.

Prov. 3:5 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil.”

That’s the true faith by which we come to possess wisdom.

v.5 “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But let him ask in faith...”

So it is we are called to exercise such faith, to believe! We read in,

Heb. 11:6 “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

Then James continues,

v.6 “...with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

I would define doubting in the context of how I just described faith. Doubting here means doubting the truth of God. It means doubting the reliability of the revelation of God. It means doubting God himself. Thus these doubts are really indicative of the absence of faith, and so we see,

B. The instability of the faithless.

If you don’t believe God is true, if you don’t believe his revealed word is true, then the end of verse 6 will accurately define your condition. The words describe the instability of such faithlessness, for you have no foundation of truth upon which to

establish your life.

v.6 “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

In other words, your instability will unmanageable, it will be out of control—most especially out of your control. You will be thrown about like the waves of the ocean, tossed by the wind with nothing to tie you down, no moorings to define truth and reality. And I hope you see just how that condition brings about the very opposite of wisdom. I hope you can sense from James’ words just how dangerous and even hopeless that condition is. “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

Finally, we see that James gives a warning to the faithfulness, warning them of foolishness.

C. The foolishness of the faithless.

v.7-8

God is not a magic genie. He is not a sort of cosmic Santa Claus, giving people whatever it is they might ask for. If you are faithless, if you do not believe in God, and I do mean this as a warning, if you do not trust God with the faith to believe his word to be true, then you ought not think that you will receive anything from the Lord. You have no right to expect anything from God. You stand condemned as a hypocrite, “a double-minded man.”

And “unstable in all his ways.” That really means restless, or even unruly. Literally it means NOT to be set in order; in other words, disorderly. Wanting the benefits of religion, wanting the blessings of God, but not believing that God himself is true. Nothing can be more unstable than that!

There is a solution to that, however.

James 4:7 “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

It is a call to repentance, repentance for your unbelief, repentance for your hypocrisy, for the double-mindedness by which you are unwilling to believe in God and trust him to be true, but you still want the blessings he might offer to those who do believe! To those, James would declare the need for repentance in no uncertain terms, “Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”

So let me go back to the encouragement James gives to those who will believe, those who do trust God. And let me go back even to the focus last week, of the ability to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” In that context of trials and struggles so much a part of this world, with that encouragement, it is not hard to see why James moves to the subject of wisdom, for wisdom is exactly what we need in order to see the work of God that enables us to grow in maturity, “that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing,” according to verse 4. If you are going to gain that sort of maturity, you need wisdom.

v.5 “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But let him ask in faith.”