

**duplicating
discipleship**

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the wisdom of james

Lesson 7: The Wisdom of James

Not until we have become humble and teachable, standing in awe of God's holiness and sovereignty... acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts, and willing to have our minds turned upside down, can divine wisdom become ours.

J. I. Packer

Background -

- Read Acts 15:1-6 for some of the background to “The Council at Jerusalem.” Note that from the earliest days of the Church, believers have been confronted with a puzzling variety of competing answers to the question, “What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to follow Him?”
- To the early church, how important was this council?
- Did they know they were establishing precedent and practice?

Paul was confident in the Gospel he preached and encouraged believers to imitate him as he imitated Christ. The Old Testament Law had no role in his answers to the two questions which were addressed by the Jerusalem apostles and elders: How does a person get right with God? How do believers go about living a holy life?

If a lifelong established practice of yours is now relegated to a different position, would you easily give up the old and accept the new?

Did they have a prejudice? A bias? A conviction?

What are the forces that they must resist to fully accept the Council's judgments?

- Even before Paul began making plans for his "second missionary journey," his message of faith and grace met with vigorous opposition even from among those who believed in Messiah Jesus. The confusion this introduced in the church was troubling enough so that Paul and Barnabas' "home church" in Syrian Antioch sent them to the "mother church" in Jerusalem to see how their teaching squared with that of the apostles and other church leaders there. This "Council at Jerusalem" addressed three closely related issues (Acts 15:7-21):
 - o How do we obtain a right relationship with God?
 - o How does a believer in Messiah Jesus live a sanctified life of obedience to Him?
 - o How can believers who come from differing lifestyles, cultures and customs experience unity of fellowship with one another?

Peter: Apostolic Teaching

- Read Acts 15:7-11. Who are the 3 acknowledged "leaders" who lead the meeting?

- Would their truth have been as accepted without a 4th party (James) jumping in to testify?

- How hard is it to "jump in" in tough situations?

Peter is the "chief spokesman" at the Council *for the Jerusalem apostles* (vs. 2). His role is to provide apostolic truth relevant to the Church's specific needs. Answer these

questions about the way in which apostolic truth was introduced as the Council dealt with the important issues it faced:

- A period of time devoted to “much debate” was allowed, so that the questions facing the Church might be formulated before an “apostolic ruling” was pronounced. What purposes might this have been intended to serve?

- How was this beneficial to those present?

- Debate? How does the church of today get involved in the practice of “debating”?

- To achieve unity, whose or what authority did they have to accept?

- The incident to which Peter refers in verses 7-11 is recorded in Acts 10:1-48 (especially verses 38-48). In his words to the Council, how does Peter emphasize the crucial issue which faith plays in obtaining a right relationship with God?

- How does Peter emphasize the doctrine of the Trinity in his teaching on salvation?

- What role does the Law of Moses play in the process of salvation? How does Peter’s teaching square with that of Paul (cf. Galatians 3:26-28)?

James: Pastoral Wisdom

- Read Acts 15:13-21. **James** is the “chief spokesman” at the Council *for the Jerusalem elders* (vs. 2). His role is to apply the Word of God (including apostolic teaching!) in a wise way to his flock’s current need (note that this James – who was one of the Lord Jesus’ half-brothers [cf. Acts 1:14] – was not one of the apostles; as we see here and in Acts 21:17-18, James served as a sort of “senior pastor” of the believers in Jerusalem).
 - In verses 13-18, James appeals to Amos 9:11-12 (it is no surprise that the man who wrote James 1:21-25 is himself “a man of the Word”!). What does James’ dependence on God’s written Word tell us about his source of wisdom?
 - It would have been easy for James to have said the “wrong thing.” Have you ever done such and what was the outcome?
 - What possibly could have been the outcome had James not handled the situation with wisdom?
 - What do you see as his attitude when he was making his speech?
 - Note that verse 21 begins with the word “for”: this verse provides the rationale behind the four prohibitions (found in verse 20) which James suggests (in his “judgment,” verse 19) believers in Messiah Jesus from among the Gentiles should follow. How would following James’ instructions help Gentile believers keep from needlessly alienating Jews?

- How would it be easier for both Jewish and Gentile believers to fellowship with one another? (Note that, though “fornication” – i.e., sexual sin – is always morally wrong in and of itself, it was a common feature of Gentile religious practices.)

- How do you feel this experience contributed to the writing of the Book of James? Find a verse or verses in James that speaks to our reactions in tough situations.

- In general, Jews and Gentiles often had a hard time “mixing” with one another (cf. Ephesians 2:11-12). James here seems to be suggesting a “compromise solution” designed to make it easier for believers from both backgrounds to maintain unity of fellowship with one another. Gentile believers – who might otherwise feel free to eat anything they’d like to eat (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:23-30) – are here encouraged to put limits on their freedom in order to accommodate the needs of others. Similarly, Jewish believers – who would ordinarily be expected to be repulsed by a Gentile’s dietary choices (cf. Acts 10:14) – are told to accept their “unkosher” fellow believers as full participants in the grace of God in the Messiah, Jesus. How does James’ “judgment” display wisdom?

- How does James judgment display godly priorities?

- How does it display Christ-like love?

- Compare James' wise counsel with that of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

Application -

- Peter's apostolic truth and James' wise pastoral judgment were presented in written form in a letter sent by the Council to those churches located on Gentile soil which had direct contacts with the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 15:23). **There could never be a more divisive issue than the one regarding law and grace. What could have gone wrong if not handled wisely?**

- **What was the outcome when you gave someone else some bad advice?**

- What had been the impact on the churches of the legalism to which they had been exposed prior to the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:24; cf. 15:1)?

- What is the impact on the churches of the message of grace – coupled with the principle of limiting personal liberties out of love and concern for others – with which James counters the spirit of legalism (Acts 15:32)?

- James appears later in the book of Acts in chapter 21. How is James' advice to Paul in Acts 21:17-25 motivated by some of the same concerns he has at the Council at Jerusalem?

Modern day example of Wisdom: Jackie Rosenberger, LPC

Although Jackie has been blind nearly her entire life, she can “see” more than many people. She has a wisdom from the Lord that has blessed countless people in her family , her church and her counseling practice. She has the ability to perceptively understand the dynamics of personal relationships and brings the Word of God wisely to bear on each situation. Jackie is well-respected sought out by many.

