

Wisdom and Prayer
James 1:5-8 (4:1-10; 5:13-18)
John Breon

We've seen that the overall theme of this letter is wisdom. In this series we're looking at how wisdom relates to troubles, to prayer, to poverty and wealth, to what we say, and to faith and works. This is the wisdom that enables us to endure trials with joy so they don't become temptations that draw us away from God.

James says if we don't have that wisdom, we're to ask for it. That reminds us of Solomon. After he became king of Israel, God appeared to him in a dream and told him to ask for whatever he wanted God to give him. Solomon asked for a heart to discern right and wrong and to govern God's people. God said, "I will give you a wise and discerning heart" (1 Kings 3:4-15).

There's a large section of the Old Testament that's called "Wisdom Literature." It includes Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and some of the Psalms. There was other Jewish wisdom writing between the Old and New Testaments. In the Gospels, we see that Jesus is very wise. Jesus is the embodiment of God's wisdom. The apostle Paul contrasts the world's wisdom and God's wisdom. He includes wisdom among gifts of the Holy Spirit.

James wants God's people to have godly wisdom, to be able to live according to God's word, to apply it to daily living. He applies wisdom to some particular situations. And he says if we lack wisdom we are to ask for it. So wisdom relates to prayer.

James goes on to describe God's way of giving. God gives generously to all without finding fault. It's tough to approach God if we think he's unavailable or doesn't want to hear from us. I can remember being really young and trying to ask my mom for something or about something, but not knowing how, not being able to say it. She was grading papers or something—she was busy. I don't remember what I wanted to ask, but I do remember feeling like I wanted to ask something, but the words wouldn't come. I don't know if I was afraid of interrupting or what was going on.

Does prayer ever feel like that to you? You want to talk to God, you want to ask God for something or about something, but you're just not sure you should. Or you're afraid the Lord is too busy or occupied with more important matters. Or that God's going to say, "Again? How many times do we have to go over this?"

James says, go ahead and ask, especially if you're asking God for wisdom. God gives generously, not grudgingly. God gives without finding fault, without keeping score. God is the Father of lights who gives every good and perfect gift (1:17). Wisdom is certainly one of God's good and perfect gifts. We pray with confidence, trusting the character of God and the nature of the gifts he gives.

Later, James describes the wisdom God gives and contrasts it with the world's way of thinking:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (3:13-18)

James says when we ask, we must believe and not doubt, not be double-minded and unstable. Doubting here doesn't mean occasional questions or sometimes wondering about God. The doubt James warns us away from is an orientation, a lifestyle of doubt, being characterized by doubt. If we doubt God's goodness and generosity, we don't expect to receive God's good gifts. How will we receive from God if we never think he cares or never believe he listens and wants to answer?

If we want God's wisdom, we need to be committed to living God's way, the way of wisdom that comes from the Lord. We open ourselves as much as we can and as often as we can to the Lord and trust that he'll give us what's needed in the moment.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* He concludes that it does make a great difference. But he takes the long way around to reach that conclusion. Yancey doesn't hide questions, doubts, and struggles. One interesting thing he does in this book is scatter testimonies, insights, and thoughts about prayer from a variety of people all through it. In one of those sidebars, a woman named Debra says that when she started managing a job, three young children, and a husband who worked evenings, her prayer life went downhill.

I pray for a few minutes in the morning; I pray when I first get to my desk at the office for a few minutes as I wait for the electric kettle to boil water for tea; I pray in snatches while driving or stirring supper on the stove or waiting for programs to load on the computer; and sometimes on a good day, I pray for a few brief moments before I crawl into bed. (167)

Sometimes that's the best we can do. There may be seasons in our lives when that's the only praying we get done. But God hears and responds to those prayers as much as to the prayers of people in monasteries who devote hours and days at a time to praying. There's time and place for all kinds of praying to our good and generous and wise God.

There's another part of the letter where James addresses prayer. Listen to this:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. (4:1-3)

This section goes on to say that we need to choose God, that God gives us more grace, that we need to be humble, get close to God, and not pass judgment on others in the Christian community.

We're to pray for what we need, not to indulge our selfish desires, but to live as God's people, to live as "friends of God." We ask God to give what's needed and to search our hearts, our motives. God gives the grace, the help, we need to live as God's friends. That means submitting to God, being close to God, living as part of the community of God's people. Repentance and humility are the attitude for receiving from God.

We all come to God as we are, with the experiences and influences and decisions that make us who we are. We respond to God as God makes himself known. We respond with faith, trust, humility, commitment. But God also responds to our needs, to our personality.

Yancey shares an article on "prayer and temperament" that looks at four forms or style of prayer and meditation that accommodate four temperaments. These are based on a personality inventory called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (*Prayer* 194-95).

The style designed for "intuitive *feelers*" stresses creative exercises that involve imagination, imagery, and journaling. One example of this kind of prayer is to see Scripture passages as addressed to us personally. We can put our name in the passage of Scripture and meditate on it with personal application. Be careful which verses you do that with!

Another style primarily speaks to "intuitive *thinkers*," more scientifically minded people. Here you take a Scripture passage and ask basic questions like who, what, when, where, why, and how. You can make it personal by asking, "What area of my life does this speak to?"

Some people are "sensory *judges*" and are more driven by duty. They need to start meditating and praying with a solid and orderly system. Here we use our senses to see, hear, and smell the scenes of Scripture as though we're actually there. We then bring ancient truth to modern application.

The fourth form of meditation engages action in prayer. The key for "sensory *perceivers*" is moving and working while they pray. Maybe pray while exercising, walking, doing housework or some other manual labor.

None of us has only one of those temperaments totally. So none of us will use only one style of praying. But isn't it freeing to know that we're not locked into one particular way of praying? Sometimes we sit or kneel quietly. Sometimes we're moving and active. Trying a style that's not what we're used to can help us stretch and grow. But we can humble ourselves, draw close to God, be friends with God starting where we are, with who we are now.

James returns to the topic of prayer at the end of the letter:

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (5:13-18)

We're not on our own in praying, in seeking God's wisdom, in living as God's people. We do all this in community. We're in this together. We confess to each other. That's probably best done in small groups or one-on-one. We pray for each other. We all experience God's healing power as we join together in prayer.

We pray in all circumstances. If you're in trouble, pray. If you're happy, sing. If you're sick, ask for prayer. If you have sin, confess it. We'll be amazed at the power of prayer when we join together in faith.

When Eli was studying German in Germany this summer, he lived in Leipzig. He got to visit a lot of interesting places. One of his favorites was the Thomaskirche (St. Thomas Church) in Leipzig. J. S. Bach was the music minister there for years. Bach is buried at the church and there's a memorial

statue of him there. One Sunday, the church recreated a worship service from Bach's time. For a musician like Eli, that was exciting.

There's another church in Leipzig where Bach served for a time: the Nicholaikirche, St. Nicholas Church. It's a very old church that also has a more recent claim to fame. When Germany was divided, Leipzig was in East Germany. In 1953, it was the scene of a violent protest against Communist rule that was crushed by force. In four decades violence changed nothing behind the Iron Curtain. But in 1989 Christians meeting in the Nicholas Church started a practice of candlelight prayer marches. These prayer meetings and marches grew. Ten thousand people, then thirty thousand, then fifty thousand, then half a million joined the marches in Leipzig. There were a million more marching and praying in Berlin. And finally one night the Berlin Wall itself, the hated symbol of the Iron Curtain, was torn down (Yancey 120). There were many factors that led to the downfall of Communism in Germany. But people praying together was one important factor. What a demonstration that "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

Sometimes in the church we follow this section of James literally, anointing people with oil and praying for healing. By anointing, I mean we smear a little oil on your forehead. Then we pray and ask God to heal. We seek God's grace. We ask for wisdom. We entrust ourselves and our situations to the Lord and trust that he will raise us up.

One of the more important things I learned at ORU is that God has multiple streams of healing. God works through medical science, doctors, surgery, medicine, and all that goes with that. God works through counseling and treatments involved in it. And God works through prayer. There are probably many other ways God brings healing. These delivery systems don't compete with each other, but they complement and support each other. Ultimately, God will heal all of his people completely through resurrection when Jesus appears again in glory.

We want to offer one of God's healing streams today. During the hymn, I'll be at the Communion rail to anoint and pray for anyone who wants to receive that. We can pray for healing of spirit, mind, body, relationships. If you want prayer for someone else, you can stand in (or

kneel in) for them. Our aim isn't to embarrass anyone or make a production of this. We just want to obey God's word and give you the opportunity to receive this particular kind of prayer. If you don't come to the rail for prayer, you can pray where you are. And, we're all called to a life of prayer as we walk in the way of God's wisdom.