

JAMES 1:5–8

SERMON: PRAYING FOR WISDOM

24 MAY 2020

¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. ² 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.

⁵ 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.

Verse 5–8 are about how to obtain wisdom. Before we look at what James teaches us about that, it would be helpful, first of all, to know why we need it. And secondly, we need to know what it is.

Why do we need wisdom? We need wisdom in order to be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4). That is, we need wisdom if we are going to reach the state of perfection, the state of glory, which is in view in verse 4. Without wisdom, the prospect of entering heaven is unobtainable. Apart from wisdom, we cannot remain steadfast under testing, which is necessary to obtain the crown of life—glorified, eternal life in heaven.

James is not talking about the kind of wisdom we might need, for example, to make a right decision about a career opportunity at work or about the purchase of a new home. Those are important matters, but they’re not matters of eternal consequence. We should pray for wisdom when we’re making important decisions like that, but that’s not what James is talking about in verse 5. He’s talking about the wisdom needed to become “perfect and complete” in the eternal state of glory in heaven.

The context is about obtaining perfection by remaining steadfast under trial. God uses “trials of various kinds” to test our faith and, thereby, produce in us patient-steadfast-endurance through which we shall be brought into a state of perfection at the end of the world. ² 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.

We shall not “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” until we’ve been translated from earth to heaven and “receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (1:12). And to “receive the crown of life,” we must remain “steadfast under trial”; we must endure the test of faith (1:12). What do we need to do that? What must we have in order to remain steadfast under testing? We must have wisdom. Without it, we shall not endure but shall be deceived the evil one.

James immediately turns to the subject of wisdom—specifically, how to obtain wisdom—after talking about “the testing of your faith” and the hope of being made “perfect and complete” in the state of glory (1:3–4). ⁴ Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God....

If we lack wisdom, we need to know how to obtain it because without it, there’s no hope of being “perfect and complete.” There’s no hope of entering heaven apart from the kind of wisdom that James has in mind.

What does James mean by wisdom? In chapter 3, James provides his own definition of the term.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James mentions two kinds of wisdom. The two kinds of wisdom are contrasted in terms of their respective origins, their characteristics, and their outcomes. In terms of their respective origins, one is from above; the other is from below. One comes from God; the other, from the devil. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable....

There are two kinds of wisdom: divine wisdom and demonic wisdom or true wisdom and false wisdom. The wisdom that comes from above comes down from the Father of lights (1:17). It’s a divine gift, a good gift, a perfect gift, which orders us to perfection (1:17). That’s the kind of wisdom necessary to remain steadfast under testing and obtain the state of perfection, the state of glory. In chapter 1, James tells us how to obtain that kind of wisdom.

There’s another kind of wisdom that James warns us about. It’s not the wisdom from above; it’s not heavenly but earthly. It’s not of the Spirit but of the flesh (cf. 1 Cor 2:14–15). It’s not divine but demonic. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

This wisdom is demonic; it's serpentine. It's the kind of wisdom that came from the mouth of the serpent in Genesis 3. It's the kind of wisdom that controls the thoughts and actions and lives of the children of the devil, the friends of the world (James 4:4). The mind of an unregenerate person is governed by this earthly, unspiritual, and demonic wisdom. The mind that is set on the flesh is ruled it (cf. Rom 8:5–6). This false wisdom is not wisdom at all; it's foolishness. But the world regards it as wisdom. And it regards the wisdom of God as folly (cf. 1 Cor. 1:17–2:14).

The contrast in James 3 between these two kinds of wisdom is absolute. They have nothing in common with each other. They're antithetical. The way of divine wisdom is the way of the righteous; the way of demonic wisdom is the way of the wicked (cf. Psalm 1).

The two kinds of wisdom are contrasted in terms of their respective origins but also in terms of their characteristics. The chief characteristic of the wisdom from above is meekness or humility. The chief characteristics of demonic wisdom are bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. The wise and understanding person is the one whose life and conduct and works are characterized by the meekness or humility produced by heavenly wisdom. Meekness or humility is the chief mark of true wisdom. If we are governed by divine wisdom, then we will humble ourselves before God, as James instructs us to do in chapter 4.¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (4:10). God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (4:6). Divine wisdom leads us to humble ourselves before God. If our lives are governed by divine wisdom, they will be marked by wisdom's meekness and humility.

They will also be marked by good works.¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. If we are living according to heavenly wisdom, others will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (cf. Matt 5:16). Divine wisdom is knowing and doing the will of God (cf. James 1:22). It's living by every word that comes from the mouth of God (cf. Matt 4:4). Divine wisdom enables us to discern between good and evil and to reject the evil and do the good.

In the sermon the mount, our Lord Jesus defined wisdom in terms of hearing and doing his words.²⁴ Everyone ... who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

James tells us that to remain steadfast under trial, we must have wisdom. In the parable of Jesus, who remains steadfast under trial, the wise man? He's the one who built his house on the rock. When the trials came—the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat on the house—he remained steadfast; his house did not fall. Why didn't it fall? He was a wise man, who built his

house on the rock. Those who hear the words of Christ and do them are the wise who endure testing. They stand the test; they patiently endure. Without that kind of wisdom, we cannot endure the testing of our faith and will not obtain perfection in the state of glory.

James says in 3:14, ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

The chief characteristics of this false wisdom are “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (3:14). Satan’s own rebellion against God illustrates that very clearly. Satan was driven by “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” when he rebelled against God in heaven. Satan was jealous of God’s honor and wanted to exalt himself above God. His heart was filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, and he said in his heart, “I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13–14).

That’s the kind of jealousy and selfish ambition that characterize the lives of those who are governed by the wisdom of the Satan. That’s in direct contrast, of course, to divine wisdom, which leads us to humble ourselves before God (cf. James 4:10). The wisdom from above sets our minds and affections on things that are above and leads us to humble ourselves before God that we may be exalted and translated to the realm of glory. But the wisdom of Satan does just the opposite. It produces in the hearts of those governed by it bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, which, in turn, produces all kinds of evil. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

Divine wisdom, on the other hand, produces a different kind of fruit. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James is not talking about wisdom in some sort of generic sense but about the divine wisdom that produces in us the fruit of meekness, humility, purity, mercy, righteousness, etc. Without that kind of wisdom that comes from above, there is no hope of salvation. Without that wisdom, we shall not remain steadfast under testing and shall not receive the crown of life.

When Adam listened to the voice of the serpent and his heart was filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, he did not endure the test. He did not remain steadfast under testing and did not receive the crown of life. When Adam acted on the wisdom of the serpent and ate the forbidden fruit, he became a friend of the world and an enemy of God (James 4:4). Christ, as the new Adam, however, remained steadfast under testing. When he was brought into conflict with the serpent, as Adam was in Genesis 3, and tempted to sin against God, he acted in accord with divine wisdom. He lived by every word that came from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4). He resisted

the devil, and he fled from him (cf. James 4:7). That's what the wisdom of God enables us to do. And that's why we need wisdom to patiently endure our testing.

How do we obtain wisdom? James says, ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. Solomon is the great example in the OT of one who asked for wisdom (1 Kings 3; 2 Chron 1). When he asked God, God gave it to him generously, without reservation, without reproach. James assures us that God will likewise give wisdom to us just as he gave it to Solomon. God will generously give us all that we need to remain steadfast under testing and obtain the crown of life.

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.

The doubter—or the double-minded man—is the one whose friendship is divided between God and the world. “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). A double-minded man is one whose allegiance and loyalty is divided. He does not serve the Lord with an undivided heart. He does not have an undivided friendship with God but tries to serve two masters. James is warning us not to be like the double-minded person but calling us to serve the Lord with single-minded devotion, to forsake the world, and to seek the things that are above.

We cannot be like waves in a storm-tossed sea driven to and fro by the wind but must be firmly and wholeheartedly committed to the LORD and love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our lives cannot be governed by both kinds of wisdom. We must forsake the wisdom from below for the wisdom from above and seek the kind of wisdom that leads to glory.