

**A PRACTICAL WAY TO RECEIVE WISDOM
JAMES 1:5-8**

INTRODUCTION:

The answer to the question will not be worth a million dollars, but can you identify the wisest man who ever lived? How do you know that Solomon is the wisest man that ever lived? The obvious answer is that God identifies him as the wisest man who ever lived—at least before the birth of the Lord Jesus. What did Solomon have that made him the wisest man who ever lived? It involved obviously more than just being the man with the most knowledge. While there is plenty of evidence that Solomon was a man of tremendous knowledge, his wisdom went deeper than that. Wisdom is actually a very practical thing; it is the ability to apply to life what one knows. It seems obvious that Solomon was ahead of his world in knowledge, but he was also ahead in knowing how to apply that knowledge to life.

When James speaks of wisdom, it is against this Old Testament background. He is writing to people who find themselves in the midst of some hard times. Life has become difficult. He has already encouraged them to respond to those difficulties with joy and with the assurance that God will work through the difficulties for their good. But he does not leave us there. He moves from that admonition to one that relates to wisdom. What is it that a person needs who finds themselves in the midst of extreme difficulties? James indicates that it is wisdom. Why wisdom?

Wisdom is understanding! Wisdom is that ability to see your present circumstance from God's perspective. Wisdom is that ability to see the hand of God at work in the

circumstances of life. If a person is to live life successfully and fruitfully in our kind of world, they need that perspective.

Wisdom is guidance! In the midst of the difficult circumstances in which the recipients of this letter found themselves, they needed to know the right course to follow. They need to know the will of God as it related to the decisions they had to make day by day. When the wisdom of Solomon is highlighted in the chronicles of the Old Testament, this is the thing that is highlighted. Solomon had that capacity to decide between that which was right and that which was wrong. He had that capacity to act wisely and do the right thing in the midst of a difficult circumstance. You will remember the situation that came before his throne one day when two mothers came in hot dispute over a child. The two women were women of the street and both had given birth to children. One of the children had died and now there was a dispute about whose child had died. Both were claiming that it was the other woman's child that had died and the living child was her child. With the wisdom that God had granted him, Solomon asked for a sword and then demanded that the living child be cut in two and half of it given to each mother. When the real mother heard the decree of the king, she spoke up immediately urging the king to give the child to the other woman. While the woman making the false claim concerning motherhood was perfectly content for the child to be severed in two. Solomon discerningly recognized who the true mother was. All of us need a measure of this kind of wisdom as we live life day by day. We are constantly being confronted with baffling situations and serious questions. We need to know the mind of God as it relates to each of these situations.

The question is, "Where can you find this kind of wisdom?" The answer is that we will find it where Solomon found it. His experience is cited in scripture to encourage us to seek wisdom in the same way that he found it.

James, in a very succinct way, brings before us the way to wisdom.

I. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR NEED.

The language of James is so straightforward; "If any of you lacks wisdom."

The truth is that all of us lack wisdom, but only the wise among us ever realize that we lack wisdom. It is a paradoxical thing - only the wise are sensitive to their need for wisdom.

One of the evidences of our fallen nature is our reluctance to admit our needs, especially our needs before God. The world encourages us to put on a front and to demonstrate our self-sufficiency. It encourages us to trust our own instincts and experiences. God encourages us to admit our needs.

1. This means a confession of our limitations.

One of the things that come out of a time of testing is a new self-awareness. One element in this new self-awareness will be a deep consciousness of one's own limitations. When you get into the midst of a painful experience, you will realize almost immediately that you do not know every thing. You do not know the why of things. You do not know the

best procedure to take. In the midst of such crises you are often faced with multiple choices, and you are uncertain about which to take. What do you do when you are faced with three alternatives, they all seem equally valid, and yet you can only take one? James would say to us that we ought, in such a moment, to acknowledge to God our limitations.

Man was never intended to be self-sufficient in himself. Man was never intended to be "a god." Man was from the beginning intended to be a limited creature. Why not stop the pretense and just acknowledge to God, "God, you alone are God. I do not know what is right. I do not know which way to go. You and you alone have the answers to the dilemma that I face. I acknowledge my limitations."

2. This means an acknowledgement of our dependence.

The word for "lack" in our statement literally means to be destitute. It means to be without the needed resources. It means that all of our resources have been expended and we have come to the end of ourselves. Then it is time to acknowledge to God our complete dependence upon Him. This is what you do when you admit to God your need. You admit to Him that apart from Him you are nothing and can do nothing.

Our sophisticated world frowns on making such an acknowledgement but it is the wisest thing you can do if you are searching for real wisdom. If you want understanding and guidance in your present circumstances, then you need to acknowledge your need to God. Usually the best posture to take when you are acknowledging such need is one of bowing before Holy God on your face. You may need to take such a position before Him today and just acknowledge the deepest need of your heart.

There is a page in American History that illustrates this point. The first few days of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia were full of discord. Frustration and strife seem to increase with every speech. The small states were pitted against the larger states. The South was pitted against New England. The Agrarians were pitted against the urbanities and the Federalists were pitted against the Republicans. A spirit of gloom and despair began to settle over the proceedings.

Eighty-one year old Benjamin Franklin was so ill during the Constitutional Convention that he often had to be carried into the meeting hall on a makeshift bed, determined to make one final mark on the little nation he had worked so hard to bring to life, he arose and reminded the delegates that the provincial congress had always opened their meetings with prayer. In fact, the first meeting of that august body was spent in fervent supplication - for more than three hours the founding fathers knelt before the Lord, seeking His blessings for their enterprise. Likewise, he reminded them, each session of congress during the period of the Articles of Confederation had begun with a time of intercession.

Thus, Franklin went on to call the delegates of this new deliberative body to humble themselves before almighty God: "In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensitive of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for divine protection. Our prayers, sirs, were heard and they were graciously answered. Have we now forgotten this powerful friend? Or do we imagine that we no longer need His assistance?"

After he had continued his speech, he in a final word said to them, "I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business."

In response to the admonition to Franklin, the delegates to that Constitutional Convention humbled themselves before God. They began to pray and seek the face of God, and out of those prayerful deliberations came the Constitution that has guided this nation over the decades and centuries since that date. This is where it all begins with an open, earnest acknowledgement. We must acknowledge that we cannot make it without God.

II. ASK GOD FOR IT.

The emphasis of James is upon asking. He states it so clearly when he writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it shall be given to him." "Ask" is a synonym for prayer. James is urging prayer upon us in that time of crises when we sense our need of wisdom.

1. Asking should be a continual practice.

Let me get a little technical as we look at this text. The verb "ask" is actually a present tense verb in the Greek text. This means that it is not just simply a matter of making your request and then moving on to something else. James is admonishing us that prayer be the continual practice of our lives. If we want wisdom, then we must be continually and habitually seeking the face of God. If God is the embodiment of all wisdom, and all

wisdom comes from Him, then it follows that we will receive that wisdom as we ask for it in prayer.

How often do you ask God for wisdom? This is not asking him for material prosperity. This is asking him for spiritual illumination and guidance. This is to be for us a continual pattern of life.

2. Asking involves obedience.

Take another look at the verb "ask." It is not only a present tense verb: it is also a Greek imperative. Imperatives are characteristic of this little letter of James. He found it to be a favorite form of the verb for him. So, it comes to us as a command, as an imperative.

When you receive such a command, you must obey or disobey. So clearly if we do not ask God for the wisdom we need, we are guilty of disobedience.

Why is it we are more comfortable seeking the counsel of men than we are seeking the face of God? Do we suspect that men may give better answers than God? Is there some man that knows more about us and our future than God. Is there some man who will be able to give us wiser counsel than God? And yet, God seems to be for us the last resort. James encourages us that when we find ourselves in those baffling situations that demand guidance, we must obediently seek the face of the Lord.

This means that you can come before the Lord with confidence. You come with confidence because you are coming obediently. You are simply doing what your

heavenly Father has instructed you to do. His instruction to you is that in every trial you acknowledge your need and seek His face in prayer. Ask of God! This is our act of obedience.

III. ANTICIPATE AN ANSWER FROM GOD.

James makes the most of this last element in receiving wisdom. It is not enough to acknowledge our need and to ask - we must anticipate an answer from God.

We must not be like the little lady who stood in front of her house. There a mountain blocked her view of things. She read in the Bible that if we would ask God, he could remove a mountain. So, she went before God and asked him to remove that mountain. She went out and addressed the mountain and said, "Be thou removed."

Then she went to bed and slept the sleep of the righteous until the early dawn. She waked then next morning and hurried to the door to see whether the mountain was gone. But there it stood just as high and rugged as ever. In disgust she turned away and said, "Just as I expected!" I'm afraid that is the way many of us pray. We ask but we never expect an answer.

James has a different perspective on prayer. He says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all men with out finding fault and it will be given to him. When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like the waves of the sea blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he

will receive anything from the Lord; he is a doubled minded man, unstable in all he does."

In this statement, James gives us three strong encouragements toward anticipating an answer.

1. Anticipate because of the generosity of God.

Our English translation does not quite catch what James says about God in this passage. The word "giving" is related to God in such a way that it refers to an attribute of God. Giving is as much of the character of God as love. In fact, giving is an expression of God's love. Jesus affirmed this when he said, "If you being evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to them that ask Him." Paul affirmed this when he wrote, "He that spared not His own son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" It is the very nature of God to give generously. So, if I am asking God in response to His command for insight and guidance that is needed for the living of life for His glory can I not be sure that He will indeed answer that prayer? Surely, He will. James is right - "It will be given to him."

2. Anticipate because of the gentleness of God

Another insight into the ways of God is included in that expression, "Without finding fault." All of us have known persons who gave gifts but they gave them in such a way that they made the recipient feel cheap or stupid. God deals with each of us in gentleness

when we come before Him with sincerity and faith. He treats us like a mother treats her child. He does not upbraid us or reproach us; rather He deals with us in the gentleness of love. God's gentle concern for your well being encourages you to believe that God will indeed hear your prayer for wisdom.

3. Anticipate because of the grasp of faith.

James contrasts faith and doubt in our passage. He highlights what it means to come before God and ask but not anticipate an answer. God does not respond to that kind of prayer with His generosity. Rather, it is to the confidence and trust of faith that God responds.

My experience across the years has vindicated this promise. Again and again I have come before God in those moments of crisis, in times when I was facing a serious decision, I have come with the confidence that if I laid my need before Him, he would respond to my request. I could write a book about the times that God has been there in response to my requests. I needed wisdom and I acknowledged my need of wisdom. I ask for wisdom, and in the quiet moment of waiting before him, he would give added insight, a new understanding, a clear sense of direction, an inner assurance, or whatever it was that I needed, at that particular moment of life.

What a resource prayer is for the struggling saint! What a privilege it is to carry every need to God in prayer. I encourage you to lay hold of this privilege and through the exercising of the privilege to open your life to the wisdom of God.

