Wisdom: Knowledge + Practice
A Summer Sermon Series: Practical Teachings from James
James 1:5-8

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James 1:5-8
New International Version (NIV)

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

The Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God!

Whenever I think of the word “wisdom” I think of one of my favorite sayings: “Too soon old, too late smart.” So, of course I looked that saying up and discovered there is actually a book by that title in which the author gives what he calls “Thirty Things You Need to Know Now”. A bit later I will share with you one of those thirty things.

Wisdom. What is it and how do we get it? Do we go to school for it? Do we get it from our parents or other adults in our life? Can we find it in the Bible? Can it be inherited? What does James, our practical theologian, say
about wisdom?

As we read what James says about it, he indicates that we must first be aware that we need wisdom. I think we could probably say that the beginning of wisdom is to know that we don’t have it. And if we don’t have it, we need to ask God for it. And God won’t laugh at us or criticize us for asking. God will reward our seeking if we truly believe that God can give us wisdom.

And I think what you will find is that wisdom is a combination of knowledge plus practice.

I have always loved the story told about the electrical engineer genius Charles Steinmetz. Henry Ford had Mr. Steinmetz design and build the generators for his automobile factory. One day years later the generators ground to a halt, and the Ford repairmen couldn’t find the problem. So Henry Ford he called Charles Steinmetz, who came and tinkered with the machines for a few hours. He then threw the switch and the generators came to life.

Mr. Steinmetz then presented Henry Ford his bill. $10,000. The rather frugal car maker then asked why the bill was so high.

Mr. Steinmetz replied, “For tinkering with the generators, I am charging you $10. For knowing where to tinker, I am charging $9,990.”

Whereupon, Mr. Ford paid the bill.

Don’t be afraid to ask God for wisdom. God will never turn you away. But when you gain some insight and begin to receive the wisdom God gives you, it must be put into practice. Knowledge setting on the shelf never does anybody any good, does it?

We Christians should not be afraid to admit that we lack wisdom and we should not be afraid to ask God for it.
Having just said that, can you see how illogical and even absurd we Christians must appear in the world’s point of view? We Christians are asked to believe in a God we cannot see who has spoken in a book written thousands of years ago in languages nobody except scholars can read.

In that book we read of miracles that God performed long, long ago, in a land very far away, to people who lived in a vastly different culture and whose lives do not resemble our lives in the 21st-century.

And if that were not enough, we Christians are asked to believe that the God of the universe came to planet earth in the person of his Son. This Son, we are told, lived a perfect life, died a cruel death, rose from the dead, and then ascended to heaven.

Isn’t that incredible? But there’s more!

When we pray, we say words to a God who is absolutely invisible to us. We believe that somehow those words make a difference, not only to us but those we love. And we believe that one day when we die and are buried, we will be with the Lord in heaven.

All of that explains why we cry out to God for wisdom to face all the problems of life. We ask God not only because we lack wisdom, but because we believe there is a God in heaven who loves us deeply and stands ready to help us in the moment of our need.

Let us do as the Bible says (for a change!) and come boldly to God’s throne, knowing that there we will find grace to help in our time of need (see Hebrews 4:16).

James says that God gives us wisdom without criticizing us. I like that. We pray, sometimes in desperation, and we know God will not say, “What’s wrong with you? You ought to be stronger than that. You should handle this better.” God never says, “You again? Why can’t you learn the lesson the first
time?"

Praying to God is not like going to the principal’s office. When you are in trouble, you need a friend, not a judge! And God will hear your prayer.

But we must put that wisdom into practice.

I said earlier I would share one of those “Thirty Things You Need to Know Now”. Here it is:
We are what we do. We are not what we think, or what we feel, or what we say, we are what we do.

Let me briefly illustrate this. You find a wallet lying on the sidewalk. You return the wallet to its owner. Why? Because you are an honest person. But, the act of returning the wallet reinforces your honesty and makes it even more likely that you will keep on being honest. We are what we do.

So, knowledge about honesty is good. Honest practices are even better.

Do you lack wisdom? Ask God for it and believe you will receive it. Then go and put this new-found wisdom into practice. “Listen to advice and accept discipline,” Proverbs 19:20 says, “and at the end you will be counted among the wise.”

In just a moment we will gather at the Lord’s Table. At the gracious invitation of our Lord Jesus, we will come as we are: wise or foolish, faithful or disloyal, encouraged or broken-hearted. But we all come with our sins and we ask the Lord of the Table to forgive us and to help us live upright and godly lives.

Welcome to the table of the Lord. Not one of us deserves to be here, but we are invited because God wants us to be part of his family. What we have before us are simple elements, the bread and the cup. But do not be mis-led by their simplicity, for they were bought at a tremendous price, the very life of
Jesus, our Saviour.

I want to read a passage from St. Paul, writing in the 12th chapter of Romans. This is how we should live as wise Christians, so let these words sink into your heart so that you will henceforth be living like this:

“Be sincere in your love for others. Hate everything that is evil and hold tight to everything that is good. Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord. Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying. Take care of God’s needy people and welcome strangers into your home.

“Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. Be friendly with everyone. Don’t be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. Don’t mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best to live at peace with everyone.”

Our Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed and arrested, sat at table with his disciples. He took bread, gave God thanks for it, broke it, and passed it to his disciples, saying “‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me’” (Luke 22:19, NLT).

In the same manner, after supper, he took the cup and said to them, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people — an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you” (Luke 22:20, NLT).

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Almighty God, we thank you for this bread, and for all you provide to sustain us. Above all, merciful Father, we thank you for Christ your Son, given
for the life of the world. Amen

The body of Christ, given for you.

Almighty God, we thank you for this fruit of the vine, and for every good gift that gives us joy. We thank you above all for Christ our Lord, by whose blood you have bought us and bound us to be your people in an everlasting covenant. Amen

The blood of Christ, shed for you.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, here at this table we have been in the company of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer. You have revealed your loving ways to us in broken bread and poured cup. Now, as your light has illuminated our lives, help us be a light for others. Amen.


I wish to thank my friend, the Rev. Dr. Ray Pritchard, of Keep Believing Ministries, for his consistent ability to challenge my thinking and for being so generous in sharing his thoughts and resources to other preachers. As we preachers often say, “I get milk from a number of cows, but I churn my own butter.”

2. Henry Mulder, who was my sales manager during my brief career with MetLife (1993-1994), would always say “They don’t know that they don’t know.”

3. Charles Proteus Steinmetz (1865 - 1923) was a German-born American mathematician and electrical engineer.


5. “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”
