

Asking God for Wisdom

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking wisdom from God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and provides practical guidance on how to ask for wisdom properly.

Duration: 38:03

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, James 1:2-8

Topics: "Wisdom"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the book of James and its teachings on trials and perseverance in the Christian life. He emphasizes the importance of adopting a perspective that trials are not intruders but rather opportunities for growth and maturity. The ultimate goal is for believers to become complete Christians, conformed to the image of Jesus. The speaker also references Graham Kendrick's song, which paraphrases the opening verses of James, highlighting God's work in molding and shaping believers to be more like Jesus.

Transcript

I invite you to turn with me to James chapter 1 as we continue to look at the letter of James. James chapter 1, we'll read from verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind.

That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. Father, with our Bibles open before us, we pray for your help to think, to understand, to believe, and to have the truth applied to our lives in such a way that we might be increasingly conformed to the image of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. J. B. Phillips, whose paraphrase we've come to enjoy together, paraphrases verse 2, when all kinds of trials crowd into your lives, don't resent them as intruders but welcome them as friends. And that little paraphrase, I think, helps to set in our thinking very quickly and clearly the opening salvo of James's rapid-fire approach to practical Christian living.

James shoots from the hips. He hit the hip. He gets it out.

Nobody is really in any doubt about what he's saying, and in that respect, it is tremendously helpful. In verses 2-4, he has urged his readers--and we are his readers--to recognize that trials are a privilege which God the Father allows his children to experience. And in order that, we might, as a result, become--verse 4--mature and complete and not lacking anything.

And when that is the perspective, then, and only then, we will be able to discover joy in the midst of the test. We've already noted that this is counterintuitive. It is certainly countercultural.

Joy and trials do not coexist in the minds of our contemporaries. In fact, trials are in many ways the antithesis of joy. Therefore, if you want to have joy, you need to remove trials.

If you want to enjoy life, then all of these dreadful circumstances need at least to be set aside or overcome. James says no. And paradoxically, he sets joy and trial together with each other.

The way in which we understand that, of course, is in relationship to the ultimate purpose of God. The ultimate purpose of God is to work in all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. And what is that ultimate good? It is that we might become mature and complete and not lacking anything--in other words, that we might become complete Christians, that we might be conformed to the image of Jesus himself.

Now, we've also been helped by various songs, and not least of all Graham Kendrick's song, which is essentially a paraphrase of these opening verses, and particularly the four lines that remind us in Kendrick's poetry, God is at work in us, Molding and shaping us, Out of his love for us, Making us more like Jesus. So when we're tempted to ask, What is going on here? Why has this happened? What will the eventuality of this be? Then Kendrick's paraphrase, along with Philip's paraphrase, helps us to get to the heart of it all. Now, to begin in this way is important, because if we're honest--which I think we want to be--if we're realistic--which I hope we are--then it is not easy, nor is it natural, to adopt this kind of perspective when going through this particular process.

And it is on account of that, I believe, that James moves so quickly to the statement in verse 5. Most of us have quoted verse 5 from time to time in relationship to making a decision about a job or about our marriage or the raising of our children or whatever it might be. And James 5 stands alone in that respect. If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all generously and without finding fault.

But verse 5 is actually after verse 4 and before verse 6. It's in this opening paragraph. And therefore, it is important for us to understand it contextually and to understand it specifically. And when we look at that, then we recognize that what he's saying here about wisdom is directly tied to what he has just said about trials and testings.

So essentially, it goes like this. You should count it all joy if you face trials of various kinds, because the trials in your life will actually produce perseverance, faith will be tested, you will grow, you will be mature and complete, and you will become the all-rounded Christian. However, if you're not getting this, if you find yourself responding to this in a way that isn't buying it, if you are tempted to think differently from what I have just said to you, then you better ask God for wisdom.

Because it is wisdom that you require in order to think properly about these issues of life. Now, Phillips, again, is really helpful in this respect, insofar as he ties the two verses together in relationship to one word, and the word is process. Process.

I need to quote it for you again. When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, don't resent them as intruders but welcome them as friends. Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.

But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you'll find that you've become people of mature character. And if in the process any of you doesn't know how to meet any particular problem, then let me tell you what to do. Do you get it? There is a process that is going on.

And if in the process you don't know what to do, then let me tell you what you need to do. I mention that so that we don't unearth verse 5 and make it just a verse that sits on its own. It does stand alone.

The truth exists in absentee form from the surrounding context. It is applicable. But it's not the way in which it is used, first of all, in the text.

So, what I want to do is ask three questions. They're straightforward questions, and find the answer in the text. Question number one, what do we need? Question number two, what should we do? Question number three, what will we find? What do we need? What should we do? What will we find? First of all, what do we need? What do we need? And the answer, in a word, wisdom.

Wisdom. James is very gracious. He doesn't say, you know, you are a bunch of deadheads, and you're all desperately in need of wisdom.

He says, if any of you lacks wisdom--which is a very inclusive way of approaching it, because who's going to stand up and say, No, I don't need any wisdom. Thank you very much for mentioning it. No.

If any of you lacks wisdom, I think that includes us all. Absolutely correct. What do we need? We need wisdom.

Wisdom. Did anyone use the word wisdom this week? Did you find that your schoolteachers told you that the most important thing that you require if you're going to graduate successfully from this particular school where you're spending time is wisdom? Probably not. Did you read it in the paper? Did it come up frequently, the word wisdom? I would wager not.

Because wisdom is almost an old-fashioned word now. It is a biblical word. And wisdom has been obscured by words like insight or information or intelligence.

Each of these things on their own, or the three of them together, do not add up to wisdom. Indeed, education cannot be equated with wisdom. Those of you who are schoolteachers, you know that to be the case.

You have in your custody all kinds of intelligent boys and girls, but they're not the wisest characters, are they? Despite the fact that you have provided them with all of that wonderful information, schooled them to the point of their ability, yet they don't necessarily exercise wisdom in the choices they make, in their relationships, in what they spend their time and their money on. Because education, despite what our culture suggests, is not the great panacea for all ills. If education really was the answer to AIDS, then we would have fixed it by now.

If education really was the answer to premarital sex, it would all be over. If education was the answer to the things that we're told it's the answer to, then we're a highly intelligent culture. We have enough

information, enough intelligence, enough education to have put all these things to bed.

We know enough to do the right things, and we know enough to make sure we don't do the wrong things. But did you read the paper this week? What was it full of? People who did all these wrong things and failed to do all these right things. What's missing? Wisdom.

Wisdom. You see, when you come to wisdom in the Bible, wisdom is not simply cognitive. Wisdom is not simply mental.

Wisdom is moral. Wisdom is, if you like, the behavior that emerges from a belief system. You have that, for example, when Jesus deals with the story of the wise and the foolish builders.

The wise men built this house upon the rock, and the waves came tumbling down, and the house stood firm. The foolish men built this house upon the sand, and it collapsed. What's the point that Jesus is making? Who is the wise man? The wise man, says Jesus, is the one who hears my words and puts them into practice.

The foolish man is not the person who doesn't hear the words of Jesus, because the foolish man also hears the words of Jesus but fails to act with wisdom--fails to put them into practice. Wisdom is the information that God supplies turned to action. So, for example, God commends Solomon in 1 Kings 3--you needn't turn to it, but you can check afterwards--when he offers to Solomon whatever Solomon desires.

And Solomon replies, You've made me your servant king in place of my father David, but I'm only a little child, and I don't know how to carry out my duties. That's a good start, isn't it? Especially coming from a king. Expect a king to say, As a king, let me just say, No, I'm a little child.

I don't know what to do. You'll never be a wise person and a proud person simultaneously. Just make a note of that.

If you've got a fat head, you will never be wise. People with fat heads are stupid. They are not wise.

They may be intelligent, and that's why their head is so fat. But they're not wise. Humility is a precursor to biblical wisdom.

Look at what he says. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. That's wisdom.

That's why, incidentally, that an educational system that is relativistic, that sets aside the notions of right and wrong, must inevitably collapse on itself. Small wonder, then, that when Solomon decides to write his proverbs, he writes as follows, The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, for attaining wisdom and discipline, for understanding words of insight, for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair, for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. Let the wise listen and add to their learning.

Let the discerning get guidance for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. What do we need? Wisdom.

Wisdom means acting in the light of God's revelation of himself in the varied circumstances of life, whether in joy or in sorrow. Wisdom is knowing how to live God's way in God's world. Knowing how to live God's way in God's world.

This is my Father's world. He has established the world. He has set the planets in space.

He has ordered the affairs of the universe. He who is involved in the macro-management of the entire universe is involved in the micro-management of those who are his children. And the wise man or the wise woman is the one who knows how to live God's way in God's world.

And to the extent that that becomes the hallmark of a life, it will be so radically different from the culture. It was in Corinth, and it is in Cleveland. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, remember, he says, What have the philosopher, the writer, and the critic of this world to show for all their wisdom? Quite a rhetorical question, isn't it? And then he says, Hasn't God made the wisdom of this world look foolish? Isn't it really tragic the extent to which evangelicalism has made such a play to appear to be as wise as everybody else? Oh, no, no, we're very wise.

We're very clever. We're very smart. It has a kind of apostolic ring to it, doesn't it? No, it doesn't.

And when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized they were actually unlearned and ignorant men, they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus. And when they spoke like Jesus, they marveled at the wise words that came out of their mouths. And they said to themselves, How do fishermen get this information? How do they know these things about humanity? How can they say what they say? Answer! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

That's not an argument for stupidity. That's not an argument for young people not to do their very best and extend themselves to the fullest extent of their capacity in terms of their intellectual development, but it is to recognize, ultimately, that there is a radical difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. And that's why James says, You will never, ever grab hold of this paradox unless you get what you need.

And what you need is wisdom. Secondly, what should we do? If what we need is wisdom, what should we do? Well, in a phrase, ask God--verse 5. Ask God, the God whom he identifies in verse 17 as providing every good and perfect gift that comes down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who doesn't change like shifting shadows. He's not one way on a Sunday and another way on a Tuesday.

He is abiding in his faithfulness. And, says James, you need to ask if you're going to receive. Did he remember Jesus' words? Ask, and it will be given to you.

Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you, for everyone who asks receives. Maybe.

You're not going to have this, he says, unless you ask. Your Heavenly Father, in a far more generous and appropriate way, is prepared to give good things to those who ask him, and when you ask for wisdom, that is one of the good things. How should you ask? Simply.

Simply. If anyone likes wisdom, let him ask God. Dear God, I need wisdom.

Dear God, I'm tempted to regard this as a major intrusion in my life, as a stumbling block, and as an expression of whatever. I think I need your wisdom on this one. I'm asking you for wisdom.

Simply. And asking him properly. Properly.

There is a proper way to make a request, isn't there? As Americans, we are not very good at approaching people and asking for things properly. It is bad in our own country, it is worse and most glaringly obvious when we take it on the road with us. Check me on this.

Go to your coffee shop tomorrow morning, four minutes early, stand and listen to the way in which people order their drinks. And I will give you a dollar--which is hard for me as a Scotsman--if you are able, in all honesty, to tell me that the balance, that the majority of those making a request begin their request with the word please. I can virtually guarantee you that you will hear people say, Give me a latte.

I'll take a mocha. Mine is a such-and-such. As opposed to, May I please have a copy of The New York Times? Could I please have this? May I please have that? It's no surprise, when that is endemic in a culture, that it is expressed in the way in which people come before God.

These people got up early to go to Starbucks to serve you. It is only right that you treat them with the most significant respect. Please, thank you for serving me, for responding to my request.

And when we come before God, remember, he is God. He is the Creator of the universe. Yes, he bids us come boldly into his presence.

Yes, Jesus opens up access whereby we may call him Father, but he remains God. And it is imperative that we come before him properly. What does it mean to come before him properly? Hebrews 10.22 says that when we come before him, we come before him with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith.

What James says here is that we need to believe and not doubt. Verse 6, if you're going to come and ask, believe and don't doubt. To believe here is more than intellectual assent.

To believe here is an expression of trust. It is an expression of devotion. To doubt is more than simply saying, I wonder if this is the case.

To doubt is to refuse to entrust ourselves to him. Again, Phillips paraphrases helpful to me. He must ask in sincere faith, without secret doubts, as to whether he really wants God's help or not.

He must ask in sincere faith, without secret doubts, as to whether he really wants God's help or not. See, God knows whether we want our help. In the same way, when you do Q&A over a period of time--doesn't matter where we go with Truth For Life--you very, very quickly know whether the person is asking a question because they want an answer, or they're asking a question because they want to annoy you, or they're asking a question because they want to impress the people that they know what the question is.

And so, very quickly, you can adjudicate on that. You get it wrong sometimes because you're finite. But God never gets it wrong.

He knows! He knows! Is this a sincere request? Is this somebody coming in faith, saying, Oh, Heavenly Father, I need your wisdom? Or is it somebody who is playing the game, using the language, singing the song, but deep inside they say, But if this wisdom comes out that I don't like, then I reserve the right to just do what I good and well please. That person is a doubter. That person is a non-truster.

That person is not a believer. In the face of trials and fears and disappointments, to come to him properly is to come to him in childlike trust, asking God to help us to see things properly, asking him to help us to see that our trials that he identifies here of many kinds, that our sufferings, our light and momentary afflictions, not worthy to be compared to the glory that is going to be revealed in us. It's gonna take wisdom to see things in that way, isn't it? We just were singing about, Oh, Father, you are sovereign in all the worlds you made.

Okay, that's fine. Then it narrows down. Oh, Father, you are sovereign in my little world.

Really? If anyone likes wisdom about this, they should ask God. But ask in such a way so that you know and God knows that we're serious about getting an answer. You see, if we're gonna ask him properly, we need to ask him for the wisdom that we require so that we can live in the way that we should.

Father, I'm asking you for your wisdom so that I might walk in your way. And God knows whether we want to walk in his way or not. I know this can't be true, but sometimes I think to myself, I'm sure God goes, Oh, turn channel 3 off.

Let's beg again. Turn him off for now. We'll bring him back in when he's serious.

We'll bring him back in when he's honest. Because honesty lies at the heart of any appeal to an earthly father or to a heavenly father. And our earthly fathers are pretty good at knowing whether we're coming right or wrong.

Our heavenly Father is absolutely unerring in his understanding of it. That's why when I drive to somewhere with this weekend to go to speak at the Moody Conference and all these thousands of people in this big place, and stand up there with your knees knocking behind the pulpit, and as you're going along in the thing, you have to be honest. Father, in many ways, I don't want to go here tonight.

Secondly, I don't even know why I want to go. I don't know whether I want to go because I like a lot of people listening to me talk, or whether I really want your truth to come home to their lives. Lord, I need your help in this, because that's dead honest who I am, and that's how I'm going in this cab.

Lord, since I know that, let me help you with this. As opposed to, Oh, I thank you that I am now going to the great Moody Bible Institute, and I'm greatly concerned for your glory. Lord goes, Off! Channel 3, off! Off! Begg's started it again.

Turn him off. Turn him off. We'll get him back later.

It's stupidity, isn't it? I mean, of all the things we could do is come before God with a pack of lies or nonsense. It's the craziest thing in the entire universe that we would ever try and impress people when we pray. Of all times.

Of all times. Of all times. What do we need? Wisdom.

What should we do? Ask, finally. What will we find? What will we find? Let's do this in reverse order--negative, and then we'll finish on a positive note. What will we find? Well, we'll find that when we try to hedge our bets--right? When he asks, he must believe and not doubt.

We try to hedge our bets. If we try to ride two horses at once--one horse is called faith and the other is called doubts--not only will we find ourselves at odds within ourselves, but, says James categorically, that

man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. Wow! I thought you always got stuff.

I thought you could ask, you know, anytime, anywhere, whatever, you always got stuff. Apparently not. Apparently not.

There's a way to come before God in prayer and get zilch. Well, I don't like the sound of that. And neither do you.

So I need to find out what it is that causes that so that that won't happen, so that when I come to God in prayer, I'm on the receiving end of his bounty and his goodness and his fatherly provision. That's a fair expectation. What's the issue here? James is addressing the issue of divided loyalty.

Divided loyalty. I don't think what James is saying here is that if a person has ever had any doubts--intellectual doubts, cognitive dissonance in their minds about the truth of God's Word--that they can't ever come to God and ask him for things, because he won't give them anything. Any thinking person doubts, even if it's only for a moment or two.

Wow! Is that true? And what we need to do is to learn how to doubt our doubts as much as we doubt our certainties. No, I think that what James is on about here is that the doubter is the person whose prayers and whose actions are so clearly at odds with each other. They come before God and ask for things.

They've got no intention of doing what they ask for. It's like Augustine's famous prayer, Lord, make me pure, but not yet. See? That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord, because he is a doubter.

He doesn't ask in faith. He says, I want to be a pure person, but it's Friday. That's not a good time to start this.

Let's start it Monday. No. No.

It's not gonna work. To receive the gifts of God, the gift of wisdom, and all that comes with it, is to say no to hypocrisy--the kind of hypocrisy which prays for wisdom and acts in foolishness, which says certain things before God in the quietness of our hearts, but deep inside we know, We don't really want this. Lord, I want your wisdom.

Well, my wisdom is that you sever this relationship because it's wrong. Thank you for that. I'm not interested in it.

What I want is my way, and I'd like you to bless it. Sorry, no can do. No, the prayer for wisdom is the Solomon's prayer, the discerning between right and wrong.

And when we pray for wisdom and ask God for wisdom, and his wisdom returns and says, This is in and this is out, the only way forward is to adjudicate in and out according to what God says. To try and do it the other way is a fiasco. It's a disaster.

And that kind of individual is like a wave of the sea tossed and blown about by the wind. He is Versailles, a double-minded man, and he's unstable in all he does. I just say a word to the girls here.

I could do it for the men, but I'm choosing to feel favorably towards my sisters this morning. If you are dating this kind of character, dump him immediately. Dump him immediately.

In fact, you have my permission to take your cell phone out right now and send him a text message, which says, Good-bye, Charlie. You and I are finished. You're finished, because I've noted that what you'd say when you do these little prayers you want to do with me is vastly different from what you want to do with me when we're not praying.

You can't pray over here and pray over there. So make up your mind. You're like a double-minded man.

You're all stunned, stable in all your ways. Yes, finish with him. If he squares up, we can have the conversation.

If he doesn't, it's over, and you ought to have a party and have all your friends come in--the Good-bye, Charlie party--because he is out the door. If he won't buckle down when you're dating him, you don't have a chance of doing anything with him after you're married to him. God might fix him.

We know that. But in all things, over thirty-one years, you either cry now or cry then. Choose when you want to cry.

And that's just a little parenthetical thing for the girls. Let me end on a positive note. What do we need wisdom? What should we do? Ask.

What will we find? We'll find that if we come at this trying to go up the escalator and down the escalator simultaneously, we'll rip ourselves apart and everybody else with us. However, if we come to God sincerely and in complete honesty, he promises, James says, to give generously to all and without finding fault. He doesn't make us feel guilty or foolish for coming back to him with the same or a similar question.

He's not like a really bad high school teacher. He's like a really good high school teacher, to the nth degree. I have a theory about teachers, but that's for another day.

All I can tell you is that in my own educational journey, there is no question but that my affinity for and interest in the arts rather than the sciences was in large measure directly tied to the approachability of those who worked with me between the ages of twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. That's not to say that I'm not brain dead, scientifically and mathematically. There is, I think, general evidence to that end.

But what I'm saying is this, that the ability to go back to somebody with the same question again and not have them say, Beg? Go away for the rest of my life! But to say, Okay, come on, you asked me this on Tuesday, you asked me Friday, now it's Monday, I know you're asking me again. Come in here, let me try and help you with this. As opposed to my science teacher, who thought that the best way to make sure that I understood the periodic table of the elements was not to take them in through my eyes, but was apparently to take them in through my hands, with a large leather belt that used to beat me because I didn't know the periodic table of the elements.

Started off that I cared, then I didn't care very much, then I couldn't care less, and frankly, na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na. But God our Father is not waiting for the chance to go, Oh, not you again. Oh, come on, how many times are you gonna ask me the question? No.

He gives generously to all and without finding fault. That's why I was quoting Friday night at Moody the Johnny Cash song from his Man in Black album, you know. I talk to Jesus every day, and he's interested in every word I say.

And no secretary ever tells me he's being called away. I talk to Jesus every day. And often about the same stuff.

Why? Because the trials are real, and the disappointments are obvious, and the hills are steep, and I need wisdom. And so do you. That's why, when you come to someone who has that empathetic capacity--like the late Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Cogan, who was a wonderful pastor to his own flock before ever he assumed the position that became his--it was said of Cogan--listen to this--he gave consistent advice to the puzzled, warm encouragement to the promising, and compassion to the perplexed.

Consistent advice to the puzzled, warm encouragement to the promising, and compassion to the perplexed. That, I suggest to you, is godlike. Godlike.

At that point, James then goes on and says, Let's think about this wisdom thing in relationship to somebody who doesn't have much in the world--a poor person. How will wisdom affect the way a poor person deals with their universe? And then let's think about how it affects somebody who is rich in financial terms in the world. How will wisdom affect them? That's verses 9, 10, and 11, and that's our study this evening.

And for now, our time has passed. Let us pray. Father, thank you for the Bible.

Thank you for James and for this particular letter. Help us, Lord, to be on the receiving end of all that is of yourself and to quickly disregard anything and everything that is extraneous, irrelevant, untrue, unhelpful, unwise. We want desperately to learn in the midst of our circumstances.

We ask you for wisdom. We ask you to help us to act simply and properly. And we thank you for being such a generous and gracious God.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with each one now and forevermore. Amen. That concludes this message.

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