

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 20: James**

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###### The Wisdom of the Kingdom: James

Wisdom, from a biblical perspective, is not the mere possession of knowledge but the process of employing knowledge correctly in order to please God. In the Old Testament, God inspired what came to be known as Wisdom literature—the books of Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes—to give his people practical instruction in how to live wisely and in the fear of the Lord.

At the heart of all Wisdom literature, as at the heart of the entire Old Testament, was the pressing reality of a coming kingdom, a kingdom whose principles and standards were foreshadowed in the admonitions and aphorisms presented in those ancient Wisdom texts.

In the New Testament, as we’ve seen in this course repeatedly, the kingdom foreshadowed in the Old Testament is finally here. The dawning of this new and glorious age begs some important questions for Christians in their pursuit of wisdom. In light of the gospel, has God left us any instruction about how to live wisely? What does wisdom look like this side of Calvary?

There is nothing quite like the book of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes in the New Testament, let alone a case study of the magnitude of the one found in the Book of Job. Yet there is no question that in the gospel, God has unveiled the ultimate wisdom for his people. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

22For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

This morning, in the hopes of addressing the question of Wisdom in the kingdom of God, we turn to the book of James. Not unlike Old Testament Wisdom literature in structure and tone, the book is also—perhaps more so than any other book in the New Testament—directly informed by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

We’ll begin our study with a look at the purpose, background, context, and structure of James before turning to major themes and, in keeping with spirit of the letter, some practical application for our lives.

# **Purpose**

# So, why was the book of James written? To begin with, it was written to encourage Christians after the persecution that began with the stoning of Stephen in **Acts 7–8**. We can see this in the opening verses. “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,” it says in verse 2. The book, however, clearly intends not only to encourage but also to exhort young Christians to pursue wisdom. The author suggests that an essential element, and even a primary means, of persevering in the Christian life is wise living.

# Twice, in verse **1:5** and verses **3:13–18**, the author exhorts his readers to ask for and to demonstrate wisdom. The book teems with example after example of what a life of wisdom entails. But ultimately, such wisdom is summed up in a manner very consistent with what we see in the Old Testament. The book of Proverbs, if you recall, declares, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The book of James, at its climax in **chapter 4 verses 4-10**, in characteristically blunt yet pastoral language, puts it like this:

**4** You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. **5** Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? **6** But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ **7** Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Draw near to God, and he will draw near you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. **9** Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. **10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

# As these verses demonstrate, wisdom in the New Testament, as in the Old, is ultimately an issue of repentance and faith, of turning away from the world and turning to God, through Christ, in humble devotion and faith. James wrote his letter precisely so that Christians would know how to apply the Gospel to their lives in a variety of situations, so that they might indeed live wisely and in the fear of the Lord.

# **Authorship & Date**

The Book of James takes its title from James, Jesus’ half brother and the man whom most scholars credit with authoring the book. The authority which comes through in the inordinate amount of imperative verbs in the letter matches the authority of James that we see in his speech to the council of elders in Jerusalem in Acts 15:13-21. James, who was also a key leader in the early church in Jerusalem, was martyred in 62 AD, which means he wrote his eponymous letter before then, perhaps even as early as 45 AD, several years before the Jerusalem Council. The general idea is that if he had written his letter *after* he met the apostle Paul at the Jerusalem Council, the letter would have more clearly dealt with the way Paul taught about justification. So it must have been written prior to the Council, which was sometime around 48 AD. If this is correct, it would make the book of James the oldest book in the New Testament.

#  **Context & Emphasis**

With the Book of James, understanding context is of the utmost importance. We don’t have to read very far into the book before coming across passages that, on the surface at least, appear to contradict other foundational New Testament teachings, particularly regarding the connection between faith and works.

So let’s just get it out there and tackle it: I am thinking specifically of verses such as **James 2:24**, which states: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” Juxtaposing this text against Paul’s teaching in **Romans 3:28**—“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”—some theologians in church history, even Martin Luther for a short time, have concluded that James undermines the biblical truth of justification by faith alone.

So, was James off his rocker on this point? Do Paul and James in fact contradict each other? Well, to start, we know that James and Paul accepted one another as fellow believers. In Gal 2:9 James extends the right hand of fellowship to Paul. In Acts 21:18-20 James praises Paul’s ministry. So James and Paul themselves didn’t think they disagreed. But how do we reconcile the two and be faithful to Scripture? To answer these questions, it is helpful to contrast the divergent yet equally worrisome teachings that prompted Paul and James to write their respective letters.

When Paul uses the word *justified*, he is employing it in a legal sense, as a word that means *being declared not guilty*. In Romans, Paul is addressing the claims of the so-called Judaizers, who taught that God declared people guilty or innocent based upon their actions. Paul counters by arguing that we are justified before God not by the works of our hands, which only ever supply damning evidence of our guilt, but by faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done on our behalf. When Paul uses the word “justification” he is meaning a “declaration of righteousness.”

In Romans, as it were, we are in the courtroom. In James, however, we have moved into the court of public opinion. When James uses the word *justified*, he means *a visible, public vindication of a personal claim- or a “demonstration of righteousness*.” James is countering a common misunderstanding among wealthy Jewish leaders in Jerusalem—perhaps even influenced by a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching. These hypocrites taught that works were of little-to-no importance so long as people believed the right things. In contrast, James argues that Christian faith is not justified, or *vindicated*, by hollow orthodoxy, but by works that provide evidence of true faith.

In short, both James and Paul agree that, to quote Martin Luther, justification is by faith alone by never by faith that *is* alone. Instead, it is always accompanied by a life of obedience, love, and the fear of the Lord.

# **Structure & Outline**

So, with that as the purpose and context for the letter, how does James actually accomplish this? Deceptively short, the Book of James wastes few words. In five concise chapters, the author packs in more than 50 imperative verbs, a literary device that gives the writing a force disproportionate to its relative brevity. As in the book of Proverbs, the material is often presented in the form of pithy sayings grouped around particular themes. Many of these sayings, or aphorisms, carry the residue of Jesus’ teachings in the gospels. For this reason, some scholars have characterized James as a kind of Cliff’s Notes to, or greatest-hits album of, Jesus’ core teachings. Although it can have a “collected sayings” feel to it, the letter nevertheless follows a loose structure, which we can outline, roughly, as follows:

Chapter 1 Introduction of major arenas: Wisdom is displayed through testing (**1:2-5**), and specifically in 3 arenas of life: generosity (**1:27**), speech (**1:19-26**), and attitude towards money (**1:9-11**). We then spend the rest of the letter stepping through each of these individually.

Chapter 2 First, testing through generosity: Favoritism is forbidden (**2:1-15**), which leads to a discussion of faith and deeds.

Chapters 3-4 Second, testing through speech: Taming the tongue **3:1-12**, prayer (**4:1-3**), slander and boasting (**4:11-17**)

Chapter 5 And finally, testing through our attitude toward wealth **(1:1-6)**, followed by a summary and a conclusion **(5:7-20)**

**VI. Major Themes** (Take questions after each one)

But James has some common things to say about wisdom displayed in each of these three arenas of life (that is, generosity, speech, and money), just like we see some common themes across all the varied topics in the book of Proverbs. For the rest of the class today, we’ll look at three of these themes and how they play out in all three of the arenas of life featured in the book of James. A) the harmony between the law and the gospel, B) faithful submission to God as the means to a blessed life, and C) practical obedience. Let’s take some time to unpack each of these themes, starting with harmony between the law and the gospel.

**A. Harmony between the law and the gospel**

Although less explicit than the other themes in the book of James, the harmony between the Old Testament and the New, between the law and the gospel, is the backdrop against which the entire book is written, and forms the basis for how wisdom is to be displayed in the three arenas of life James deals with: generosity, speech, and wealth.

In the Bible, the law has three intended uses. The first use of the law is to restrain sin and provide for a civil society. This is law in the sense that Paul writes of it in **Romans 1 and 2**. The second use of the law, which Paul writes of in **Galatians 3**, is to convict people of their sins and lead them to Christ. You see this also in the Sermon on the Mount. As Jesus says, unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God. Impossible, you say! Exactly the point. Jesus’ explanation of the law is intended to drive us to the cross by proving to us that we cannot possibly be good enough for God in our own strength.

But there is a third use of the law, the one that James is most concerned with, and that is the law as a guide for how Christians should live in light of the gospel. Going back to the sermon on the mount, for example, once we have been driven to the cross, and have accepted Christ’s righteousness lived on our behalf, we can now go back to that sermon and find incredible wisdom for how we should live the Christian life. Even as Christians, imperative verbs are important. And that’s what we see here in James. The third use of the law. Now, this distinction is important to understand as we read the imperatives James gives to his readers. As we’ve already discussed, James is not commanding his readers to work for their salvation but rather to show they are saved by their good works. This kind of living is not arbitrary moralism but evidence that we have found wisdom in the gospel, that we are living in the fear of the Lord.

Christ often spoke about the law in this way, and as we previously mentioned, the book of James is heavily dependent of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as he goes about instructing us on how we should live now that God’s kingdom has come. In your handout, you’ll see a chart that shows different passages in James alongside Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount as recounted in the gospel of Matthew. I’ll read the first few of these, and leave the rest for your personal reference.

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| **James** | **Matthew** |
| 1:2 | Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds  | 5:11f. | Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. |
| 1:4 | And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.  | 5:48 | You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. |
| 1:5 | If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. | 7:7 | Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.  |
| 1:17 | Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.  | 7:11 | If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!  |
| 1:20 | For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.  | 5:22 | But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire.  |
| 1:22-24 | But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.  | 7:24-26 | “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 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.  |
| 2:5 | Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?  | 5:3-5 | “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”  |
| 2:10-11 | For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”  | 5:19-22 | Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire.  |
| 2:13 | For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.  | 5:7 | Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.  |
| 3:12 | Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.  | 7:16 | You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?  |
| 3:18 | And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.  | 5:9 | Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God |
| 4:2-3 | You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.  | 7:7-8 | Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knowck, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.  |
| 4:4 | You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.  | 6:24 | No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and espies the other. You cannot serve God and money.  |
| 4:8 | Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded.  | 6:22 | The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, |
| 4:9 | Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.  | 5:4 | Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.  |
| 4:11-12 | Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?  | 7:1 | Judge not, that you be not judged.  |
| 4:13-14 | Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” –Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.  | 6:34 | Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.  |
| 5:2 | Your riches have rotted and your garments are motheaten.  | 6:19-20 | Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.  |
| 5:9 | Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. | 5:22, 7:1 | But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. Judge not, that you be not judged.  |
| 5:10 | As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.  | 5:11-12 | Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.  |
| 5:12 | But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.  | 5:34-35 | But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.  |

**B. Faithful submission**

Let’s turn now to the second theme of James, faithful submission to God. William Dumbrell, an Old Testament scholar, has remarked, “[M]eaning in life cannot be understood within the human compass, but only within the framework of a vision of God.” If you have ever grappled with the problems of suffering and evil, or the seeming injustices of this world, you know the truth of those words. Nothing in our world finally makes sense apart from a proper fear and reverence for the God who made, sustains and redeems our world.

According to the book of James, the path to a blessed life in the kingdom begins, first and foremost, with submission to the Lord and to what he says about the world. Any wisdom that has anything else as its starting point is foolishness. In **James 3:13-18**, we read of the stark contrasts between the so-called “wisdom” of this world and the wisdom of God:

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

The wisdom of the world, as this passage makes patently clear, stands in direct opposition to the wisdom that comes down from heaven. In fact, blind or willful adherence to the world’s wisdom is more than mere foolishness—it is an affront against the Lord. “Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world,” we read in **James 4:4**, “becomes an enemy of God.” So, James calls us, bluntly yet lovingly, to “Humble [o]urselves before the Lord,” and he bookends this command with a sweet promise. If you do this, the verse continues, “He will exalt you.”

And so this motivates action. As we read in 4:17, “whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” Simple, but powerful as a principle to combat apathy and procrastination. Good must be done today. Not tomorrow.

## **C. Practical obedience**

## A final theme native to the book of James is practical obedience. The author spends most of his time here. To James, obedience to God’s word in our daily lives is the ultimate display of wisdom. “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” as it says in **James 1: 25**. True blessing, according to James, proceeds from applying God’s word directly to our lives.

## Far from a passive enterprise, Christianity is actually an active process of continually heeding God’s word as we hear it preached in community and meditate on it in our quiet times. Christianity is more than just a belief system; it is also a way of life—a faith with implications on how we think and act. Christians, James concludes, are to be doers of God’s word.

## As the book of James progresses, the author tethers this overarching admonition that Christians should be doers of God’s word to some specific areas of life:

**Generous Love**

**James 2:1-16**, for instance, entreats Christians to **love others generously**. In these verses, we learn that there was a temptation among the churches to whom James was writing to show favoritism to people based upon worldly prestige, and so James calls them back to the kind of undiscriminating and merciful love that Christ has displayed towards them in the gospel. He commands in **2:12-13**: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” To show favoritism is to forget that we have been shown grace by God, grace that we, an unfaithful band of sinners, did not deserve to receive from a holy God. The fact that we have received such mercy in Christ should compel us to show love and mercy towards others.

**Careful Speech**

In **James 3:1-12** and then in **James 4**:**1–3** and **11-17**, James gives instruction concerning **speech**, the way we use our tongues toward God and others. “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God . . . “ it says in **3:9-10**, and continues, “My brothers, these things ought not to be so.” The language in these verses is poetic and leavened with some potent metaphors. James compares the human tongue to, among other things, a tiny spark that can nevertheless engulf a mighty forest in flames.

A loose tongue, to James, reveals a lack of self-control, and a lack of self-control reveals a void of reverence and submission towards God. Indeed, an untamed tongue reveals a fundamental lack of wisdom and invites judgment from God instead of blessing. What comes out of our mouths—whether slander or praise, gossip or words of encouragement, silence or prayer—bears testimony about the condition of our hearts. For that reason, James entreats Christians to tame their tongues and take speech seriously.

Incidentally, as regards the most difficult decisions we face in our speech—when we are in relational conflict—James has some profound insight for us. Chapter 4, verse 1. “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” As you understand it, that little gem of a thought can completely transform your relationships in this world. Fights and quarrels don’t come, James says, because of something the other person did, or because you had a bad day, or you’re tired, or your personalities don’t click. Fights and quarrels come from desires that battle within you. Verse 2: “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.” Paul Tripp’s book, “War of Words” is a great resource to help you understand the profound implications of this little verse on your life.

## **Compassionate Wealth**

## Throughout the book, James also cautions his readers about wealth. In **1:9-11**, by comparing a rich man to a wild flower that has no sooner bloomed than withered in the field, he reminds us that worldly riches are ultimately fleeting. Later, in **James 4:13-14**, he warns against the pride and boasting that often erupts from the fount of worldly success: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’ –yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life?”

## But we know that wealth in and of itself is not sinful: Jesus himself calls Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, ‘son of Abraham’ in Luke 19:9. In 1:10, James calls rich believers “to take pride in his low position.” But lest we think James is calling Christians to avoid wealth entirely, to take up a vow of poverty, he gives some positive examples of how to handle money appropriately, namely by using it to bless others, instead of hoarding it for ourselves. “Religion,” it says in **James 1:27**, that God our Father will “visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Because we have been so richly blessed in Christ, we are called, and freed, to use the wealth that we do have to bless others.

#  **Application**

So, what does wisdom look like in the Kingdom of God? Well, the life of wisdom, according to the book of James, is a life lived in submission to God, a life of faith evidenced by works. Hopefully, as we’ve covered topics like applying the law to our lives, faithful submission, practical obedience, careful speech, and compassionate wealth love, you’ve been encouraged and challenged in different areas of your life. I wonder, which of these is the hardest for you?

Let’s conclude with a few more points of application.. We could come up with dozens, but here are three I’d like to leave us with:

**1. Pursue true wisdom**

If you are tempted, as I often am, to look to this world for wisdom as opposed to God’s word, let James be both a warning and an encouragement to you. The wisdom that leads to a blessed life comes only from God and his Word. Let God’s Word be the roadmap for your life. “Humble yourself,” as James commands, “and he will exalt you.”

**2. Examine your relationships**

James’ admonition to avoid favoritism should cause us to examine, among other things, our relationships and social interactions. Who are your friends and the people you often find yourself gravitating towards and reaching out to? Are they people who dress a certain way? People who have a certain type of job? People with interests that line-up, line by line, with ours? Or are we loving people indiscriminately, mindful of how God has loved us in Christ?

**3. Commit to meditating on James**

Hold James’ definition of Christian faith—a faith that produces good works—up to your life like a mirror and respond accordingly. Ask a friend about what fruit they have seen in your life in the past few months, especially in regards to the way you speak, handle money, and serve others. Ask them to help you brainstorm ways to grow in glorifying God in those areas. There are passages in James, which if taken to heart, can change our lives and relationships, so we should spend time reading it, meditating on it, even memorizing verses from it.