

### The Wisdom of James

Are you wondering what's going on? The storytelling came from the first three chapters of Genesis, the scripture reading was from Proverbs, and the sermon title mentions the book of James. A cartoon from the most recent edition of *Anabaptist World* might be appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

Preacher: Did you enjoy my sermon on Genesis 1?

Woman: In the beginning.

Preacher: And how was my sermon after the beginning?

Woman: Without form and void.

I trust that won't be the case today. We'll see.

This fall we're using scripture from the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis of our worship. In September, this includes readings from Proverbs and James. I'll be focusing mostly on James, but I thought it would be good to get a taste of Proverbs too. If you've watched the videos on Proverbs and James from *The Bible Project* linked in the bulletin, you'll soon realize that I'm drawing heavily from them in my remarks.

Except for the first nine chapters and the last part of the last one, we tend not to read entire chapters of Proverbs.<sup>2</sup> The first nine chapters contain ten speeches from a father to a son and four poems of Lady Wisdom. The last section of Proverbs 31 is a poem about a wise woman, perhaps better known as a virtuous woman. The intervening twenty-one chapters contain hundreds of ancient, mostly two-line proverbs about a wide variety of topics. The chapter we heard today, chapter 22, contains sayings about reputation, wealth, poverty, humility, child-rearing, justice, generosity, relationships, character, justice, anger, debt, and work. It's difficult to determine any system of organization in this collection of sayings so, unlike most other books in the Bible, there's no problem in pulling a few verses out of a chapter in Proverbs without looking at the context.

According to the prologue of the book, the proverbs were collected for the gaining of wisdom and the fear of the Lord. Wisdom is more than an accumulation of knowledge. Wisdom involves skill, the ability to apply knowledge to everyday situations. The fear of the Lord refers to a healthy sense of awe for God and an acknowledgment of our human place in the world. God is God and we are not. These proverbs, then, are to be used to develop practical skills. They are a guide for living well in God's world.

The proverbs deal in probabilities. If you honor God and heed their advice, it's likely that things will go great. If you do not honor God and don't heed their advice, it's likely that things will go poorly.

However, proverbs are not promises. There are no guarantees. The proverbs focus on the general rule, not the exceptions. Consider one of the most quoted sayings found in the chapter we read today. (I'll read it from the King James Version because that's the way we most often hear it.) *Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*<sup>3</sup> It's important for parents to teach their children well and provide a safe, stable, loving home for them as they mature, but that doesn't guarantee that their children will make the decisions and live their lives the way their parents want them to when they are adults.

Life is too complex for formulas. In fact, we find two books in the Bible, Ecclesiastes and Job, that illustrate exceptions to the rules that if you live right things will go well and if you don't, they will go poorly.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Edwards, "Loaves and Fishsticks," *Anabaptist World*, August 27, 2021, [Issue Archive | Anabaptist World](#)

<sup>2</sup> Background on Proverbs comes from The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/proverbs/>

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 22:6, *King James Version*

All three of these books – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job – are considered wisdom literature. They all explore how to live well in God’s world. Wisdom is neither law nor prophecy. Wisdom is the accumulated insight of God’s people through generations. It’s guidance for how to live in a way that honors God and other people.

This brings us, then, to the book of James.<sup>4</sup> This book is actually a letter, one of the few in the New Testament not attributed to the Apostle Paul. It is written by James, the half-brother of Jesus and a leader of the first Christian church of Jerusalem. (That’s literally the very first Christian church in the world, not simply the first one in the city of Jerusalem.) James writes to all of Jesus’ followers scattered throughout the nations outside the land of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Like the book of Proverbs, the letter of James is filled with short, challenging wisdom speeches that are full of metaphors and easily memorized one-liners. Along with Proverbs, the book is also heavily influenced by Jesus’ teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>6</sup>

James doesn’t teach new theology. He challenges beliefs on how they should live, covering topics such as speech, favoritism, love, wealth, and hardship. When believers listen to and obey God’s word, they show their love for God and for others. Their actions match their words. The goal is to live lives of wholeness and integrity rather than lives that are fractured and inconsistent.

The lectionary reading for this Sunday is from James 2. This passage speaking against showing favoritism instead of love was the basis for worship on a Sunday during our summer series on seeking justice together. Instead of focusing on that passage today, we’re going to read the first chapter of the book. This introduces the main ideas and key words found in the rest of the letter.

James begins by talking about life’s trials. *My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*<sup>7</sup>

James knows that life is hard, but he considers life’s trials and hardships as gifts that produce endurance and shape character. While the NRSV talks about maturity and completeness, some translations use the word “perfect” in verse 4. When we read about being perfect in James or in other biblical books, it might be more helpful to think about wholeness and integrity instead. God’s desire for us is to live integrated lives where our actions are consistent with our values and beliefs based on the teachings of Jesus. Most of us live as fractured people with inconsistencies in our character. We all are more compromised than we want to admit. But God is on a mission to restore fractured people and make them whole, to make them perfect. This wholeness begins with wisdom which helps us to see hardships from a new perspective.

The next section of the letter encourages us to ask in faith for wisdom. *If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.*<sup>8</sup> Gaining wisdom is a journey. The asking for and receiving of wisdom happens over the course of a lifetime, but James assures us that God does give wisdom along the way to those who ask in faith.

Next, James moves on to poverty and riches – topics he addresses several more times in this letter. *Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will*

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<sup>4</sup> Background on James comes from The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/james/>

<sup>5</sup> James 1:1

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5-7

<sup>7</sup> James 1:2-4, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> James 1:5-8, NRSV

wither away.<sup>9</sup> James encourages many of his readers by reminding them that poverty can force them to trust God. He challenges other readers by warning them that wealth will pass away.

The letter continues with more encouragement for those who are enduring hardship and temptation. *Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.*<sup>10</sup>

*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.*<sup>11</sup> God is generous and gives new birth through Jesus. We are to be generous too so that others also will receive the gift of new life.

The first chapter of James ends with admonition to follow the words and example of Jesus, especially regarding anger, obedience, and speech. *You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*<sup>12</sup>

*But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*<sup>13</sup>

*If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*<sup>14</sup>

Don't just listen to God's word but do it. God's law is a law of freedom, calling us to speak with love, serve the poor, and be wholly devoted to God. Jesus' summary of the law is to love God and love neighbor. Easy enough, right?

As we've begun to see and will continue to learn over this month, the wisdom of James challenges and encourages us to live in wholehearted devotion to Jesus. May God give us the wisdom, courage, and energy to follow this call.

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<sup>9</sup> James 1:9-11, NRSV

<sup>10</sup> James 1:12-16, NRSV

<sup>11</sup> James 1:17-18, NRSV

<sup>12</sup> James 1:19-21, NRSV

<sup>13</sup> James 1:22-25, NRSV

<sup>14</sup> James 1:26-27, NRSV