

Wisdom

Our ideas of wisdom and biblical ideas of wisdom are often rather different. Wisdom in the OT is a virtue often linked with understanding or insight, and is immensely practical. It has been described as the art of being successful in life. Biblical wisdom is both religious and practical, rooted in God the ultimate Wisdom, it begins with the fear of God - or knowing God (Psalm 111.10) and extends into all of life. Proverbs is the classic example (1.7, 3.13-26)

In a sense to live wisely is to live life with God at the centre for that is the wisest and best way to live, and this is what James deals with. He explains wisdom in various ways, giving examples and contrasting so we get a full picture of what it looks like to live wisely. Wisdom is practical and is expressed in action but is about our hearts and the action that flows from a heart transformed by Jesus and his Spirit.

Wisdom in James also appears to have correlations to the role/work of the Spirit and fits into the context of prayer. His main assertion appears to be not that people aren't praying but they are praying in the wrong ways and asking for the wrong things (i.e. not wisdom).

The passages below are the ones that deal specifically with instructions about prayer and wisdom but the examples of what a wise life looks like fill his letter. Passages about our speech, how we treat rich and poor, persevering etc all describe the wise life.

James 1.5-8

If we are to be perfect and to move towards maturity (v 4) we need divine help that comes in the form of wisdom. 3 questions can sum up this passage: what is wisdom? What does James teach us about God? And: what does he teach about prayer? We ask in full confidence that our God is generous in his giving and wants us to come to maturity in him, and echoes the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7.7-11, Mark 11.24 etc. The qualifications are not to do with how perfect you are (God gives to all without finding fault) but simply to believe – to be committed to God, or that trusts in God because he is God. The doubt is not about specific instances but doubting that God really is good and is for our best. It could be said that James is not referring to 'feelings' but commitment, someone who wavers – who is not single minded (remember 'pure in heart') but double-minded. If we are not stable/secure in God we are not secure at all. This flows into prayer – God gives when we are one in mind with him as Jesus, but often we ask things that are not in line with what God knows is ultimately best for us.

James 3.13-18

The link here makes it obvious that one of the applications of wisdom is our speech; if the source is pure then the outflow will be too. Wisdom is not displayed intellectually by clever arguments but by a good life. Actions do speak louder than words (Matthew 5.16), but they are rooted in humility (the beatitudes all over again!). The things James describes are to do with how we relate to others but are not simply things to do but what we are to be. James contrasts Godly and worldly wisdom, and lays out the two choices we face and the results. Verse 17 and 18 bring echoes both of the beatitudes and Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5v22-23) and are good verses to learn.

James 4.1-10

This section follows on from 3.18 dealing with the situations of conflict where wisdom has not been shown. In the context of prayer they are not getting what they pray for because they are not asking for the right things, and with the wrong motive – James describes some of the things that block effective prayer. This involves wrong relationships with others that have at root problems in our relationship with God. They want for themselves not for the good of others or the kingdom (see James 5.20). The promises about prayer in the gospels make the assumption that the person's heart is in tune with God's. This is what it means to pray in the name of Jesus – according to his character and will, and why the 'Lord's Prayer' begins by

expressing the desire that God's will would be done. The context James is speaking of is not the trusting child asking for a meal but the greedy child wanting the best bits for themselves. Despite God's anger yet he is gracious (4.6) and there is hope if they humble themselves to experience God's grace instead of continuing in self-sufficiency. James presents them with the steps to do this. Repentance involves a number of steps – resisting temptation, purification, change of attitude, coming near to God and not running away as we often do when conscious of sin. Once again the resonances with the beatitudes are loud and clear.

James 5.13-20

Our response in all situations should be to turn to God. "our whole life should be angled towards God so that whatever strikes us, sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into his presence" (A Motyer). Prayer may not remove the problem but can transform it. James describes types of prayer – personal when in trouble, by the elders for the sick, and with each other – confessing our sinfulness and praying for healing of the spiritual sort to move us towards maturity. James reminds us again of God's generosity and willingness to heal. Prayer certainly is powerful; maybe too often we forget this, which is why James reminds us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective – although we must be careful to note what he is not saying. It does not mean we always get what we pray for and God will always heal physically – the amount of suffering, and endurance throughout God's word negates that 'prosperity gospel – health and wealth' understanding. Trust in God and obedience to his ways are essential in prayer. He does use the example of Elijah (1 Kings 17-19) to encourage us that Elijah was no different to us – he had highs and lows, and God worked powerfully through his prayers – so let's call on that prayer and pray God's kingdom into being – 5.20 is an example of one way to do that.

Prayer is powerful and effective because we stand righteous in God's sight and has supernatural results, but requires patience.

Prayer

There are important qualifications here – if a person is not healed –we must submit as previously to god's will, so perhaps the best way to start is to ask for wisdom to discern how to pray for someone. Just because someone is not healed does not necessarily mean there is a lack of faith. Some may die and not receive physical healing on this earth but are ultimately healed as they receive a new and perfect body as they enter the presence of Jesus. We must be aware of the sensitivities this may arouse of suffering in our families and lives.

Resources

For some of the stuff here especially in chapter 5 it may be helpful to consult what others think (recognising all have different perspectives). John Piper has a helpful sermon in the sermon section on James of the resources library on desiringgod.org. Other good commentaries are:

Message of James – Alec Motyer (IVP)

New International Biblical Commentary on James – PH Davids (Paternoster).

Summary

All of what James says about prayer and wisdom must be taken as a whole – each snapshot makes up a scene of the film. We read the words in James 5 in light of what he previously says about prayer, all in the context of a generous and good God who longs for his children to ask for what he longs to give them.