



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Wisdom of James
(Where Wisdom Is Found,
pp. 27-37)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Wisdom of James

The Letter of James, reverberating with themes of biblical wisdom from ancient Israel through the traditions of Jesus and Paul, calls us to be a wise community that walks and talks the “wisdom from above.”

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 1:1-5, 17-27

Meditation

James calls wisdom the cause of perfection. He knows that faith is tried and tested in affliction. There is no need to ask God for perfect people. What we need are wise people. This is why he encourages those who want to be on top of their afflictions to ask God for wisdom.

Oecumenius (10th Century), Commentary on James

Reflection

What would Christian wisdom look like, and how could we obtain and maintain it, if the conventional views of goodness and the practices of life in the empire around us are corrupt? That is the focus of the Letter of James, written to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion [*diaspora*],” a metaphor for faithful disciples who experience life as “exiles, dislocated and marginalized within an alien world because of their faith,” Robert Wall suggests.

Those early disciples faced many hardships which could lead them toward joyful confidence and a steady allegiance to God (1:2-3), or “give birth to sin...and to death” (1:14-15). The outcome in each case would depend very much on how one responded to the test and the state of one’s hearts (1:13-14). In that cultural pressure-cooker, how could disciples learn to trust God as a generous benefactor and ask God for the know-how they lacked in order to deal with their trials in a wise manner?

Admittedly, James’s “wisdom after so powerful a build-up may seem anticlimactic: ‘let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger’ (1:19b).” Yet in this letter’s three central essays, Wall finds “a fresh and elaborate commentary of this ‘implanted word that has the power to save your souls’ (1:21).”

- ▶ *A wise community walks the talk* (1:22-2:26) by listening quickly to the “perfect law of liberty” that demands merciful treatment of the poor and powerless. Wall translates James 2:1, “Do you have the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” Jesus’ ministry among the poor should be the community’s model of faithfulness. “Abraham and Rahab, are mentioned to underwrite the wisdom of caring for the poor in their distress,” Wall notes. “Their cases are introduced by the common sense assertion that the mere profession of orthodox faith does not save anyone if not demonstrated by works.”
- ▶ *A wise community talks the walk* (3:1-18) through its careful choice of words. Some leaders/teachers may slander one another or to bend the gospel in order to elevate their status. The community should choose leaders who exhibit “wisdom from above” (3:17;



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cf. 1:17-18) rather than those with a selfish character formed by a wisdom that is “devilish” (3:14-16a).

- ▶ *A wise community slows anger* (4:1-5:6) which arises from self-centered desire for material profit. After sharply contrasting friendship with God (cf. 2:23) and “friendship with the world” (4:4; cf. 1:27; 3:6), James dramatizes the corruption of wealth with two examples: the merchant whose travels take him “to such and such a town” rather than God’s kingdom (4:13-17), and the rich farmer who defrauds his workers (5:1-6). “These are the functional atheists who live their lives as though God does not exist,” Wall notes. They “make foolish choices as though there is no future apocalypse when God will judge all people according to what they have done, whether the ‘right thing’ or ‘sin’ (4:17; cf. 4:11-12; 2:13).”

The closing verses (5:19-20) enlist the community members to instruct and forgive “lapsed believers who have ‘wandered from the truth’ of God’s word (cf. 1:18, 21).” Wall concludes, “The real wisdom of James is clarified by these final words of hope: the repentance and restoration of those believers who have failed their test of faith is mediated by the community made wise for salvation by the instruction of this letter (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15).”

Study Questions

1. What advice does James give about “being quick to listen”? If a congregation tries to heed this wisdom today, what obstacles to this practice will it face in the surrounding culture?
2. Discuss James’ instruction about being “slow to speak.” What cultural attitudes or practices make this difficult for us?
3. Discuss James’ instruction about being “slow to anger.” What cultural attitudes or practices make this difficult for us?
4. James 5:7-20 can seem quaint. How does Robert Wall interpret this passage about “the future of the wise community”?
5. Discuss Michael McCullar’s observation: “Scripture places experiential knowledge alongside supernatural insight provided through the Holy Spirit. There is no sense of ‘going it alone’...in the letter penned by James.”

Departing Hymn: “God of Grace and God of Glory” (vv. 1 and 5)

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
crown your ancient Church’s story,
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969), alt.

Tune: CWM RHONDDA

The Wisdom of James

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Three Session Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Read James 1:1-2:26 / 3:1-18 / 4:1-5:20
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss appropriate sections of Wall's article
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 / 2 and 5 / 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the Letter of James describes the wise community of Jesus' disciples.
2. To discuss this letter's instruction on three topics—listening quickly, speaking slowly, and slowing anger—and the obstacles we face in heeding this advice.
3. To examine the letter's underlying conception of Christian wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the disciple community.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory" locate the familiar tune CWM RHONDDA in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

"Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle supported wisdom based on sagacious experience combined with personal intelligence. In effect, the individual could think his or her way through life's issues through a combination of brainpower and experience," Michael McCullar has written. "Conversely, Scripture places experiential knowledge alongside supernatural insight provided through the Holy Spirit. There is no sense of 'going it alone' in the scriptural wisdom writings, especially in the letter penned by James." ("James in Wisdom Literature," quoted in *Where Wisdom is Found*, p. 64)

Human wisdom—in regard both to theoretical knowledge and practical know-how—is not something we can accomplish and maintain by ourselves. Rather, it requires the community of faithful disciples. This is the challenging heart of the counter-cultural message of the Letter of James.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the wisdom of the Letter of James, which can be a mirror for examining our disciple communities.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read James 1:1-5 and 1:17-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study introduces the Letter of James as a Christian instruction in wise living. If you devote only one session to this topic, emphasize the *diaspora* context of the early Christian communities, present the underlying

conception of Christian wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the disciple community, and sketch what Robert Wall calls “the three essays” at the heart of the letter’s instruction. If time permits, ask three individuals to read the “essays” aloud.

Since Robert Wall’s essay, “The Wisdom of James,” is a wonderful, brief commentary on the entire Letter of James, consider extending your group study to several sessions in order to explore the letter more carefully. For example, in one session you might review the cultural context of the letter’s first audience (1:1-21) and discuss the first essay on “quick listening” (1:22-2:26). In another session, discuss the second essay on “speaking slowly” (3:1-18) and consider the conception of Christian wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the disciple community. In a third session, discuss the essay on “slowing anger” (4:1-5:6) and consider how the wise community responds to folly and unfaithfulness among its members (5:7-20).

Study Questions

1. The theme in the first essay is obeying the “perfect law of liberty” as a community through merciful actions toward the poor. Members may mention obstacles like the *individualism* that prevents us from identifying with the poor, or working with others to help them; a *consumer mentality* that asks “What’s in it for me?”; an *avoidance of responsibility* that says “It’s the government’s business”; a preference for *privacy* and *keeping one’s distance* that leads us to pay someone else to deal with the poor; *fear that we are not trained* to fix the problems; etc.
2. The theme of the second essay is finding careful teachers that communicate Christian wisdom faithfully, especially to members within the community. In addition to all of the cultural obstacles mentioned in response to question one, which apply here as well, members might mention the *desire to be admired* for teaching novelties, *envy of other’s wisdom*, etc. Consider what spiritual and educational practices prepare a person to receive “wisdom from above” and be a good communicator of Christian wisdom. How can wise congregations encourage those who are timid to share their wisdom, without pushing them toward vanity?
3. The theme of the third essay is avoiding the anger that arises from greed and envy, from a losing comparison of oneself with other people’s accomplishments or wealth. This is difficult in a market economy because we tend to value ourselves on the basis of our success in being consumers – in having more and better (more desirable, rare, or environmentally friendly) products or services. We are tempted to take a consumerist approach to personal relationships, which will turn us into consumers of one another. Those “practical atheists,” the merchant (4:13-17) and rich farmer (5:1-6), seem like only slight exaggerations of the crafty consumers we admire. How can wise congregations teach members to live as stewards of divine gifts of wealth and possessions?
4. Some may think this section is quaint because it predicts “the coming of the Lord is near” (5:8) and centers attention on an unusual practice of “anointing [the sick] with oil in the name of the Lord” (5:14). Wall sees 5:7-12 and 5:13-20 as parallel statements, each with “a triad of exhortations that recall important catchwords from the letter’s opening.” Anticipating the coming triumph of Christ encourages readers to reject the ways of the empire and embrace the community’s wisdom. Wall notes, “Patience and prayerfulness are the twin dispositions of an apocalyptic worldview.” Anointing the sick with oil may invoke the presence of Christ who “will raise them up” at the end of the age or in physical healing. Discuss how these practices, and the forgiveness of wayward members (5:19-20), witnessed to the truth of Christ’s reign. Are these or similar practices appropriate in the Church today?
5. In the extended quotation (*Where Wisdom is Found*, p. 64), Michael McCullar contrasts the ancient Greek conception of wisdom as “based on sagacious experience combined with personal intelligence” with the scriptural conception of wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the practices of the disciple community. Discuss how the Letter of James emphasizes the roles of God and the community in the formation of Christian wisdom. For many people today, “wisdom” has negative connotations of being disengaged from real life, self-aggrandizing, and even prideful. How would James respond to these charges?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.