

JUDSON BIBLE

JOURNEYS

FOR ADULTS

SUMMER 2020

Many Faces of Wisdom

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Many Faces of Wisdom

JOURNEYS • SUMMER 2020

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About the Study

In this quarter, God is experienced as Wisdom in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Unit I, “Wisdom in Proverbs,” covering the first four sessions, explores how Wisdom calls to us and the value of Wisdom and the gifts she offers. Unit II, “Wisdom in the Gospels” offers one session from each of the four Gospels that examines the wisdom of God seen in the teachings and life of Jesus. Unit III, “Faith and Wisdom in James,” offers a five-session study of wisdom as seen in the Letter of James. These sessions explore the interaction of faith and wisdom, including practical advice regarding faith in action and taming the tongue.

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The Call of Wisdom

.....
SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 1:1-4, 7-10, 20-22, 32-33

KEY VERSE: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” —Proverbs 1:7
.....

Not an Opinion

Mary Cosby, the cofounder of Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., said she saw a similarity between many of the teachings of Scripture and a common road sign in rural Virginia. The sign read, “Bridges Ice Up Before Roads.” She noted that the sign didn’t actually tell motorists to do anything; it simply gave them some facts and let them respond accordingly. Drivers could speed over a possibly icy bridge and deal with the consequences, or they could slow down and heed the free information. The Scriptures, Cosby observed, often tell readers the way things are, leaving them free to alter their course or plow on to unnecessary pain. Proverbs is an example of the kind of Scripture Cosby had in mind. This Book of Wisdom rarely addresses the way life should be or could be, but instead explains the way things *are* and leaves the response to the reader.

This Book of Wisdom explains the way things are and leaves the response to the reader.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can you think of other road signs that merely give information and let the driver choose how to respond?
- Which teachings of Scripture follow a similar approach?

† PROVERBS 1:1-4

¹ The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

- 2 For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
- 3 for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
- 4 to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—

The Way Things Are

1 Kings 4:29-34 describes King Solomon as having wisdom that “**surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East, and all the wisdom of Egypt**” (**1 Kings 4:30**). Later in the passage the historian states that this exceptionally wise man “**composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five**” (**1 Kings 4:32**).

Many of his proverbs are found in the book of Scripture called **Proverbs**. Solomon states that his proverbs are offered to help people learn wisdom. In **Proverbs 1**, Wisdom is personified as a female voice that strives to guide people in effective living. Wisdom’s guidance leads to success, integrity, healthy relationships, sterling reputations, and a deep connection to God. Conversely, eschewing wisdom leads to failure, foolishness, wrecked relationships, loss of respect, and separation from God.

Wisdom is effective because she clearly describes the way things are. For example, **Proverbs 27:14** reads: “**Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.**” Living with a “morning person” who insists on shouting greetings as soon as the sun arises (or even just before) will confirm the truth of Wisdom’s observation. Solomon’s wisdom is not esoteric or philosophical; it is centered on real matters in a real world. Humans need oxygen to survive. If people reject this truth, they will suffer, because that is the way things are. Similarly, one can accept Wisdom’s keen observations on the reality of life and live effectively or one can reject them at one’s own peril.

Verse 3 promises Solomon’s words will give instruction in “wise dealing” (practical decisions) as well as in righteousness, justice, and equity. These last three words indicate that

Solomon’s
wisdom is
centered
on real
matters in a
real world.

Solomon’s guidance has an ethical quality that can help build a healthy family, community, and religious assembly.



Lastly, this passage assures us that Solomon’s words, when heeded, will develop prudence, knowledge, and discretion in the “simple.” The word *simple* means the inexperienced, uneducated, or ignorant. “Simple” is not an evaluation of a person’s intellect or ability to learn. The word refers to those who are eager to learn but have not had much experience with life. Wisdom can easily change a person eager to learn into a person who makes healthy choices in life. Wisdom can also spare people pain if they accept her words as true without having to learn everything by their own experience.

Wisdom can also spare people pain if they accept her words as true.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What wise teachings have been proven true in your life so far?

† **PROVERBS 1:7-10**

- 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
- 8 Hear, my child, your father’s instruction,
and do not reject your mother’s teaching;
- 9 for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck.
- 10 My child, if sinners entice you,
do not consent.

Daily Bible Readings

**WEEK 1:
THE CALL OF WISDOM**

June 1
(MONDAY)
*Faith
Community
Discerns Path of
Wisdom*
ACTS 6:1-7

June 2
(TUESDAY)
*Parents Joyfully
Pass on the
Faith*
2 TIMOTHY
1:3-9a

June 3
(WEDNESDAY)
*Learning the
Fear of the Lord*
PSALM 34:11-18

June 4
(THURSDAY)
*Violence Not a
Wise Choice*
MATTHEW
26:47-52

Fear and Fools

When believers read **“the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,”** many respond with “I don’t believe we ought to fear God. Respect, yes, reverence, yes, but fear, no.” People sometimes quote **1 John 4:18** in response to this proverb: **“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”** That is true. When believers reach perfection in love, they won’t need to fear the Lord. Until then, humans will fall short of perfection.

We disciples of Christ are still sinners. We are selfish, willful, and arrogant, so we still need to fear the Lord. Fear of the Lord is not like the fear of an ogre or dictator or terrorist. It is more like the fear felt when viewing an avalanche. Because the consequences of standing in front of an avalanche are disastrous, people seek protection. Similarly, defiance of God’s teachings puts people in the path of painful consequences. God doesn’t have to punish the defiant; the consequences happen on their own. We who are disciples of Christ ought to fear the pain of such consequences and seek the protection of the Lord’s guidance. Until disciples are totally transformed by love, that fear, respect, or reverence will keep them from defying the Lord’s wisdom that both protects from harm and leads to God’s blessings.

Solomon identifies two external influences that pull disciples in opposite directions as they hear wisdom’s voice. One is the influence of faithful parents. Solomon writes that a father’s instruction and mother’s teaching are like the awards given athletes who compete successfully. When children follow their instruction and teaching, they become laurel wreaths of victory and medals of achievement that signify a life well lived.

Healthy, loving parents are a gift to any child. They distill wisdom’s guidance into age-appropriate instruction that helps children avoid the worst pitfalls in life and embrace the best God has to offer. The cost of ignoring

God doesn’t
have to
punish the
defiant;
the conse-
quences
happen on
their own.



the advice of parents, though a common experience, only goes to prove the value mothers and fathers provide their children.

The second influence is that of peers who try to get people to reject the voice of wisdom. Peer pressure does not end with one's twenty-first birthday. Throughout adulthood, people entice one another to reject what Wisdom has declared to be true and experiment with rebelliousness, unfaithfulness, deception, excesses, and aggression. Solomon says that when people give in to such influences, they act like fools. Instead, he advised students of wisdom to cling to the influence of their parents and avoid the traps laid for them by wayward friends and acquaintances.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can you remember a time when your parents were able to steer you in the way of wisdom?
- Can you remember a time when you rejected that guidance for the influence of friends? How did that turn out?

† PROVERBS 1:20-22, 32-33

- ²⁰ Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
- ²¹ At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
- ²² “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
-
- ³² For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
- ³³ but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Peer
pressure
does not
end with
one's
twenty-first
birthday.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 1: THE CALL OF WISDOM

June 5

(FRIDAY)

*Vast Scope
of Solomon's
Wisdom*

1 KINGS 4:29-34

June 6

(SATURDAY)

*Prize Wisdom
and Insight*

PROVERBS 4:1-9

June 7

(SUNDAY)

*Godly Wisdom
for Life's
Decisions*

PROVERBS

1:1-4, 7-8, 10-11,
20-22, 32-33

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Dealing with Ourselves

Solomon isolates one of the most perplexing challenges to heeding the voice of Wisdom. Direction to do the right thing often feels like it comes from outside human hearts and minds while the impetus to do wrong seems to rise up within. Jeremiah promised the people of Israel:

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). Christians believe that this new heart direction comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Even with the tremendous advantage of the inner presence of Christ, however, believers continue to battle destructive desires.

Solomon says that wisdom is like a woman crying out at the gates of the city, in the village square, and at the busiest intersections in town for citizens to heed her warnings. No one can claim ignorance, for her clear words are broadcast everywhere in town. However, just as Wisdom calls believers to heed her words, something inside them wants to rebel. Paul described the conflict this way: **“For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Romans 7:22-23).** Solomon described this resistance to Wisdom as a rigid defense against change.

There is something in human beings that causes them to entrench themselves in the status quo. Solomon says people **“love being simple”** and delight in scoffing at wisdom. The common phrase “that’s just the way I am” in response to calls to change articulates this desire to maintain the status quo. Even the contemporary plea “love means accepting me for who I am” can sometimes be used to deflect Wisdom’s voice to follow a healthier direction in life.



There is something in human beings that causes them to entrench themselves in the status quo.

Solomon calls the rejection of Wisdom's voice "the complacency of fools" and then adds a dire warning. That complacency "**destroys**" those who maintain it. In contrast, the wise king promises that those who listen to Wisdom's teachings will be "**secure,**" "**at ease,**" and live "**without dread of disaster.**" Why is Solomon so certain of the effectiveness of Wisdom's instruction? Because Wisdom states the way things are. When people cheat on their spouses, they suffer. When employees lie to their bosses, they get fired. When children reject the guidance of parents, they fail in school. When people build their lives around greed for material possessions, they end up empty and in debt. Wisdom doesn't talk about what might be true or could be true, or even what should be true. Wisdom cries, "This is the way things are! Believe me and live without the dread of disaster! Scoff at me and cling to the complacency of fools and suffer the awful consequences!"

Solomon calls the rejection of Wisdom's voice "the complacency of fools."

Jesus teaches that when God shows sinners they are going the wrong way, they should turn around and follow the ways of God. Jesus calls this "turning around" repentance and promises to give his disciples the strength to repent when they confess him as Lord and Savior and receive the Holy Spirit. Solomon never heard this invitation. Through Christ, disciples have the power to heed the voice of Wisdom before encountering the worst consequences of their rebellion. Thanks be to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through Christ, disciples have the power to heed the voice of Wisdom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can you identify parts of yourself that resist change, even when it is for the best?
- How can Christ help you with that resistance?

The Value of Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 2:1-11

KEY VERSE: “**For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.**” —Proverbs 2:6

Treasure Chest

In 2010 Forest Fenns, a retired art and antiques dealer from Santa Fe, New Mexico, claimed to have a treasure chest full of gold, jewels, and precious heirlooms hidden somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. Fenns declared the precious trove would become the possession of whoever first found it. He placed a poem in a self-published memoir that he claimed held all the clues needed for treasure hunters to find his buried riches. His memoir sold out in very short order. Scores of people have spent small fortunes seeking Fenns’ treasure, but as of the time of this writing, no one has claimed it. So many have tried and failed to retrieve Fenns’ wealth that some discouraged seekers have questioned the existence of the hidden valuables. Sadly, two people have died in pursuit of the prized box, spurring critics to call for Fenns to end the search.¹

Wisdom claims her instruction to be as valuable as a hidden treasure. She promises that, if believers pursue her wisdom with the enthusiasm of a fortune hunter, they will be rewarded with the best in life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Would you be tempted to seek for a hidden treasure?
- What discovery would be worth the expenditure of your time, energy, and money?

† PROVERBS 2:1-5

¹ My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,

- 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
3 if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
4 if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.

Seek and Ye Shall Find

Solomon’s address of “my child” means he is offering his insight to his children. However, he does not mean his wisdom is only for his children or children of any kind. Solomon offers his advice to anyone who desires knowledge.

To receive Solomon’s wisdom, readers must seek it with their whole hearts. Scripture teaches that faith is a prerequisite for all the blessings of God. Paul promises his hearers in **Romans 10:9**, “**if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**” According to Paul, profession of faith in Jesus precedes the experience of the joys of salvation or the jubilation of heaven. **Luke 6:38** challenges disciples to “**give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.**” Acts of generosity will be rewarded with generosity in return. Believers don’t learn this, however, until they take the initiative to give in faith.

Faith is required in response to Solomon’s words as well. If people seek his guidance with total dedication, their faith will be rewarded with lifesaving instruction. Eight times in **Proverbs 2:1-4**, Solomon announces that the people of Israel will reap the benefits of his knowledge only if they seek his wisdom with tenacity. In **verse 1**, the king says, “**if you (one translation adds ‘heartily’)**”

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 2: THE VALUE OF WISDOM

June 8

(MONDAY)
Work for the Good of All
GALATIANS
6:1-10

June 9

(TUESDAY)
Live Together in Harmony
ROMANS 15:1-6

June 10

(WEDNESDAY)
Wisdom Is Walking Together in Love
2 JOHN 4-11

June 11

(THURSDAY)
Joseph Resists Temptation
GENESIS
39:6b-18

accept my words and treasure my commandments within you.” The phrases allude to the work of harvesting and storing the fruit of wisdom’s teachings.

Verse 2 asks the reader to make “**your ear attentive**” and incline “**your heart to understanding**.” These phrases refer to a purposeful turning of one’s mind from other daily distractions to what wisdom has to say.

Verse 3 teaches that a baby’s yearning for parental attention provides a proper metaphor for the longing the people of Israel need to have for Solomon’s instruction. “**Cry out**” and “**raise your voice**,” the king says, and the seeker will gain insight.

In **verse 4**, Solomon calls the people of Israel to pursue the riches of knowledge as if they were silver or hidden treasure. Solomon never issues a casual “if you get around to it” invitation to heed his proverbs. He won’t convey his incredible learning unless people diligently listen to his words.

Solomon claims in **verse 5** that the payoff for persistently seeking his wisdom is that students will comprehend the “**fear of the Lord**.” They will learn that God’s warnings spare them heartache and hardship. When disciples fear the consequences of disobeying God, they are ready to learn the deeper truths of the spiritual life. Solomon calls these spiritual riches “**the knowledge of God**.”

Human beings are stubborn and sinful creatures. Sometimes God must connect with people’s fears to wake them up and take them in a more positive direction. If the king can get people to fear the consequences of rejecting God’s guidance, he can take them to a deeper communion with the Lord.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Which metaphor best expresses your level of desire to obtain Wisdom’s guidance? Storing up grain from a harvest? Purposeful redirection of the mind? A baby crying for a parent? A fortune hunter looking for buried treasure? Or would you have to admit that your interest is far less intense?

† PROVERBS 2:6-8

⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

- 7 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
 he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
 8 guarding the paths of justice
 and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

No Disappointment

More than a few adults have attempted a withdrawal from a bank account only to be told the account has insufficient funds. Solomon promises that wisdom’s storehouse of insight is never empty. He assures those in need of instruction that Wisdom continually deposits valuable insight into her vault of knowledge. Wisdom is never out of date, obsolete, or replaced by smarter sources.

Adults are frustrated when they receive an “access denied” message to inquiries for information. When cell phones are without service or Wi-Fi access, anxiety or even panic might follow. Solomon promises that God is always eager to give access and wisdom to those who seek it. In **verse 6**, the king says, **“The LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”** Seekers don’t have to pay God to get the instruction they need nor does God’s guidance require a secret password or access code. The Lord freely shares the wealth of wisdom with all who devotedly seek it.

In addition to “insufficient funds” and “access denied,” a third source of disappointment to those seeking information is that often, after it is obtained, someone steals it. Identity theft, Internet fraud, intellectual property theft, phishing, and other online scams pilfer sensitive and private information and leave victims without the protection they need. Add to the malicious acts of others, a “user error” in which people unknowingly delete, destroy, or send into the mysterious unknown documents and data they desperately need, and a crisis of lost information arises.

Solomon says God never allows anyone or anything to steal what the Lord gives to faithful believers. Instead,

Daily Bible Readings

**WEEK 2:
THE VALUE OF WISDOM**

June 12
 (FRIDAY)
Wisdom Saves from Temptation
 PROVERBS 2:12-19

June 13
 (SATURDAY)
Walk on Just and Good Paths
 PROVERBS 2:20-22; 4:24-27

June 14
 (SUNDAY)
Following Godly Wisdom Pays
 PROVERBS 2:1-11

Solomon promises God is a “**shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of the faithful ones**” (verses 7b-8). These words promise dedicated believers that no force can steal, corrupt, or delete the wisdom of God from their lives.

This promise is similar to one made by Jesus in **John 10:10**: “**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.**” Later in the chapter Jesus promises: “**I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand**” (**John 10:28**). God’s gifts of wisdom and abundant life are eternally secure, and those who receive such gifts are safe forever.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever received an “insufficient funds,” “access denied,” or “suspected credit card fraud” message?
- Are you encouraged to know that the gifts of God cannot be stolen, lost, or corrupted?

† PROVERBS 2:9-11

- ⁹ Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
- ¹⁰ for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
- ¹¹ prudence will watch over you;
and understanding will guard you.

You’ll See

The voice of Wisdom tries to keep us from learning lessons the hard way; nonetheless, most disciples learn only by experience. Until advice is tried and proven true, or ignored and proven true, most adults remain dubious.

But it’s the pro-active seeking and heading that makes the difference. As we saw in **Proverbs 2:1-4**, Solomon repeats his conditions for growing in wisdom: “**If you accept my words,**” “**if you indeed cry out for insight,**” and “**if you seek it like silver.**” He then assures those who meet the conditions that they will “**find the knowledge of God.**”

In **Proverbs 2:9**, Solomon goes on to write that those who seek God’s wisdom with perseverance will “**understand righteousness and**

justice and equity, and every good path.” God’s moral and ethical laws lead communities to experience right relationships with God and one another. When implemented, God’s laws institute justice in society and provide equal treatment for all people. Ultimately, they put the community on a “good path.”

When nations or communities put greed, preferential treatment, racial bias, intimidation, and exclusion at the center of their values, they travel pathways of disgrace, violence, and destruction. In contrast, when they implement the teachings of Wisdom, they create societies where all people have physical necessities, dignity, fair treatment, and individual satisfaction.

In **verse 10**, Solomon adds a more personal promise to those who follow his guidance. Those who put his words into practice will soon recognize that wisdom has taken root in their hearts and become pleasant to their souls. When people have firsthand experience of God’s instruction, they develop an inner desire to obey. Instead of chafing when they are commanded to obey the wisdom of God, believers feel gratitude over the opportunity to walk on the good path.

Christians have the power of the Holy Spirit to instill God’s wisdom into their hearts and souls. After Paul describes the great struggle to follow the ways of God rather than the urges of his own flesh, he mourns, **“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)**. Fortunately, he goes on to answer his own plea. **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25)**. Salvation through Jesus Christ transforms the hearts and souls of disciples so that their greatest desire is to live in harmony with the wisdom of God—a wisdom that has been proven over and over to be “pleasant to one’s soul.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When have you learned by firsthand experience that God’s ways are good and pleasant?
- Where do you still struggle to trust such wisdom?

NOTES

1. www.forbes.com/sites/margiegoldsmith/2018/07/01/hello-world/#3b43435639ac.
2. *The Inclusive Bible* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 445.

The Gifts of Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 8:8-14, 17-21

KEY VERSE: “Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.”

—Proverbs 8:10-11

No Comparison

A friend of mine is fond of saying, “Any problem that can be solved with money isn’t much of a problem.” Yet money continues to be the prime motivator of many adults. In 2015, former hedge-fund manager and multimillionaire Martin Shkreli raised the price of Darapim, a life-saving medicine used by AIDS patients, from \$13.50 to \$750 a pill. He defended the price hike by saying he had a right to make a profit. When told his price gouging would prevent many desperate patients from obtaining the medicine necessary to their survival, Shkreli showed no remorse.¹

Wisdom consistently argues that her treasures are worth far more than gold or silver. In a world where the almighty dollar is pursued at almost any cost to health, relationships, community wellbeing, and spiritual growth, disciples need help to trust wisdom’s claims.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What examples of people valuing money over the wisdom of God do you see in our world today?

† PROVERBS 8:8-11

⁸ All the words of my mouth are righteous;
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.

⁹ They are all straight to one who understands
and right to those who find knowledge.

- 10 Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
11 for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Hard to Believe

Although many salespeople provide an essential service by connecting customers to necessary and desired products, some salespeople give the profession a bad name by their corrupt practices. The most notorious twist the truth, make false claims, and take advantage of gullible customers to make outrageous profits for themselves or their employers.

Wisdom promises she does not practice such deception. Her words are righteous or approved by God. She never alters the truth or spins her claims in a dishonest manner.

Rather than be crooked or twisted, wisdom's guidance is "straight." In Hebrew culture, the word means honest, with integrity, and in direct obedience to God's guidance. Isaiah employed the word to describe the path the exiles were to take back to Israel when he said: **"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God"** (Isaiah 40:3). The desert road that the people of Israel were to travel was to be direct, without any twists, turns, or distractions.

Matthew quoted the words of the prophet in his Gospel but applied them to John the Baptist. John, according to Matthew, called the people to repentance so that Christ would have a direct path to their hearts. Matthew said John the Baptist was **"the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'"** (Matthew 3:3).

The King James Version of **Matthew 7:13-14** reads, **"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many**

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 3: THE GIFTS OF WISDOM

June 15

(MONDAY)
*Christ, the
Wisdom of God*
1 CORINTHIANS
1:18-25

June 16

(TUESDAY)
*God
Abundantly
Rewards Job's
Faithfulness*
JOB 1:1-5

June 17

(WEDNESDAY)
*God Restores
Job's Family and
Wealth*
JOB 42:10-17

June 18

(THURSDAY)
*Wisdom Calls
the People to
Respond*
PROVERBS 8:1-7

there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

Although more recent translations substitute “narrow” or “hard” for the word *strait*, the meaning is the same. The pathway God calls us to is direct, without diversion, dead ends, or misdirection. Wisdom puts believers on the straight path to embrace God’s guidance.

Because of the effectiveness of Wisdom’s clear and trustworthy guidance, her instruction is more valuable than silver, gold or precious jewels. In fact, Wisdom claims that her teaching is more precious than any desire harbored in the hearts of believers.

These claims are hard to believe. How could Wisdom’s words be more valuable than a six-figure income, a reliable retirement plan, a beautiful spouse and healthy family, good health, exotic vacations, career success, financial independence, public acclaim, or power?

Anyone who has had problems that couldn’t be solved with money knows the answer. No amount of cash can take away guilt for sin, repair a broken marriage, give hope in the midst of a chronic illness, provide grace for personal failure, supply love and patience toward a rebellious child, offer companionship when facing life alone, or grant peace when death approaches. Only spiritual understanding and knowledge can see believers through such times. And because of this unique ability, Wisdom’s value exceeds any other human desire or material possession.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever faced a problem that money could not solve? What did you do?
- Did the wisdom of God help in such times?

† PROVERBS 8:12-14

¹² I, wisdom, live with prudence,
and I attain knowledge and discretion.

¹³ The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil
and perverted speech I hate.

¹⁴ I have good advice and sound wisdom;
I have insight, I have strength.

Steadfast Opposition To Hate

One of the first values Christian parents teach their children is that hatred is wrong. Hatred of people because of their beliefs, way of life, ethnicity, sins, political perspective, or customs is clearly a violation of what Jesus taught. However, Wisdom claims believers can and should hate anything that interferes with their ability to hear and do the will of God.

Wisdom proclaims she **“lives with prudence.”** She has attained great knowledge and discernment from God and applies it to important life situations. She knows the will of God in every situation and has a divine remedy for every problem. And she is willing to share her life-saving discoveries with anyone who humbly seeks her advice. Those who follow her guidance experience the goodness God intends for all creation.

Wisdom detests attitudes, influences, and powers that take disciples away from God. One such diverting attitude is nonchalance about the consequences people face when they defy God. When people think they can lie, steal, cheat, commit adultery, abuse the vulnerable, and intimidate the weak to get what they want without fear of consequences, they go full speed toward the destruction of all God holds dear. Wisdom calls such people “fools” for not fearing the Lord.

When adults ignore the warnings of God, they encounter unnecessary pain. God does not take pleasure in inflicting pain on disobedient followers. In fact, God grieves the suffering foolish choices cause. However, God does not intervene to shelter people from the consequences of their sinful behaviors. Instead, God waits on the rebellious to come to their senses after encountering the suffering sin brings to their lives.

People who fear the Lord avoid this suffering by heeding God’s instruction. They alter their behavior in order to avoid the pain that always follows sinful actions.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 3: THE GIFTS OF WISDOM

June 19

(FRIDAY)

Wisdom

*Present and
Active During
Creation*

PROVERBS

8:22-31

June 20

(SATURDAY)

*Choose Wisdom
and Live*

PROVERBS

8:32-36

June 21

(SUNDAY)

*Wisdom Affects
All of Life*

PROVERBS 8:8-

14, 17-21

The fear of the Lord also causes people to recoil from evil influences that pull them into actions that have painful consequences. They quit seeing greed as momentum for success and view it as an appetite that destroys people, the environment, and valued relationships. They quit seeing dishonesty as a shrewd business practice and view it as a habit that ruins reputations, preys on the innocent, and spreads toxic values throughout the community. Wise disciples despise everything that leads people into destructive behaviors.

Wisdom adds that pride, arrogance, and perverted speech are especially worthy of our contempt. Pride and arrogance keep people from submitting to the superior guidance of God. Perverted speech deceives people into destructive habits, dangerous alliances, and foolish behaviors.

Instead of choosing the influences that lead to sin, Wisdom calls on her readers to embrace her good advice and sound wisdom. She knows the way to effective living and has the strength to pass that way on to whoever wholeheartedly seeks her guidance.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever been influenced to commit a sin?
- Did you suffer any consequences for such actions?
- What did you learn?

† PROVERBS 8:17-21

- ¹⁷ I love those who love me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.
- ¹⁸ Riches and honor are with me,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
- ¹⁹ My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,
and my yield than choice silver.
- ²⁰ I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
- ²¹ endowing with wealth those who love me,
and filling their treasuries.

This and More

Mature Christians have learned that obedience to God does not guarantee material wealth. Yet in this passage Wisdom claims that she will

fill the treasuries of those who love her. Although disciples cannot rely on Wisdom to make them materially rich, her guidance has practical benefits for financial security.

For example, **Proverbs 20:4** says: “**The lazy person does not plow in season; harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found.**” Hard work, at the proper time, usually brings more financial security than laziness. Wisdom’s advice has a material application.

Another example is found in **Proverbs 19:17**: “**Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full.**” Generosity to those in need prompts the blessings of God, some of which are financial.

A third example comes from **Proverbs 20:21**: “**An estate quickly acquired in the beginning will not be blessed in the end.**” Impulse buying often leads to bad deals, financial loss, and buyer’s remorse. Wisdom helps adults avoid such costly mistakes.

Though Wisdom’s advice helps believers develop good economic habits, Wisdom’s chief gift is a spiritually rich life. Wisdom helps believers follow the way of righteousness, which means it shows them how to live in healthy relationships with one another and with God. She also provides a road map to justice, showing communities how to treat people fairly and make unbiased legal judgments.

Both the material and spiritual largesse of Wisdom are reserved for those who love her ways and seek them diligently. She cannot share her wealth with those who detest her interference in their lives or those who are apathetic about her instruction. She can only infuse “**enduring wealth and prosperity**” (**Proverbs 8:18**) in those who value her guidance above human wisdom and selfish desires.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Has the Wisdom of Scripture instilled any values in you that have made you more financially secure?
- Has she passed on spiritual wealth as well?
- Which is most important to you?

NOTE

1. CNBC Interview with Martin Shkreli, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-U1MMa0SHw>.

Invitation to Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 9:1-6, 8-10, 13-18

KEY VERSE: “**Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.**” —Proverbs 9:6

RSVP

FOBO is an acronym that stands for “fear of better options.” FOBO is a creation of the cell-phone age. Adults, especially young ones, sometimes receive multiple offers for how to spend their time. The cell phone allows these invitations to be received while the recipient is on the move. This creates the possibility that as one accepts an invitation to a party, date, or event, a better option could be just around the corner. The popular recipient might regret saying yes to one option before all possibilities were known. This regret leads to FOBO. This fear causes adults to wait as long as possible to say yes to any invitation so that they don’t accept one option and then miss out on a more desirable opportunity.

FOBO can influence the spiritual life of adults as well as their social lives. Fearing that a better philosophy, religion, or spiritual practice might be just around the corner, adults can be hesitant to make a full commitment to Jesus Christ. Solomon teaches that responding to Wisdom’s invitations should not be deferred. Waiting can make adults vulnerable to other enticing invitations that lead to destruction. The same could be said of Christ’s invitation to discipleship. Postponing a full profession of faith in Christ might make adults susceptible to the misleading temptations that bring unnecessary pain.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever experienced FOBO and hesitated to accept an invitation in the hopes that a better option might arise?
- What are the costs of postponing a full commitment to Christ out of concern a better option might arise?

† PROVERBS 9:1-6

- 1 Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
- 2 She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
- 3 She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,
- 4 “You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
- 5 “Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
- 6 Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

Grow Up

Scripture prompts spiritual growth by inviting disciples to choose a spiritual path in life. In **Matthew 7:13-14** Jesus says: **“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”** Later in this passage, Jesus tells disciples to be like the man who built his house upon the rock, not like the man who built it on the sand (**Matthew 7:24-27**).

Luke 9:62 tells us: **“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’”** And in **Matthew 6:24** Jesus declares: **“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”** Disciples can’t avoid deciding whom to follow in this life. They must choose Christ as Lord or something or someone else to rule over their thoughts, values, and decisions.

Solomon says that people of faith must decide between Wisdom’s voice and invitations from one he calls

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 4: INVITATION TO WISDOM

June 22
(MONDAY)
Law Provides the Edge
PSALM
119:97-104

June 23
(TUESDAY)
Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids
MATTHEW
25:1-13

June 24
(WEDNESDAY)
Church Proclaims the Wisdom of God
EPHESIANS
3:7-13

June 25
(THURSDAY)
No Wise Person among You?
1 CORINTHIANS
6:1-6

“the foolish woman” or “Folly” (in the NIV). To help believers make a healthy decision, the wise king describes Wisdom’s assets.

First, he says that Wisdom has a sure foundation. She has built her house on the seven pillars. In the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, seven was considered the number of perfection, so the meaning of this phrase is probably that Wisdom made a perfect foundation for her home. Jesus might have said she built her house on the rock.

Secondly, Wisdom has a feast prepared for all those who listen to her voice. She has prepared a rich meal of meat and wine served in exquisite fashion. Wisdom has prepared her banquet of good advice well; she has much to offer.

Third, Wisdom is transparent. She has made her invitation clear to all. She has sent her servants out to broadcast her invitation from the “highest places.” This might refer to the walls of the city. Wherever the invitation is issued, all the city can hear and understand it. There is no deception in her offers.

Fourth, Wisdom lays out an effective teaching plan for those in need of her guidance. With language similar to Jesus’ invitation to Communion, she invites the simple to eat her bread, drink her wine, and grow up in the way of her insight.

There is substance and nutrition for the soul in Wisdom’s provision. Her lessons take the listener from naïve, impulsive, vacillating immaturity to a life of integrity, effectiveness, and understanding.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- How has the wisdom of God helped you grow up?

† PROVERBS 9:8-10

- ⁸ A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you;
the wise, when rebuked, will love you.
- ⁹ Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still;
teach the righteous and they will gain in learning.
- ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

The Role of the Listener

Wisdom can be counted on to do her part. She will provide trustworthy

advice to all who will listen. However, her life-giving guidance can be rebuffed. In **Revelation 3:20** Jesus says, **“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”** Notice Jesus did not say he would “kick the door down” and force those residing there to have communion with him. Wisdom is of like mind. She offers, but her offers can be rejected.

In fact, Wisdom has learned that if an adult’s heart is not open to her guidance, the words she shares serve only to make the listener more rebellious. Scoffers hate those who try to teach them a better way. They resent all interference with their foolish behaviors.

Solomon presents the rejection of Wisdom’s guidance as a sign of adolescence. Parents can readily see their teenagers’ rejection of wise counsel as a dangerous and immature mistake. Wisdom declares the rejection of her guidance at any point in life demonstrates a return to adolescent foolishness.

The righteous and wise, in contrast, appreciate the words of Wisdom, even when her guidance shows they are wrong. Like people driving in the wrong direction, the wise are thankful Wisdom cared enough to turn them around. The receptive are eager to hear Wisdom and continue to grow wiser as the years unfold. Scoffers stay in their ignorance forever.

Once again Solomon refers to the fear of the Lord as being the beginning of wisdom. Those who have no concern about the consequences of violating God’s wisdom can’t learn. Instead they remain in their arrogance until the consequences unfold. Sometimes, the pain of disobeying God will redirect the rebellious to a way of repentance and obedience. Sometimes, the rebellious respond to painful consequences with even greater anger toward the God who is trying to redeem them from their sins.

Daily Bible Readings

**WEEK 4:
INVITATION TO WISDOM**

June 26
(FRIDAY)
Wise and Foolish Builders
MATTHEW 7:24-27

June 27
(SATURDAY)
Benefits of Making the Wise Choice
PSALM 1

June 28
(SUNDAY)
Wisdom Delivers Many Benefits
PROVERBS 9:1-6, 8-10, 13-18

Adults can check the nature of their hearts by reflecting on whether the wisdom of God is welcomed or unwanted in their lives. Have they responded to God's guidance with anger, rejection, and pride? Or have they been quick to repent and go in a new direction? A tender heart and receptive mind allows Wisdom to pass on the rich banquet of her insight.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Why do teenagers often reject the counsel of older people who love them?
- Why do adults often reject the counsel of God's wisdom?

† PROVERBS 9:13-18

- ¹³ The foolish woman is loud;
she is ignorant and knows nothing.
- ¹⁴ She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the high places of the town,
- ¹⁵ calling to those who pass by,
who are going straight on their way,
- ¹⁶ "You who are simple, turn in here!"
And to those without sense she says,
- ¹⁷ "Stolen water is sweet,
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant."
- ¹⁸ But they do not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Fools Rush In

Although Wisdom's voice is available to all, there is another voice that can be heard in the streets, the voice of one Solomon calls, "the foolish woman." She too can be heard all over town. But in contrast to Wisdom, the foolish woman's invitation is destructive. To further help believers choose wisdom, Solomon lists the foolish woman's deficiencies.

First, she is ignorant. Wisdom is depicted as a hard-working woman who prepares well, retains helpful guidance, and builds securely on the truth of God. The foolish woman appears too lazy to do anything but lie about what she has to offer. She has no wisdom to impart.

Second, she is deceptive. In language similar to how wisdom is

described, the foolish woman calls to the gullible from her doorway and from the high places or city walls. Everyone in town can hear her. She is especially interested in those who are going **“straight on their way” (v. 15)**. “Straight ways” are honest, filled with integrity and lead believers to God. Those walking the “straight” paths are the prime targets of the foolish woman’s wiles. If she can get even one believer to turn away from God, she has been successful in her toxic work.

Ministers and lay leaders should be on guard for the enticements of Folly’s voice. The forces that oppose the will of God are always trying to destroy the influence and reputation of those who attempt to follow Christ.

The foolish woman mimics Wisdom’s invitation: **“You who are simple, turn in here” (v.16)**. But unlike Wisdom, the foolish woman has nothing of substance to offer those who respond to her invitation. Instead of nurturing those who stop, she misleads them. She announces, **“Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (v. 17)**.

There is some truth to what the foolish woman claims. The King James Version of Scripture speaks of Moses in **Hebrews 11:25**: **“Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.”** The writer acknowledges the pleasure of sin, but also that such pleasure soon gives way to painful consequences. A sexual affair or pornography might offer some passing pleasure. Gambling with money needed by one’s household might provide a temporary thrill. However, these temporary enjoyments quickly turn to the painful consequences of lost relationships, divorce, bankruptcy, and addictions.

Solomon sums up the devastating outcomes of falling for Folly’s deception as becoming a guest in the “depths of Sheol.” *Sheol* refers to the place of the dead. The foolish woman attempts to describe her home as a place of forbidden pleasures and endless delights. Solomon tells the truth. Those who listen to her voice end up spiritually, emotionally, and eventually physically dead.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are some of the lies told by the purveyors of temptation?
- How long does the pleasure of sin last?
- What happens when the fun comes to an end?

Wisdom's Vindication

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 11:7-19

KEY VERSE: “**The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.**”

—Matthew 11:19

I Wish I Knew

When I was a teenager, I had horrible complexion problems. My acne was so severe that strangers would offer me suggestions as to how to heal my face. Lava soap, oatmeal masks, referrals to dermatologists, herbal supplements, dietary recommendations, stress reducers, over-the-counter remedies, cosmetics, exposure to sun lamps, and prayer were all offered by well-meaning people who thought they might be able to help. I took everyone's advice and, as a result, my adolescent ailment grew worse. I learned there is no shortage of “wisdom” offered in this world, but not all sage advice is accurate. Jesus offers guidance on when to trust direction and when to reject it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When have you received good advice?
- When have you received harmful advice?
- How did you tell the difference?

† MATTHEW 11:7-8

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

There is no shortage of “wisdom” offered in this world, but not all sage advice is accurate.

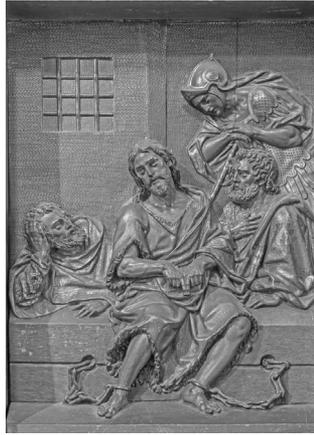
Prosperity?

Some people measure the value of wisdom by prosperity. If advice leads to financial reward, good health, comfort, safety, and economic freedom, the guidance is seen as good. If one follows advice and encounters suffering, sacrifice, and danger, the guidance is seen as faulty.

This evaluation of wisdom is often correct. Advice that leads adults or the ones they love into needless suffering, poor investments, financial loss, sickness, and physical harm is frequently unwise. However, John the Baptist knew that prosperity was not always the measure of godly instruction.

John the Baptist preached that Jesus was the Messiah and called on the people of his generation to repent and prepare themselves for the coming of the Kingdom of God. This message, along with pronouncements against the immorality of King Herod and his wife, landed John in the palace dungeon. His suffering caused John to wonder if he had misjudged Jesus. Maybe, he thought, Christ wasn't the Messiah. Maybe his teachings were not trustworthy.

In the midst of his anguish, John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the long-expected deliverer or whether they had all made a huge mistake in judgment. John had recognized Jesus as the Messiah while both he and Jesus were in their mothers' wombs (**Luke 1:44**), and he witnessed God's affirmation of Christ as the Messiah on the day he baptized Jesus (**Matthew 3:13-17**). Hardship, however, made John wonder if he had believed in the wrong person.



Relief of St. John the Baptist in prison

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 5: WISDOM'S VINDICATION

June 29

(MONDAY)

*Wise Counsel
for Defending
Your Faith*

MATTHEW
10:16-23

June 30

(TUESDAY)

*Wise Deeds of
the Coming
Messiah*

ISAIAH 35:3-10

July 1

(WEDNESDAY)

*John the
Baptist, God's
Messenger*

LUKE 7:24-28

July 2

(THURSDAY)

*The Messiah's
Wise Deeds*

MATTHEW
11:1-6

When asked if he was the one, Jesus replied, **“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”** (Matthew 11:4-6). Jesus wanted John to recognize that his deeds and his many miracles confirmed the truth that he was the Messiah.

Jesus wanted John to recognize that his deeds and his many miracles confirmed the truth.

Christ seemed to know his assurances would reassure John. After sending his disciples back to John with the evidence of his trustworthiness, Jesus asked the crowd why they went to see John in the wilderness. Was it to see **“a reed shaken by the wind”** or **“someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes live in palaces.”** These questions are laughable as a description of John. He had courageously preached repentance to the powerful and had not backed down even when threatened with death by King Herod. In no way was he a **“reed shaken by the wind.”** In addition, John had no use for the “soft robes” and “palaces” of the privileged. He wore camel’s hair and had only visited the palace as a prisoner.

Christ knew that once John was reminded of Jesus’ powerful deeds, he would be convinced Jesus was the source of life-giving wisdom and the Messiah sent by God. John would not see prosperity as confirmation of wisdom nor his current suffering as a refutation of the truth of Christ.

Circumstances in life change without much notice. Sometimes the course of discipleship takes Christ’s followers through days of joy and blessing. Sometimes following Jesus leads them into difficulties. Prosperity is not the litmus test for evaluating wisdom. Something far more reliable proves the value of godly wisdom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can the craving for prosperity take adults away from the source of true wisdom?
- Who has suffered because they followed God’s wisdom?

† MATTHEW 11:9-15

⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵Let anyone with ears listen!

Prophecy?

Prophets are another possible source of wisdom. Jesus affirms John as a true prophet of God. He says that John was the prophet announced in **Malachi 3:1**: “**See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.**” Later in the passage, Jesus says: “**If you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah who is come.**” The Lord’s reference is to **Malachi 4:5**: “**Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.**” Jesus announces that John the Baptist is more than a prophet; he is the one sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. Christ says that all the biblical prophets and the Law were reliable sources of wisdom preparing the way for the preaching of John. John, in turn, prepared the way for the arrival of Jesus. All involved were true prophets, sharing valid wisdom from God.

However, Jesus also knew there were false prophets whose “wisdom” was not true. His enigmatic statement, “**From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force,**” is open to many interpretations. A

Daily Bible Readings

**WEEK 5:
WISDOM’S
VINDICATION**

July 3

(FRIDAY)

Woes on Unwise Cities

MATTHEW
11:20-24

July 4

(SATURDAY)

Wisdom’s Invitation to Come and Rest

MATTHEW
11:25-30

July 5

(SUNDAY)

Wisdom Is Vindicated by Her Deeds

MATTHEW
11:7-19

credible understanding is that Jesus was referring to the false Messiahs and violent revolutionaries who vowed to “take” or institute the kingdom by force. Many people in Jesus’ day claimed to be messiahs and called the people to join their movement to overthrow the Roman government through violent insurrection. Jesus referred to such leaders in **John 10:8: “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.”**

Disciples cannot trust every self-proclaimed prophet as a source of true wisdom. Throughout history, men and women have claimed to speak for God when, in actuality, they were mouthpieces for philosophies, power structures, self-interest, unwell minds, confusion, and evil. Such “thieves and bandits” tried to force people to follow their agenda. Forced faith is no faith at all. People have to be free to say no to God in order for their yes to have any significance. The Kingdom of God cannot be established by force. Disciples must test the wisdom of those who claim to be prophets to distinguish godly wisdom from the folly of the human mind.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can you name some false prophets who have risen to prominence in your lifetime?
- How were they proven to be false?

† **MATTHEW 11:16-19**

¹⁶ “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’



The fresco of St. John the Baptist in Rosenkranz Basilica by Friedrich Stummels, Karl Welzel, and Theodor Nuttgens.

The
Kingdom
of God
cannot be
established
by force.

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Popular Opinion

Evidently there was a children’s game popular in the time of Christ that resembled Simon Says. In Simon Says, a leader tells other players to do various actions (“rub your head,” “stand on one foot,” etc.) and the players must disregard the order unless the leader prefaces his or her directions with “Simon says.” If the leader starts with “Simon says,” all the players must do as they are told. In Jesus’ day, a leader pretended to play a flute or wail out a cry of sorrow. If the leader pantomimed the playing of a flute, all the children had to dance. If the leader mimicked a wail, all the children had to act sad. If a child did not obey such cues, he or she was out of the game.

Jesus used that familiar game to criticize the religious and cultural leaders of his day. He said when John the Baptist abstained from eating and drinking, the leaders claimed John was demon possessed. He didn’t dance when they played the flute. Jesus, in contrast, ate and drank, and they accused him of being a glutton and a drunk. He didn’t mourn when they wailed.

Neither John nor Jesus shaped their message according to popular opinion. The majority viewpoint of their day was rarely based on godly wisdom. Those who tried to match their guidance to popular opinion were susceptible to the fickleness and foolishness of the prevailing voices of their age.

Cultural wisdom changes on a daily basis. Think of the variety of diets, political viewpoints, get-rich schemes, self-help books, child-rearing techniques, and fashion fads that capture the admiration of the majority for a season, only to fade into oblivion. Polls showing that a majority of people believe in some kind of pop philosophy or agree on whether someone’s behavior is right or wrong do not prove anything. Wisdom

Neither John
nor Jesus
shaped their
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to popular
opinion.

cannot be decided by the changing views of the dominant voices in society.

Instead, Jesus said Wisdom was vindicated by her deeds. Luke's Gospel quotes Jesus as saying: **"Wisdom is vindicated by all her children"** (Luke 7:35). Both translations mean the same thing. True wisdom is proven reliable by what it produces. If someone's "wisdom" produces hate, bigotry, fear, anxiety and chaos, then that direction is not from God. If someone's "wisdom" leads people away from God, contradicts Scripture, and sows doubts about Christ as the Son of God, then that guidance is false.

However, if a person's wisdom leads others to repentance, faith, forgiveness, hope, love, joy, and salvation, then those results prove the authenticity of what is shared. If one's guidance establishes justice, righteousness, healthy communities, and people reconciled to God and one another, then that wisdom is of God. If one's advice leads people to greater trust in God, reliance on the teachings of Scripture, and acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior, then that advice is godly advice.

Prosperity, prophets, and popularity cannot provide a reliable basis upon which to evaluate wisdom. Disciples can be led astray by such faulty ways of measuring the trustworthiness of guidance. Churches can be ruined by a false gospel that exalts money, power, and unquestioned "divine inspiration" that contradicts the teachings of Jesus and the character of God. Followers of Christ are called to examine what a message produces in the lives of others and the community of believers before embracing any instruction as godly words of wisdom.

Prosperity,
prophets,
and
popularity
cannot
provide a
reliable
basis upon
which to
evaluate
wisdom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Whose wisdom has produced good deeds in your life?
- Whose wisdom has caused you to be more selfish, hateful, or less trusting of God?

The Boy Jesus

.....
SCRIPTURE: Ecclesiastes 3:1,7b; Luke 2:39-52

KEY VERSE: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” —Luke 2:40
.....

Miracle Boy

The New Testament provides very little information about Jesus’ childhood and adolescence. Several books, deemed not trustworthy enough to be included in the New Testament, contain brief stories about Jesus in his earliest years. Such stories often depict Jesus as a “miracle boy.” For example, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* states that at the age of five, Jesus made some birds out of mud on the Sabbath. Here’s the text that follows: **“When Joseph came to the place and saw what had happened, he cried out to him, ‘Why are you doing what is forbidden on the Sabbath?’ But Jesus clapped his hands and cried to the sparrows, ‘Be gone!’ And the sparrows took flight and went off, chirping. When the Jews saw this, they were amazed; and they went away and reported to their leaders what they had seen Jesus do.”**¹

The implication is that Jesus was born with special powers that he was allowed to exert as a small child. By contrast, Luke’s Gospel gives an account of Jesus’ early years that is much more normal. He matured through the stages of development that most people experience. Yet Luke also records that at a very early age, Jesus became aware of his unique calling and relationship with God.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Do you think Jesus was a “miracle boy” who used special powers from God to amaze his

At a very early age, Jesus became aware of his unique calling and relationship with God.

family and friends, or did he grow up in a more normal fashion? What difference does it make?

† ECCLESIASTES 3:1, 7b

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: . . .

⁷ a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

Timing Is Everything

The writer of Ecclesiastes states that “**there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak.**” There is a time and place for every human emotion and behavior as long as that emotion or behavior is not sinful. The corollary truth is that human emotion or behavior exhibited at an inappropriate time or place has a negative effect regardless of the inherent goodness of the deed or feeling. Laughing is fine unless one does it when others are grieving. Singing is wonderful unless the singer is in a home where all others are asleep.



Jesus understood that there were times when he needed to keep his thoughts to himself, especially thoughts about his identity and mission. According to the Gospels, Jesus kept silent about his unique relationship with God throughout his childhood. When he turned twelve, however, Jesus felt compelled to speak about his special relationship with God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever felt you should keep your thoughts to yourself?
- When have you felt compelled to share your thoughts with others?
- What helped you discern the proper time and place to share with others?

† LUKE 2:39-40

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Not Yet

Luke 2:21-38 describes Joseph and Mary's obedience to Jewish law in connection with the birth of Jesus. On the eighth day of his life, Jesus was circumcised as the Jewish law required. **Leviticus 12:1-8** states that after a woman gives birth to a son, she is ceremonially unclean for seven days and then must go through thirty-three days of purification before she can worship in the temple again. Once her days of purification come to an end, Leviticus requires the mother and father to bring an offering to the priest to complete the religious duties surrounding childbirth. The prescribed offering was a lamb unless the family was poor. In that case, the sacrifice of two turtledoves or pigeons could satisfy the requirement of the Law. Joseph and Mary could not afford a lamb, so they brought birds to the priest to fulfill the Law.

While making their sacrifice, Mary and Joseph were told by Simeon and Anna that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. After receiving this holy confirmation, Mary and Joseph took Jesus home and raised him just like any other Jewish boy. Jesus grew intellectually, physically, socially, and spiritually. The brevity of the information shared in **Luke 2:39** suggests that nothing more was said about Jesus' special calling throughout his childhood. Jesus knew that it was not yet time to reveal his identity as God's Son.

† LUKE 2:41-45

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 6: THE BOY JESUS

July 6

(MONDAY)

*Everything Has
Its Time and
Season*

ECCLESIASTES
3:2-8

July 7

(TUESDAY)

*Perform Your
God-Given
Task*

ECCLESIASTES
3:9-15

July 8

(WEDNESDAY)

*The Firstborn
Belong to God*

NUMBERS
3:11-13

July 9

(THURSDAY)

*Jesus Presented
to the Lord*

LUKE 2:21-24

What Time is It?

As Jesus grew up, his parents probably struggled with his normal stages of development. Modern readers are often bewildered as to how Joseph and Mary could leave their twelve-year-old son behind in the nation's largest city during the busiest season of the year. Jewish customs help explain why the parents made such a mistake.

Before a boy turned twelve, he was viewed as a child. When the Jewish families journeyed to Passover in Jerusalem, the women usually traveled with the children and the men walked together child free. Jesus would have gone up to Jerusalem with the women.

Once a twelve-year-old boy celebrated Passover, however, he was seen as a man. This meant that Jesus should have journeyed home with the men. Mary would have expected Jesus to join the men on the trip home. She would therefore not be concerned when Jesus did not walk with her and the other women. And depending on how closely this tradition was followed in this instance, Joseph could have easily assumed Jesus would return with the women and therefore not be worried when Jesus was absent from his group.

At night, however, when individual families bedded down together, Mary and Joseph would have realized the Jesus was not in their caravan at all. Like any parents with missing children, Joseph and Mary immediately returned to the city to search for Jesus.

This confusion is typical of all parent/child relationships. Although parents know their child's age, they are not always attuned to his or her growth in maturity or lack thereof. Numerous moms and dads have been crestfallen to discover their child no longer wants a bedtime story or a good-night kiss. Parents can feel high anxiety during their child's first sleepover, field trip, or summer camp, while the child can embrace such experiences with great joy.

At the same time, parents can err thinking their child has outgrown all need for their

Jesus should have journeyed home with the men.

Parents can err thinking their child has outgrown all need for their comfort and guidance.

comfort and guidance. A skinned knee, broken heart, or school failure often causes a child to want the parent's emotional support at a time when the parent might think the child wants more distance and independence.

High school graduation can be especially tricky for parents. Teenagers often demonstrate great excitement to go off to college, join the military, or volunteer in a far-off city. Parents normally support the son or daughter's ambitions and help make the dream come true. However, once the teen is on his or her own, the challenges of independence can become overwhelming. Parents don't always know when to intervene or when to allow the child to resolve his or her own crisis.

Knowing what a child needs at every stage of growth is an intimidating challenge that demands the wisdom and guidance of God. Parents need to pray their way through the challenges and work together to do their best to provide the love and support they feel in their hearts.

Joseph and Mary had the same challenges. Although Jesus lived in a completely different culture and time in history than children today, they were still baffled at times by their son's physical, mental, spiritual, and social development.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Did your parents ever treat you as being older or younger than you actually were developmentally? What happened?
- Have you ever treated your children as being older or younger than they actually were developmentally? What happened?

† LUKE 2:46-52

⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished;

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 6: THE BOY JESUS

July 10

(FRIDAY)

*Simeon Praises
God for the
Child*

LUKE 2:25-35

July 11

(SATURDAY)

*Anna Speaks
about the Christ
Child*

LUKE 2:36-38

July 12

(SUNDAY)

*The Wise Boy
Jesus Amazes
Teachers*

ECCLESIASTES
3:1, 7b; LUKE
2:39-52

and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” ⁴⁹ He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Whose Son Is This?

Although much of Jesus’ development was typical of Jewish boys of his time, a dimension of his maturity was unique to him. Evidently, Jesus felt that his twelfth birthday was a proper time to begin his advanced studies in the ways of his heavenly Father. Rather than follow the norms of his family and travel back home to Nazareth after the Passover, Jesus stayed in the temple, learning from the elders and impressing them with his level of spiritual understanding.

We are not sure where Joseph and Mary began their search for Jesus, but it evidently was not in the temple. Luke says they found him after three days. The first day was the journey home to Nazareth. The second day was the panic-filled trip back to Jerusalem. The third day was the search for the missing boy in the big city. Eventually they checked the temple and found Jesus there.

Mary responds with understandable frustration. **“Child, why have you treated us like this?”** Notice Mary is still referring to Jesus as a child; but at age twelve, he was a man according to the customs of the day. In essence her question means, “Why don’t you act like our child? Why don’t you keep up with us or tell us where you are going? Why don’t you consider how your actions worry us?”



Prague - The fresco of Twelve old Jesus in the Temple in church kostel Svätého Cyrila Metodeje by Petr Maixner (1872).

All are normal parental questions. But Jesus answers abnormally. **“Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?”** (NKJV). Jesus was clearly stating that his priorities were changing. He was transitioning from the obedient child of Joseph and Mary to the obedient child of God the Father. His concerns were no longer wholly the concerns of Mary and Joseph. His primary business was not carpentry or farming or any other trade, but to do the will of God.

Mary and Joseph could not fully comprehend what their son was saying, so Mary “pondered” his words in her heart. She continued to struggle with her son’s identity for many more years.

Luke ends this section by restating that Jesus, now considered a man, continued to grow physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially.

In a general way, all children have to develop their own relationships with God. Part of their conversion is to recognize that God’s will supersedes even the will of their earthly parents, who may or may not understand the child’s calling. Jesus’ relationship with God, however, was unique, and his spiritual development astonished his parents. He was not theirs but God’s. They would have him at home for a few more years, but then God’s call would take him away to a holy and frightening mission. It was never an easy task to parent the Son of God.

Jesus’ relationship with God, however, was unique, and his spiritual development astonished his parents.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What feelings does a child’s development bring out in parents?
- What unique responses did Jesus’ special calling evoke in Mary and Joseph?

NOTE

1. “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas” (from *The Apocryphal New Testament*, M.R. James—Translation and Notes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), *The Gnostic Society Library*, <http://gnosis.org/library/infoma.htm>.

The Wisdom of Jesus

SCRIPTURE: Mark 6:1-6

KEY VERSE: “On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom that has been given to him?’ . . . And they took offense at him.” —Mark 6:2-3

Didn't See It Coming

When I was in seminary, I was invited to preach at a large church where my brother was the minister of music. The pastor was out of town and trusted me with both the Sunday morning and evening sermons. My mother and father attended the service, as did my brother and his family. At the time, our nation's president was threatening to go to war, and my sermon from **Isaiah 2** spoke against war. I did not know the pastor of the church had been endorsing the president's call to war.

Immediately following my message, the associate pastor whispered, “That was a gutsy sermon.” After worship, the deacons confronted me and said, “If we had known Jane Fonda was going to be preaching, we would have stayed home.” My parents were uneasy and my brother more than a little nervous. I learned that some sermons astound and offend. I chose a different text for the evening service. Jesus astounded and offended many listeners, but their responses never caused him to alter his message.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever heard a sermon that astounded and offended you? What was it about? How did you respond?

† MARK 6:1

¹He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

Going Home Again

Robert Frost wrote in his poem “Death of the Hired Man,” “Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”¹ His words have resonated with many because home can be a place of respite and a place of great discomfort. Sometimes people go home only when they have to, only when they have no other choice.

Jesus felt led to return to his hometown after ministering in communities surrounding the Sea of Galilee. **Mark 4** and **5** tell dramatic stories about Jesus exhibiting great power in the towns around the sea. The Lord quiets a storm, heals a demon-possessed man, cures a woman of a disease no physician could cure, and raises Jairus’ daughter from the dead. After all these miracles were worked on the western, eastern, and northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus visited his home in Nazareth, thirty miles southwest of the sea.

Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem and lived much of his adult life in Capernaum, his childhood home was the very small town of Nazareth. Mark tells his readers the disciples were with Jesus. This was his way of saying there were living witnesses at the time he wrote his Gospel who could validate the events he described.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever had to go home when you would have preferred to stay away? What caused those feelings of dread?

† MARK 6:2

²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

Very Impressive

Jesus’ teachings in the synagogue of his hometown astonished the folks who had known him since birth. Jesus

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 7: THE WISDOM OF JESUS

July 13

(MONDAY)

Jesus Retores

Leader’s

Daughter to

Life

MARK 5:35-43

July 14

(TUESDAY)

Samaritans

Testify to

Wisdom of Jesus

JOHN 4:27-29,

39-42

July 15

(WEDNESDAY)

All Wisdom

Dwells in

Christ

COLOSSIANS

2:1-5

July 16

(THURSDAY)

Jesus Denounces

Human

Traditions

MARK 7:1-8

received a similar reaction when he preached in Capernaum at the beginning of his ministry. **Mark 1:22** says: “**They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.**” Later in the text, Mark reports the people of Capernaum “**were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee**” (Mark 1:27-28).

There is no account in the New Testament of Jesus studying with a rabbi in order to become a rabbi. The only reported time he met with the elders to learn from them is when he was a twelve-year-old boy in the temple in Jerusalem (**Luke 2:46**). Yet Jesus demonstrated an unusual grasp of Scripture and an astonishing level of power to combat sickness and evil. Consequently, his Jewish audiences were often stunned by his ability and curious about where he received such insight, authority, and miraculous ability. The answer was that Jesus had a unique relationship with the God who sent him to earth.

The questions posed by the people in Nazareth and Capernaum were good questions. On another occasion, Jesus told his listeners that true wisdom was “**vindicated by her deeds**” (**Matthew 11:19**). He encouraged that crowd to evaluate self-proclaimed prophets by their deeds and not their words. When any speaker makes claims of authority and “special revelation,” people need to investigate further before pledging their allegiance.

The people of both Capernaum and Nazareth were astounded at Jesus’ words and work. Astonishment, however, does not equal faith. Amazement amounts to momentary awe that can quickly diminish. Discipleship requires reflection, examination over time, and obedience. The crowds in Capernaum and Nazareth were not ready for that level of commitment. The big difference between the two groups was that the listeners in Capernaum had admiration for Jesus, while Jesus’ hometown folks had contempt.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When would you want to investigate the credentials and claims of a speaker?
- Have you ever been amazed by something that had no long-term effect on your life?

- Can we be amazed by religious experiences that do not transform us into disciples?

† MARK 6:3

³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

Hometown Boy

After being astonished by Jesus' knowledge and power, the people of Nazareth reject Jesus. First, they point out that Jesus was a carpenter, not a learned rabbi. The word translated as "carpenter" is *tehton* and can also be interpreted as stonecutter or woodworker. **Matthew 13:55** says the people asked, "Is this not the carpenter's son?" Both **Mark 6:3** and **Matthew 13:55** reveal an effort to diminish Jesus. The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus because they saw him as a working-class craftsman from a working-class family, not one from the priestly class or one with official rabbinical training.

To add to their belittling remarks, the people point out that they knew Jesus' mother, his brothers, and his sisters. The inference is that they were nobody special, so Jesus couldn't be anybody special.

Some see a deeper insult in the phrase "son of Mary." Normally people were known by their father's name. The fact that the crowd identified him by his mother might mean they were reminding one another that Jesus was born to a woman who became pregnant before marriage.

"Familiarity breeds contempt" is a well-known saying that is proven to be true in this setting. Because they've known Jesus all his life, the people of Nazareth can't believe he has a special anointing of God. His declaration to have come from God offends the crowd.

Luke 4:28-30 depicts the level of contempt held for Jesus by the people of his hometown. Luke says that

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 7: THE WISDOM OF JESUS

July 17

(FRIDAY)

*God's Wisdom
Trumps Human
Commands*

MARK 7:9-15

July 18

(SATURDAY)

*The Heart Not
the Stomach
Defiles*

MARK 7:17-23

July 19

(SUNDAY)

*Jesus' Wisdom
Astonishes His
Hometown
People*

MARK 6:1-6

while preaching in Nazareth, Jesus claimed that on occasion God blessed foreigners instead of Jewish citizens because the faith of the foreigners exceeded that of the local Jewish community. Not only did the crowd take offense at his words; they also took Jesus to a precipice and intended to cast him to his death. Jesus escaped the violence by the protection of God.

The writer Finley Peter Dunne is credited with saying that newspapers were supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Many preachers have noted a similarity to their own callings. Jesus certainly comforted many in his ministry, but when he thought people were self-righteous, bigoted toward others, or living in direct disobedience to God, he called on them to repent and return to the ways of God. In such cases, his words offended his listeners.

The writer of Hebrews reminds disciples of Christ: **“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account”** (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Preachers normally do not like to offend people. Most preachers want to be liked and consequently speak words they know will upset some in the congregation only when absolutely necessary. But when they preach the Word of God, that Word often convicts people of their sins. Although it is never comfortable for a congregation to listen to words of indictment from their pastor, if those words are based on Scripture, they can bring believers to a closer walk with Christ. In such cases, those believers can be grateful that their pastor is walking in the prophetic tradition of Jesus.

† MARK 6:4-6

⁴Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

No Respect

In response to their anger, Jesus quoted a common proverb that stated prophets were held in honor everywhere but in their own hometown and among their own family. Mark tells us that Jesus was not able to work many acts of power in Nazareth because of the people's lack of belief in him. Nevertheless, even on a bad day, in a hostile environment, Jesus' healing power was present such that **“he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.”**

The passage concludes with a description of Jesus' amazement at the hometown folk's unbelief. Although several times Jesus is amazed by someone's faith, this is the only time in Scripture Jesus is quoted as being “amazed” at someone's unbelief.

Often the word from God needed by a congregation arises from someone within the church. A teenager may call the church to a new ministry to the homeless. An elder may raise up the needs of senior citizens. A Christian in recovery from alcoholism might sensitize the church to the needs of the addicted in the community. A recent immigrant might deliver a message from God for the church to help recent arrivals to this country.

The church might be tempted to dismiss such voices because of familiarity. After all, they knew the teen when he was a rambunctious boy; they knew the elder when she complained about the new music in worship; they knew the alcoholic before he was in recovery; and they knew the immigrant when she arrived with nothing. Jesus' words call us to listen carefully for the voice of God even when it comes from those we know well.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever dismissed a person's message because you knew the person really well? Why or why not?
- Has someone from your church ever called your congregation to acts of true discipleship? Did the church listen?

NOTE

1. Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man,” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44261/the-death-of-the-hired-man.

Wisdom: The Way, Truth and Life

SCRIPTURE: John 14:1-14

KEY VERSE: Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

—John 14:6

Oars in the Water

In his book *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again and Again*, Roger Housden tells of visiting the Greek island of Santorini. Transported there by a ship too large to land on the shore of the island, he had to wait on board until islanders could row out in a smaller boat to get him. When his ship anchored, it was after dark and Roger could not see if anyone was coming for him or not. In the quiet, however, he could hear the sound of oars hitting the water and he knew someone was headed his direction to take him to the island.¹

John 14 provides the sound of oars hitting the water to let us know that even when we cannot see what follows our death, we can count on Christ to come for us to escort us into the presence of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Does it comfort you to know that Christ is watching and waiting, ready to take you home to God when you die?
- Does this awareness remove all anxiety about your death? Why or why not?

† JOHN 14:1-3

¹Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for

you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Adding On

Ray Vander Laan, a Christian Reformed minister and frequent lecturer on ancient Israel, writes that when a man became engaged to a woman in first-century Judea, he could not marry until he had built enough rooms onto his parent’s home to house his new bride. He could marry his fiancée only when his father agreed that he had constructed sufficient space in which to raise a family. After the wedding, the groom would bring his new bride back to the home he had prepared for them.²

Jesus might have used that common practice as a backdrop to his teaching on what would happen when he left his followers on earth. In **John 13:31-36**, Jesus tells his disciples he will soon be going away. This naturally made the disciples uneasy. To reassure them, Jesus said that he, like a bridegroom, would go to his “Father’s house” and prepare a place for them. Then, when all was ready and God said the time had come, Jesus would return to take them to their eternal home.

Paul echoes this teaching in **2 Corinthians 4:14**: “**We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.**” Although many of the details of the afterlife are not revealed to believers, they can be sure that Jesus will be present to accompany them to God.

Many religions teach there is life after this one. They differ on how one can enter into that blissful place. Christianity declares that we will enter because Jesus gave his life to save us from our sins and make us worthy to enter heaven. That same Jesus will be there when we die to escort us into God’s presence.

Jesus tells his disciples he will soon be going away.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 8: WISDOM: THE WAY, TRUTH, AND LIFE

July 20

(MONDAY)
Wisdom, Source of Abundant Life
PROVERBS
3:13-18

July 21

(TUESDAY)
Jesus Does What the Father Does
JOHN 5: 19-24

July 22

(WEDNESDAY)
Love as I Loved You
JOHN 13:31-35

July 23

(THURSDAY)
Spirit of Truth Dwells in You
JOHN 14:15-17

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Does it comfort you to know that Christ has prepared a place for you with God in heaven?
- Does it comfort you to know that Christ will be your escort into the presence of God?

† JOHN 14:4-7

⁴“And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Which Way to Where?

Thomas was honest enough to admit that he did not know where Jesus was going, much less how to get there. Although he was the only disciple to voice the confusion, he spoke for all of them. According to Thomas, none of the disciples understood what Jesus was saying.

In response, Jesus said that he was the way to God. Then he added that no one could get to God except through him. In the diverse world in which we live, some Christians would have preferred that Jesus had said, “I am *a* way” leaving room for people of other faiths to find their own way to God. But that is not what Jesus said.

This statement makes some believers a little haughty. They take pride in being right about the way to God while, in their opinion, all other faiths are wrong. That attitude is not becoming of a Christian. Others are overcome with gratitude to know that by God’s mercy they have found the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is more in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament.

John 14:6 motivates some in both groups to more intentional forms of evangelism. “If Jesus is the only way to God,” they reason, “then we should be much more active in trying to convert those who don’t know Christ.” Such folks worry that in our efforts to be more conciliatory and

According to Thomas, none of the disciples understood what Jesus was saying.

respectful of people of other faiths, we are allowing them to die without a true Savior.

A growing number of Christians seek to interpret Jesus' words in a way that allows for people of other religions to enter God's presence even though they may not accept Christ as their Savior. Such believers have a hard time accepting that God would keep billions of devout, God-fearing people out of heaven because they did not accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. "What about Gandhi?" they ask. "What about the millions of devout Jews?" they inquire. "What about those who practice their Muslim faith far more fervently than many Christians practice their own?"

Some Christians interpret these words in light of **John 1:1**: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Possibly, they say, this Word that we have met in Christ has been encountered by people of true faith in other religions.

Even though they may describe other means as making this connection possible, when anyone comes to true repentance and faith in God, they are actually encountering the eternal Word in the teachings of their ancient faith. Perhaps, such Christians say, an encounter with the eternal "Word" that Christians have come to know as Jesus, but others have encountered elsewhere is the only way to find salvation.

Although Christians are called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the people in their lives, Christians are not called to decide who will receive God's mercy and who will not. Regardless of how one interprets **John 14:6**, that holy decision must be left in the hands of God.



The Rosette Nebula
(NGC 2237, Caldwell 49)

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 8: WISDOM: THE WAY, TRUTH, AND LIFE

July 24

(FRIDAY)

Love Binds

Believers to God

JOHN 14:18-24

July 25

(SATURDAY)

Spirit of

Wisdom

Promised to All

JOHN 14:25-31

July 26

(SUNDAY)

Jesus, the Way

to the Father

JOHN 14:1-14

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How do you interpret John 14:6 when it comes to people of other faiths?
- Do you feel a need to try to convert devout members of other faiths or to establish dialogue to better understand their beliefs?
- Are you comfortable leaving decisions about eternity to God, or do you feel you must understand such determinations?

† JOHN 14:8-11

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

The Truth and the Life

Christians don’t have to know all the answers concerning what happens to people of other faiths in order to be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ. All believers can agree that Jesus has taught them the truth about God and given them new life. Out of love for God, Christ, and others, they can testify about the One who has brought them to God.

Philip did not yet understand that Jesus was God incarnate. Evidently, he saw Jesus as a teacher about God rather than the one God himself who was living on earth. Jesus clarified to Philip and the other disciples that when they heard him speak, they could trust his words were from God because God was fully present in him. The truth he offered and the life he made possible were all from God. Once Christians are fully convinced that Jesus is the incarnation of God, they can dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to doing the will of Christ and sharing his invitation to salvation with everyone they meet.



The writer of Hebrews explained: **“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being”** (Hebrews 1:1-3a). These words acknowledge that other faiths have knowledge of God, but that the revelation of God’s way, truth, and life in Christ is clearer than any other. Jesus is the “exact imprint of God’s very being.”

Christians don’t have to condemn all other faiths to share their faith with others.

When a woman marries a man, she isn’t saying all other men in the world are to be condemned. She is saying she has found a man who loves her, can be trusted, and is worthy of her respect, love, and healthy devotion. Christians don’t have to condemn all other faiths to share their faith with others. Believers can say that they have found in Christ one who loves them; can be trusted; can show them the way, truth, and life; and is worthy of their respect, love, and healthy devotion.

Jesus said as much to Philip. **“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.”** Then Christ added, **“But if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.”** Once again Jesus echoes his words in **Matthew 11:19: “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”** Jesus offers the world the same invitation. In essence, the Lord invites the whole world to trust his word, examine his works, and accept him as “the way, and the truth, and the life.”

† JOHN 14:12-14

¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Not Magic

Jesus promises that those who trust him as the way, truth, and life can continue his work on earth. When he says that believers will do greater

works than he did, he means their works will exceed his over time. Jesus was only here for a few years. Christianity has continued for some two thousand years. Jesus was only one person. Millions and millions of people do the work of Christ in the world today. Although no one disciple exceeds the power of Christ, the Lord's work through the church has exceeded what he was able to do while on this earth.

The phrase "in my name" has led to great confusion among followers of Christ. Some disciples believe that if they add those words to any prayer, they are guaranteed God will do as they ask. That would make the words magic, not acts of faith. Instead the phrase means "according to my will" or "as my representative." When disciples pray for Christ's help to do his will in the world, they can be assured God will grant that help.

When
disciples
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in the world,
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help.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever added "in Jesus' name" to a prayer hoping it will convince God to give you what you want? If so, did you get what you wanted from God?
- Does it make more sense that Jesus would teach us to pray according to his will rather than simply adding "in his name" to all our prayers?

NOTES

1. Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again and Again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 90-91.

2. Ray Vander Laan, "Marriage," *That the World May Know*, www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/marriage.

Faith and Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: James 1:1-11

KEY VERSE: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you.” —James 1:5

Practical Christian Living

The Letter of James is often held up as an example of what a life of Christian integrity looks like. The letter **provided great comfort to those living in situations of persecution.** Calling to mind Jesus’ sermon on the Mount, the beginning of the epistle is an exhortation to hope and patience, promising the rewards of endurance borne in faith. Other parts of the epistle concern the nature of wisdom and juxtapose the relationship of wisdom and justice. James is concerned that Christians live a life of integrity, both personally and communally. Most of this letter prophetically calls believers into a covenantal community that holds to certain moral standards.

† JAMES 1:1

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”

Like most letters in ancient times as well as today, the Letter of James starts with a greeting. The author announces himself and states the occasion for writing to the declared audience. Since the writing of this letter, the author has been assumed to be either James the apostle (who died in 44 CE in Rome according to Acts 11) or James the brother of Jesus (who was killed in 62 CE according to the Jewish historian Josephus). However, it is also possible that “James” is a symbolic name used to signal to readers that the letter should be taken seriously.

The audience for the letter appears to probably be converted Jews, as the author writes to the twelve tribes of Israel now scattered throughout the Middle East. Or, like the authorship, the audience addressed could also be symbolic, written to Christ-followers that were spread abroad.

Misattributed Quotes

When trying to sound wise, people often appeal to quotes from great historical figures. They think that whatever point they are trying to make will be elevated by referring to a famous person. However, many common quotes are misattributed. Here are some examples:

- “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Misattributed to Voltaire, actually written by Evelyn Beatrice Hall.
- “Well-behaved women rarely make history.” Misattributed to Marilyn Monroe, actually written by author Laurel Thatcher Ulrich.
- “The ends justify the means.” Misattributed to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, but originated far earlier in the Roman poet Ovid’s work.
- “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Misattributed to Albert Einstein, but actually penned by Rita Mae Brown, the mystery novelist in her book *Sudden Death*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How does the origin of a piece of wisdom factor into how wise it is? Does it matter who said or wrote it? Does that change the amount of wisdom a saying contains?
- What is a piece of wisdom you’ve received from someone you know? How does that affect how you think of that person?

† JAMES 1:2-8

²My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ^{7,8}for

the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

A Spirit of Encouragement

The author of James understands God as testing the righteous for their own edification. This type of understanding is typical of the Psalms and other wisdom literature that looks for reasons for life's biggest questions: love, suffering, death. Within this context, the author of James addresses "brothers and sisters" in a spirit of encouragement: **"Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance"** (James 1:2-3). Living in the context of the Roman Empire, encouragement would have been important for small, fledgling communities like the early Christ-followers.

The anti-imperial sentiment of Jesus did not appeal to the Roman government. Following Jesus' death, we might imagine how important it was for the community to continue their faith, since the figurehead of their movement was gone. The Letter of James contains encouragement to keep the faith and to trust in God, **"who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,"** (v. 5) even when they feel they lack wisdom and do not feel "mature and complete" if their endurance wavers. The author of James exhorts believers to **"ask in faith, never doubting"** (v.6) as a sign of trusting in God's justice and righteousness.

Doubting is undesirable for the author James, though modern readers may have different ideas.

The author of James compares the doubter to **"one who...is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind."**(v.6) This image is not of one who is steadfast and firmly rooted, but everything opposite. Faith is seen as opposite to doubt for this audience, as the letter encourages the believers to trust in God to deliver them through the present trials of their lives.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 9: FAITH AND WISDOM

July 27

(MONDAY)
*Suffering on
Behalf of the
Church*
COLOSSIANS
1:24-29

July 28

(TUESDAY)
*Saved by God's
Mercy*
TITUS 3:3-7

July 29

(WEDNESDAY)
*Ask: God Will
Supply Your
Needs*
LUKE 11:9-13

July 30

(THURSDAY)
*Rejoice in Your
Sufferings*
ROMANS 5:1-5

Waves of Faith and Doubt

Barbara Brown Taylor is a theologian, author, educator and Episcopal priest. She has written the award-winning books *Leaving Church*, *An Altar in the World*, and *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. As a theologian, Taylor finds God active in human bodies, in classrooms, in hospitals and in prisons. Her keen observation of the world around her leads her to be a deep thinker who does not shy away from challenging topics.

In her 2014 book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Taylor explores the “shadow sides” of life, considering faith, doubt, depression, death and mystery. She writes, “The good news is that dark and light, faith and doubt, divine absence and presence, do not exist at opposite poles. Instead, they exist with and within each other, like distinct waves that roll out of the same ocean and roll back into it again.”¹

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How does the image of the waves in verses 6-8 compare and contrast to Taylor’s image of the sea?
- How does understanding faith and doubt as a part of the same ocean change your experience of these words?
- How can we offer grace to people who are in the midst of a “dark night of the soul?” How can we offer grace to each other and to ourselves when we are in the midst of doubt?

† JAMES 1:9-11

⁹ Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, ¹⁰ and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹ 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 wither away.

Lived Faith Through Justice

Some scholars hold James in high esteem because of the prevalence of justice-related illustrations. Liberation theology is based upon the idea that God is on the side of the oppressed, caring for all people but particularly for those who have been exploited. In **James 1:9-11**, the author uplifts the poor so the **“rich [are] brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field.”** This recalls Mary’s Magnificat

in **Luke 1** and the Beatitudes in **Luke 6** with their fiery concern for the reversal of the social order, a characteristic of God's judgment and coming heavenly kingdom. The environmental image of the sun scorching flowers further calls readers to question the extent to which the rich exploit the world around them.

However, James is unique in that the recommendations made by the author are primarily practical. This follows Jewish tradition where care for the poor is basic covenantal law. As the early Christians struggled to form a cohesive identity as a movement following the absence of their spiritual leader, they had to figure out what teachings to spiritualize and what to keep literal.

Faith, Doubt and Wisdom

When I was growing up, I attended a church that didn't like questions. They liked to have kids around, attending Sunday school and Vacation Bible School and (sometimes) adult worship in the sanctuary. But they weren't so good with the hard questions. And kids and youth ask a lot of questions! "Do we know God is a man?" "Why do people suffer?" "Will my dad go to hell because he doesn't believe in Jesus?" "What will heaven be like if the people I love aren't there?" "How do we know Jesus did all these things and said all these things?" "What if people don't know about Jesus before they die, will they automatically not be saved?" "What does the book of Revelation mean, that there will be a 'new heaven and new earth?'" "If you have sex before marriage, does that mean you're not a Christian?"

Sometimes when I think about faith, doubt and wisdom, I think about the disciple Thomas. Often he is known as "Doubting Thomas," which I don't think is

When I was growing up, I attended a church that didn't like questions.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 9: FAITH AND WISDOM

July 31

(FRIDAY)

*God's Loving
Actions toward
Sinners*

ROMANS 5:6-11

August 1

(SATURDAY)

*Grass Withers
But God's Word
Stands*

ISAIAH 40:1-8

August 2

(SUNDAY)

*Wisdom
Overcomes
Trials and
Temptations*

JAMES 1:1-11

quite fair. Doubt does not mean that someone does not believe or does not have faith. Often doubt is a mark of taking one's faith or life situation seriously. I wonder if Thomas asked a lot of questions as a child. I wonder if people heard his questions and regarded him seriously. I wonder if Thomas' love for Jesus was so deep that he wanted to be sure—actually, really, 100% sure—that Jesus had risen from the dead, because his heart just couldn't bear it if this was a hoax. Maybe Thomas' doubt was born of serious, heartfelt inquiry and desire to follow a life-giving God.

It's ok not
to know
everything.
It's ok
to ask
questions.

Asking questions and having doubts are a part of life. But they are also marks of wisdom. Doubt can sometimes be a tool aiding the process of discernment. To know what you believe, sometimes you have to question it. To have faith in something, you have to consider what it means not to have faith. Wisdom can mean being honest about your doubts and questions, pursuing a life of integrity even (and especially) when it's not convenient or easy, and letting go of your ego. It's ok not to know everything. It's ok to ask questions. And just because other people (or kids or youth) are asking questions or experiencing doubts, that doesn't mean your teaching is faulty or they are losing faith. When you practice understanding doubts as a way to be serious about faith, wisdom will show you the way forward.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is the difference between doubt and faith? How do these concepts interact? How does doubt inform faith, and vice versa?
- Have you ever been put down for having doubts? Why do you think this happened? What does putting down doubts offer?
- Having doubts and questions can be uncomfortable. Why do you think this is? What happens when you move through the discomfort?

NOTE

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

Hearing and Doing the Word

SCRIPTURE: James 1:19-27

KEY VERSE: “**Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.**” —James 1:22

Christian Mindfulness

In today’s world, humans all over the globe are connected by technology more than ever before. Interactions via email and social media are shared almost immediately, and the news cycle can seem relentless. In this part of the Letter of James, the author invites readers to slow down and increase their mindfulness. Jesus himself taught that his followers should be “in the world but not of the world” (**John 17:14-19**) and therefore conscious of what their life of faith means for their relationships. James takes this up, writing that believers should behave in the world in a way representative of their God, careful that their speech and behavior are not reactionary or quick to judge but full of kindness and gentleness.

Some Bible scholars wonder if the author of James took the apostle Paul’s idea of “faith alone” so literally that they were neglecting to monitor their behavior and speech to follow the teachings of Christ. With the guarantee of salvation only by faith, what did it matter if they spoke ill of others or treated their families with contempt? But James, always offering advice for faith lived practically, is concerned with the “**im-planted word**” (v. 21), akin to the righteousness of God that empowers each of God’s followers to act with justice and kindness. For the author of James and the community to whom he was writing, true religion is the religion that cares for

Believers should behave in the world in a way representative of their God.

“**the least of these**” (Matthew 25:45) while also being self-reflective and conscious of being a representative of the God of liberation on Earth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are examples of being *of* the world that hinder our Christian witness?
- What are ways that Christians can strike a balance between the not being *of* the world but being *in* it without compromising our values *and* without completely isolating ourselves from reality?

Reflecting God

Sometimes when I hear and say the Lord’s Prayer, I get stuck on the “**on earth as it is in heaven**” (Matthew 6:10) part. I like the idea of heaven on earth, of course, as I look around the metropolis where I live and see many people living on the streets, suffering from illness and addiction. I want heaven to be on earth for “**the least of these**” so that they, as the Beatitudes say, may be comforted and filled and see God. But also, what is preventing those of us now from making it so? Why does “**on earth as it is in heaven**” have to conjure images of a far-off time? I wonder what we can do to make a difference in our communities right now.

We understand our lives to be complex and bound up with others’ well-being.

A Jewish friend once told me that everyone has God inside them, and that when you meet someone on the street, the God in you bows to the God in them. Maybe this is how we can live every day in a manner that reflects God’s goodness, and how we can create “heaven on earth” right now. When we understand our lives to be complex and bound up with others’ well-being, we are more likely to act for the common good rather than just our own good.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Have you ever seen God in someone that you didn’t expect? Discuss how your initial judgement of them was changed. What did this interaction teach you about yourself?

- How do you greet others when you meet them on the street? What kinds of daily interactions lift you up? How can you share those kindnesses with others?
- What can you do, alone or with your family and friends or church, to create “earth as it is in heaven”?

† JAMES 1:19-21

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore 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.

Listen First, Speak Second

In this part of James, the author addresses the reader as “my beloved” (v. 19). The use of this familiar and friendly greeting indicates that the author of the letter was fondly familiar with the community to whom he was writing. This greeting makes it less likely that the letter was written as an apologetic epistle to convince nonbelievers to convert to Christianity. Instead, this letter was meant to encourage Christ-followers to adapt their lifestyles and behaviors to a manner representative of God. For example, Christians should keep anger at bay by being “quick to listen” and “slow to speak” (v. 19). In the view of the author of James, it was important for the lives of believers to reflect the goodness of God, as known through God’s word and God’s righteousness.

Is there a place for Christian anger? I will admit, I am not good at anger. Wait, you say, why would someone



Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 10: HEARING AND DOING THE WORD

August 3

(MONDAY)
Impartial Relationships with One Another
LEVITICUS 19:13-18

August 4

(TUESDAY)
Praised for Steadfast Faith in Persecution
2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-5, 11-12

August 5

(WEDNESDAY)
The Poor Blessed; the Rich Criticized
LUKE 6:20-26

August 6

(THURSDAY)
Suffering for Doing the Right Thing
1 PETER 3:13-19

want to be good at anger? Well, the alternative is not being able to express anger in healthy ways, and it is not pleasant. As a woman, I have been socialized throughout my life to be “nice” and “sweet” and “polite,” with no direction of what to do when I am feeling wronged or when I see a social relationship that is not as it should be.

Practice being self-reflective before being reactive.

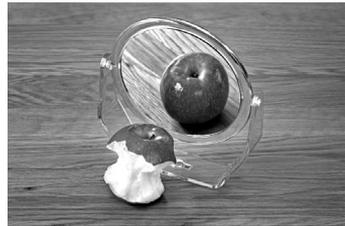
Sometimes Christians want to focus only on righteousness and forget that Jesus got angry sometimes and even overturned some tables. But anger doesn’t have to have a bad reputation, especially when regarded as an indicator of something being not quite right in the social fabric of a community, such as when Jesus rebuked people who were not caring for the poor and oppressed. For communities to encourage one another to express anger in healthy ways, they can practice being self-reflective before being reactive.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is experiencing anger like for you? When you feel it towards others? When you feel it from others? When you are angry yourself?
- What place is there for righteous anger in the Letter of James? How can “**being quick to listen [and] slow to speak**” (v. 19) be part of expressing angry feelings positively?

† JAMES 1:22-27

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a



mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ 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.

The Word and the World

This section of James reveals a Jewish understanding of the Law. “Word” is synonymous with the Law in rabbinic Judaism, such that one should experience the reflection of God in the Law. Following logically, God is the source of all life and the source of the Word, therefore the Word is reflected in the Law. The Law should point to the One who is the Giver of the Law. The Jewish Law is highly ethical, not only concerning verbal confession of belief and faith but also practical compliance with ethics. It was not enough to profess the right words; the lifestyle had to match up with one’s speech. There was little tolerance for hypocrisy in this framework, and the author of James entreats readers to carefully abide by these standards. The appropriate response to God, the Giver of the Law, was to follow the Law and live ethically.

Though Jesus is not mentioned specifically in this section, it is possible that if the Letter of James was circulated in Roman communities, the word “logos” (“Word”) may have drawn connections with Christ (see **John 1:1**). These references may have been something like a code so the Good News about Jesus Christ could be shared and spread in a time when the Roman Empire was not very tolerant of small, fledgling religious sects, especially not ones viewed in opposition to the political order.

It is somewhat common knowledge that the reformer Martin Luther disliked the Letter of James, saying at various times that it was too catholic, that is, too focused on the actions of a life of works than on God’s grace alone. However, Luther liked the part of James at hand, **James 1:19-27**. Luther

The appropriate response to God, the Giver of the Law, was to follow the Law and live ethically.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 10: HEARING AND DOING THE WORD

August 7

(FRIDAY)

*God’s Choice—
the Foolish,
Weak, Lowly*

1 CORINTHIANS
1:26-31

August 8

(SATURDAY)

*Treat the Rich
and Poor*

Impartially

JAMES 2:1-7

August 9

(SUNDAY)

*The Wise Hear
and Do Good*

JAMES 1:19-27

thought that every day the Christian should be focused on God and neighbor, and act in goodwill towards others. Luther was also a proponent of a kind of “servant leadership.” The danger of the world is that it might cause someone to be double-minded, to live for God in one way but also live according to the rules and practices of the world. But salvation in the Letter of James is an everyday choice to unite one’s earthly actions and will with God’s, so that the Christian is acting in the world to represent God’s grace to others.

Luther thought that every day the Christian should be focused on God and neighbor.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- Describe aspects in your life where you feel you have set up a social boundary to keep your Christian living separated from what would be deemed worldly living and double mindedness.

Easier Said Than Done

It’s probably true that all of us have heard, and probably said, this aphorism at some point in our lives. I think of my mom telling me to do my chores, and my confident answer, “Yes, I will!” before getting lost in a book or drowned in my homework. It was easier to assure my mom that I’d get the dishes washed, the laundry sorted and folded, and the dog walked than actually making time to do them.

Similar things are happening in churches today. Our churches want visions for the future, strategic plans for growing membership, and deeper faith for their congregants. But all such things are easier said than done. And, perhaps a bit closer to our text from James today, they are easier heard than done. Sure, some congregants might think a strategic plan is a good idea, but when it comes around to living it out, getting it done, changing the shape of one’s own life and comfort to accomplish it—that’s another story.

I know of a church that was interested in getting more “young people” (usually defined as millennials) in the doors. “If only the young people would come to church, then our church would survive,” or “If only there were more young people, then we could do more outreach

to our neighborhood.” These were statements heard regularly around the church. The truth was that they already had young people in the pews each Sunday and attending Wednesday night dinners on a weekly basis! The root issue seemed to be the comfort level of the older generations in making space for the younger ones to lead. No one under fifty was seated on the leadership council for the church, and no one over fifty was seeking out the young people to serve. It was most common to see older men leading worship, and the worship committee was not inviting younger people to be greeters, read Scripture, or get more fully involved.

So often, the things that people dream of accomplishing in churches require making space for new leadership, innovative collaboration, and dreams of what can be done. This may mean that folks who are used to getting their agenda accomplished, being listened to all the time, and leading the decision-making have to step aside so that others have the opportunity to share their God-given gifts and talents. It may be “easier said than done,” but it will be worth the growth and discovery in the process.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What are you hearing right now that is “easier said than done”? What is your response?
- In what ways are you saying things and setting goals that are going to be challenging to accomplish? How can you trust God in this process? How are you engaging with others so that you’re not doing everything on your own?
- Maybe your church desires more younger members. Maybe you already have younger folks in leadership. How can you make space for others to step into leadership roles? What opportunities are available for you to support new leadership?

The root issue seemed to be the comfort level of the older generations in making space for the younger ones to lead.

Faith Without Works Is Dead

SCRIPTURE: James 2:14-26

KEY VERSE: **“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”**

—James 2:17

Sola Fide?

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther famously disliked the Letter of James because of the concept that **“faith without works is dead,”** found in **James 2:17,26**. As Reformers sought to distance themselves from the Roman Catholic Church due to its sale of “pardons” for sins, they also sought to embrace faith alone as justification before God. This means that no earthly deeds could change the outcome of one’s judgement by God, but “by faith alone” (*sola fide*) were people saved. For Luther, God was the source of all grace, and Christians needed only to recognize the abundant grace they received from God and have faith.

Enter the Letter of James, which consistently knits together faith and action. In **James 1**, care for the neediest in the community is presented as the hallmark of true religion. In this section in **James 2**, the hypocrisy of people who say they have faith and yet who neglect to care for their neighbors is highlighted. The author of James also illustrates that Christians are not the only major religion to encourage ethical commitments in life, as the text includes direct connections to the sacred stories of Judaism.

In the Western world, the doctrine of *sola fide* has resulted in increasingly individualistic faith. But for Christians today, living in an increasingly globalized world with rising economic disparity, confessing belief in Christ is not the only responsibility of a person of faith. One must also care for the least among them, for works are to faith as the body is to the spirit (**James 2:26**).

† JAMES 2:14-19

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.

The Works of Faith

The author of James addresses salvation in this section of his letter. Remember that the author was probably not writing as an apologist trying to convince nonbelievers to follow Christ, but seeking to encourage the behavior of current followers. Eternal salvation is not the main concern for the author of James, but rather how “the works of faith” reveal the commitments of a person or community who believe in God. Hypocrisy is all too easy for the individual and for the community, as it can be tempting to say all the right things without following up with action.

The author questions the goodness of intention if words are not followed by deeds that confirm the intention. He reveals a proclivity to sarcasm in **verse 19**. Where some modern Christians may be confused about the reference to demons who acknowledge that “**God is one**,” in the first-century the meaning would have been plain. The standard worldview included the unity of God. Therefore, saying the demons even recognize God’s oneness is a basic belief, something that is so common that everyone would know. For the author of James, true faith goes further than this, to affect how one behaves alone and in community.

Daily Bible Readings**WEEK 11:
FAITH
WITHOUT
WORKS IS
DEAD****August 10**

(MONDAY)

*Abraham
Blessed for
Fearing God*

GENESIS 22:9-19

August 11

(TUESDAY)

*Spies Saved by
Rahab’s Quick
Actions*

JOSHUA 2:1-7

August 12

(WEDNESDAY)

*Forgive Others
like God**Forgave You*MATTHEW
18:23-25**August 13**

(THURSDAY)

*Devoted to
Good Works,
Avoiding
Distractions*TITUS 3:1-2,
8-11

Sophie Scholl's Faith in Action

Sophie Scholl was a university student and anti-Nazi activist in Germany in the 1940s. The legacy of her involvement and action alongside her brother Hans through their organization, the White Rose Society, is deep and impactful. The Scholls continue to be an inspiration to many young activists who are witnesses for peace and justice in our world today. Visit <https://www.amightygirl.com/blog?p=19179> to learn more about Sophie Scholl.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Does Sophie's story remind you of any biblical stories? If so, which one(s) and why?
- Does Sophie's activism remind you of any modern-day people? Who and why?
- How did Sophie's faith inform her action, and vice versa? What was the relationship between righteousness and legality in Sophie's context?
- Does the story of Sophie and the White Rose Society remind you of any twenty-first century activism? Who? What are the similarities? What can we learn from young adults and their political activism?

† JAMES 2:20-24

²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Abraham's Faith in Action

These lessons have already established that the audience of the Letter of James. For the author to allude to the great patriarch Abraham of the Jewish faith, the audience would have had to be in close proximity with Jewish culture and teachings, potentially Jewish converts to

Christianity and/or Jewish Christians who had not totally differentiated themselves from other Jewish sects of the time.

The story of Abraham and his son Isaac's journey to make a sacrifice to God is legendary. Some Christians understand the near-sacrifice of Isaac to be a foreshadowing of Jesus' death on the cross, a father willing to sacrifice his son to demonstrate that God would ask God's followers to do anything God the Father wasn't willing to do regarding the Son Jesus. For the author of James, it seems that the point of using Abraham as an example of true faith is because Abraham's faith was not passive but was present in his actions. The author of the letter is not praising Abraham for almost killing his long-awaited child, but for showing how one must unite one's individual will with God's will, an integral aspect of his faith.

Church and State, Faith and Action

Classical Baptist tradition holds the separation of church and state in high esteem. This stems from the earliest Baptists in the American colonies, preachers like John Leland and Roger Williams, who didn't like the connection of the Church of England with the colonial government—particularly how citizens' taxes benefitted the Church of England, no matter if they shared that religious conviction or not. Today in the United States, opinions on the relationship of church and state vary. The United States professes to be a country where religious freedom is guaranteed for all, yet the vast majority of politicians benefit when claiming Christian faith.

What would Leland and Williams have thought about the relationship of Christianity to the United States government today? Perhaps it would have been an Abraham and Isaac situation, where the act upon which Abraham was embarking was not to be praised but the unity of his faith/will/action is.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 11: FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

August 14
(FRIDAY)

*Works Guided
by Loyalty to
God*

DEUTERONOMY
6:4-9

August 15
(SATURDAY)

*Receive God's
Mercy by
Showing Mercy*

JAMES 2:8-13

August 16
(SUNDAY)

*Faith and
Works Must Go
Together*

JAMES 2:14-26

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How would you describe Abraham's faith? Is this faith to be emulated, or do you have some misgivings?
- What does it mean to unite an individual's will with God's will? How are you inspired to do this, following the author of James' lead?

† JAMES 2:25-26

²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

Rahab, Pillar of Faith

The Abraham and Isaac story is not the only surprising example of faith cited by the author of James. Rahab's story is found in **Joshua 2**, where she helps Joshua's spies hide from the king of Jericho, ultimately making it possible for the Israelites to occupy their promised land. Because of this action, the author of James understands Rahab's deeds as aligned with God's will, providing safe passage for those chosen to accomplish God's plan in the world.

Notably, Rahab is one of five women mentioned in Matthew's version of Jesus' genealogy (alongside Tamar, Ruth, the wife of Uriah [Bathsheba], and Mary the mother of Jesus). Many readers judge Rahab for her activities as a prostitute, but it is exactly that line of work that provided a cover for hiding Joshua's spies in her home. As she proclaimed her faith to the two spies that "the LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below (**Joshua 2:11b**), her actions on behalf of God's people showed the genuineness of her faith to such an extent that the author of James lifts her up as an example. For James, it is not the life situation that matters but the faithful action aligned with God's will. While some would avoid praising Rahab because of her social status and judge her for being a believer while engaging in prostitution, authenticity of faith is something James does not legislate. Though

The author of James understands Rahab's deeds as aligned with God's will.

anyone would find it challenging to abide by their values and standards 100 percent of the time, authentic faith yields space for God’s grace as we seek to show we are Christians by our behaviors and commitments.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- How can we as individual Christians best shift our focus from our Christian rhetoric to Christian actions?
- In what ways can we as churches move our congregations to more actions rather than “religious” traditions and attitudes?

Discerning in Committee

While pursuing ordination, I met with my local church’s ordination committee. The committee was made up of seven congregants from various walks of life, and they regularly gathered for prayer and to assist members of the community with discernment. When I started meeting with them, I was uncomfortable at times because there was so much silence. I thought about Quaker communities that practice silent reflection until someone is moved to speak. I thought about a silent retreat that I participated in during college. I wondered what the silence of these discernment meetings could offer me.

Into the quiet space, deep questions emerged from the committee members and from me. Shared exploration and curiosity were offered into the silence. Those of us gathered tried our best to leave space for the Spirit to move us. And move the Spirit did, in a way that seemed to me more authentic than in the rest of my busy life. We gave space and time and breath so that the Spirit’s movements would be noticed and spoken aloud.

We gave space and time and breath so that the Spirit’s movements would be noticed and spoken aloud.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What does discernment mean to you? How do you leave space for the Spirit to move? What helps you tune into God’s will? What dissuades you?
- How do you foster space for authentic faith to grow? What are the fruits that show authentic faith has taken root?

Taming the Tongue

SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12

KEY VERSE: **“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”** —James 3:10

Becoming People of Integrity

The author’s desire for his readers to be people of faithful integrity is illustrated in the quest for continuity of speech, thought, and action. At the time of this letter’s writing, early Christ-following communities were searching for ways to make themselves distinct from other communities of faith. Lessons from this time period echo today.

The author calls for accountability in speech, knowing that communities are made up of humans who are not perfect. Sometimes we are tempted to speak or act recklessly, but the invitation given in the Letter of James is to discern what kind of speech will govern a Christ-following community in the midst of doublespeak and hypocrisy in society. The author uses illustrative examples of forest fires, ships, taming animals, fresh springs and saltwater, and fig trees to invite readers to consider their need to maintain control over our own tongues. **Verse 9** illustrates the temptation to hypocrisy that many Christians are familiar with: **“With [the same tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”**

Sometimes
we are
tempted to
speak or act
recklessly.

Many non-Christians report that the hypocrisy of speech and behavior is what contributes to their disillusionment with the church. As many mainline Protestant churches are declining in membership, communities must wrestle with the disunity of values, speech, and behavior and what impact that has on evangelism.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Recall a situation when your emotions got the better of you in terms of how you responded to someone verbally. What impact did your words have on the hearer? What impact did your words have on the relationship in the long term?
- What's an example when a well-known Christian said something publicly that then went viral? What was the impression made on society?

† JAMES 3:1

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

The Power of Public Witness

The author starts out this chapter with harsh truth-telling: The author was not only addressing teachers and other community leaders who spoke publicly, but also himself. The author understood that the more publicly someone lives, the more they will be seen and judged for their speech and actions. Consider political leaders and famous celebrities. Many social media posts pronounce quick and harsh judgments on them, contributing to an atmosphere wherein many people face ongoing pressure to judge or be judged. In writing about judgment here, however, the author is focusing on earthly behavior, as divine judgment is a different matter. With great visibility comes great responsibility.

† JAMES 3:2-5a

²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive

Daily Bible Readings**WEEK 12:
TAMING THE TONGUE**

August 17
(MONDAY)
Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers
PROVERBS
5:7-14

August 18
(TUESDAY)
Testimony of a Wise Teacher
ISAIAH 50:4-11

August 19
(WEDNESDAY)
Slander and Abusive Language Not Allowed
COLOSSIANS
3:1-11

August 20
(THURSDAY)
Use Tongue to Speak God's Praise
PSALM
119:169-176

them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

Speech Under Control

The author's practicality shines in this section of the letter as he acknowledges the humanity of his audience. Every human makes mistakes, and no one is exempt from that. The more people are in the public eye, the more their mistakes are likely to be scrutinized.



However, there must be ways to manage the impact of these mistakes, particularly pertaining to the tongue. Speech is powerful and must be practiced responsibly. Here, the author uses the Hellenistic metaphors of a bridled horse and a ship's rudder to express the idea of something small having such a big influence. Even though the tongue is a small part of the body, speech can have a greater impact than one might know.

Sometimes controlling the tongue takes practiced disciplines such as prayer, meditation and silence. Such practices help us be more self-aware and grow in patience and self-control. Reflect on the scripture “In your patience, possess ye your soul (KJV)” Luke:21:19. We have to be intentional in slowing down and getting a grip on our thoughts and intentions through introspection and prayer. When we allow the Spirit to control us from within, it is much easier to control what comes out of our mouth—or shall I say heart.

Speech is powerful and must be practiced responsibly.

Dorothy Day, in *On Poverty*, credits Maurice Zundel, from Our Lady of Wisdom Peace Center, with some beautiful passages on silence:

“Do we understand at last that action must be born in silence, and abide in silence, and issue in silence, and that its power must be an emanation and the radiation of silence, since its sole aim is to make men capable of hearing the Word that silently reverberates in their souls?”

“All speech and reasoning, all eloquence and science, all methods and all psychologies, all slogans and suggestions are not worth a minute of silence in which the soul, completely open, yields itself to the embrace of the Spirit.”

“In solitude Christ speaks to the heart, as a modest lover who embraces not His beloved before all the world. In silence we hear so much that is beautiful.”¹

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Describe a time when silence was beautiful to you.
- In what way do you hear Christ most clearly? Through speech, or silence, or something else?
- How can you “yield yourself to the embrace of the Spirit”?
- What does “action must be born in silence” mean to you? What are these words calling you to do?

Reflection on Intent vs. Impact

Some activist groups talk about being aware of “intent vs. impact.” This acknowledges the truth that, though someone might not have meant to cause harm by what they said, they are still responsible for the impact of their words. Assuming good intent is often a behavioral norm for committee meetings, but that does not erase the fact that sometimes things are said that harm others. It is a type of victim-blaming to request that the person who was harmed should assume good intentions from the person who did the harming, putting the responsibility on the injured party to do the work of reconciliation. If the person who did the speaking acknowledged the possibility of harm from their words, no matter what their intention, the responsibility for reconciliation would be more of a shared one.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Does the author of James acknowledge the difference in intent and impact of words? How?

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 12: TAMING THE TONGUE

August 21

(FRIDAY)

Believers Anointed with Fire and Tongues

ACTS 2:1-12

August 22

(SATURDAY)

Tongues and Teachers Are God's Gifts

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-31

August 23

(SUNDAY)

Speech Is for Hearing and Refreshment

JAMES 3:1-12

- What more contemporary metaphors would help your community understand the power of the tongue, besides a bridled horse and ship's rudder? What other small things have a great impact?

† JAMES 3:5b-12

^{5b}How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Mistakes Abound

In the context of a fledgling group of Christ-followers trying to differentiate themselves from other faith communities in the first-century Roman Empire, the importance of speech could not be overrated. Trying to find their way in a pluralistic world, a community's speech and behavior could engage new members or give the community a bad reputation. Perhaps the community could even have been persecuted by the Empire. The dramatic illustrations used by the author were serious and impactful for the audience of this letter, as they are for us today.



“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing,” the author writes, driving the import of speech home. While possibly referring to foul language and swear words as well as kind speech, the author is also drawing attention to how people treat one another. Some of the same people who use their words and actions to praise God also curse their

siblings and their neighbors. The author explains that blessing and cursing with the same mouth is unnatural, like a spring giving off two kinds of water or a grapevine growing figs. Similarly, a person made in the image of God should not praise God in one breath and curse their neighbor in the next.

People of integrity mind their speech and action so that they are consistent and just in representing themselves, their community, and their God.

Words create worlds. Speaking carefully and intentionally is easier for some people than it is for others. As **James 3:2** says, **“For all of us make many mistakes.”** In communities, we must cultivate empathy for each other as beings made in the image of God. We also must work to understand the difference between our intentions and our impacts, and take honest responsibility for both.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What could be a concern for first-century Christians who speak openly and honestly the values of their new religion in the midst of the Roman Empire?
- In such situations, what do you believe God would call us to do—speak up or shut up?

Intentional Speech

I do not think quickly on my feet. When someone says something to me that is upsetting, offensive, or triggering, it usually takes a little while for me to figure out what I should have said. Do you know that feeling?

Once someone in my congregation told me they didn't like the color of lipstick I was wearing that day. Instead of standing up for myself and my personal choices, I fell silent. Later, when I was sitting in my office, some possible responses came to me. It's good I didn't say some of them! And I wish I had said some others for both my sake and theirs. Sometimes I think I should have two notecards in my back pocket. On one note card are all the reasonable pastoral responses to criticism, offensive language, and personal comments. On the other note card are

We must cultivate empathy for each other as beings made in the image of God.

all the things I *wish* I could say but might be a bit too snarky for my own good.

Envisioning these two notecards could be helpful as we practice intentional speech. Intentional speech occurs when we take a moment for discernment before the words exit our lips. In that moment we ask ourselves: “Is this comment necessary? Is it helpful? Is it constructive? Is it kind?” It takes time, practice, and patience to cultivate the discipline of speaking intentionally.

Intentional speech is not just about being “nice.” And it’s not the same as: “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” Sometimes things must be said that are difficult or may cause hurt feelings. Sometimes harmful behaviors must be called out; sometimes abusive language must be stopped; sometimes we just need to express our emotions through animated speech. My activist friends say, “There comes a point when you have to speak up, when the cost of not speaking is more than the cost of offending someone.” Speaking truth to power is one of those times when speech is intentional but may still be hard to receive. It takes dedication to intentional speech (and intentional listening) to be able to receive these messages.

Speaking truth to power is one of those times when speech is intentional but may still be hard to receive.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- When did you speak with intentionality? What were the results? When did you speak without discernment? What were the results?
- Is there one standard of speech that applies to everyone? Why or why not?
- What does “speaking truth to power” mean to you? How can that activity be intentional and accomplish the intended goals?

NOTE

1. Dorothy Day. *On Poverty*, Catholic Worker, p. 16, [https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/themes/On%20Poverty%20\(Dorothy%20Day\).pdf](https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/themes/On%20Poverty%20(Dorothy%20Day).pdf).

Two Kinds of Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: James 3:13-18; 5:7-12

KEY VERSE: **“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”** —James 3:17

They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our . . . What?

You probably know the song “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” Though a well-known song in many Christian communities, the reputation of the religion does not always live up to the song. Many non-Christians describe Christians as hypocritical, judgmental, and insular. The phrases “if you’re going to talk the talk, you’ve got to walk the walk” and “practice what you preach” would resonate with the author of James if he were alive today. **James 3:13-18** and **5:7-12** focus on how personal behaviors display the theological and ethical convictions of the individual, as well as affect the cohesiveness of the community. In a North American context, Christianity can often be individualistic, as many believers are only concerned with their own salvation, well-being, and image. However, it would be a disservice to the author of James to interpret the quest for wisdom as concerning only the individual.

Communal wisdom is part of what the author was encouraging the readers to cultivate. This can be achieved only through honesty, vulnerability, and direct communication. **“Disorder and wickedness” (v. 3:16)** are the consequences of a community where envy, ambition, boasting, and

Personal behaviors display the theological and ethical convictions of the individual, as well as affect the cohesiveness of the community.

“grumb[ing] against one another” (v. 5:9) are the norm. Though individual churches may indeed live up to the song and be known by their love, the institution of the church can be fraught with frustration, indecision, red tape, and roadblocks. People grumble against one another all the time, even though they have come together by choice to go on the journey of following Jesus. Uniting an individual’s will with God’s will, as the author of James wrote, is only one part of the task of living with authentic faith. The next part is to alter the behavior of the group.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What are the group dynamics within congregations that make it difficult for members to hold each other accountable in sustaining Godly demeanor and action when dealing with internal issues? In other words, how do politics (generically speaking) impact the church?

† JAMES 3:13-18

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Emulating the Right Attributes

The author challenges those who are “**wise and understanding**” to be gentle examples of how they live their faith. The author is inviting readers to understand how the convictions of one’s heart should be evident in one’s actions. For the author, consistency is key to living a life of integrity.

Contemporary readers might think this challenge to wisdom is playing into dualistic thinking, where one is either wise or foolish. Christians today fall too easily into dualistic thinking, where the extremes of an idea are the only parts given

Consistency
is key to
living a life
of integrity.

credence. When the author uses the example of “order” vs. “disorder” or “wisdom from above” vs. “earthly wisdom,” it is important to notice the juxtaposition. The “unspiritual” and “devilish” wisdom of the world are “envy” and “selfish ambition,” while “wisdom from above” is “willing to yield” and has a good measure of humility and integrity. The author writes using these dualities to encourage readers to consider whether they act only for their personal benefit, or for the good of their whole community. As **verse 18** says, peacemakers will reap what they sow. Written with community in mind, the passage encourages neighbors to live peaceably with one another.

Reconciliation in the Gray Areas

Sometimes it can feel like the world is full of dualities. Politics is either great or terrible, either in my favor or not in my favor. The world is either rejoicing or mourning. But there are many shades of gray in the middle. The work of peacemaking is done in the gray areas, in understanding that the extremes must talk to one another.

Compassion works against the pull of polarity. The extremes of any issue are discovered to be not so far away, to have more in common than previously thought. Compassion invites mutual understanding, and empathy takes root. Reconciliation can take place when people of integrity practice compassionate conversation with each other, respecting each other as made in the image of God. To do this, they must let the Spirit lead them into the gray areas, where peacemaking can happen.

The work of peacemaking is done in the gray areas, in understanding that the extremes must talk to one another.

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 13: TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

August 24

(MONDAY)

*Wisdom about
End Time Signs*

MATTHEW
24:3-14

August 25

(TUESDAY)

*Wisdom for
Speaking a
Prophetic
Message*

JEREMIAH
38:1-6

August 26

(WEDNESDAY)

*Wisdom in
Knowing
Hearts without
Blame*

1 THESSALONIANS
3:6-13

August 27

(THURSDAY)

*Wisdom in
Speaking
Clearly*

MATTHEW
5:33-37

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What does it mean to live with integrity? How do you live with integrity? How can you encourage others to do so?
- What motivates people to do the work of peacemaking?

The Peacemaking of Rev. Edwin T. Dahlberg

Rev. Edwin T. Dahlberg (1892-1986), a graduate of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, was ordained in 1918. During World War I he was a pacifist and conscientious objector. He served as Secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA under the leadership of Dr. Walter Rauschenbusch, the well-known social gospel advocate. Rev. Dahlberg served as president of the American Baptist Churches USA from 1946 to 1947 and as president of the National Council of Churches USA from 1957 to 1960. He was also instrumental in founding the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Baptist Peace Fellowship. He received the Gandhi Peace Award after advocating for pacifism during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Rev. Dahlberg protested segregation, participated in sit-ins for civil rights, and was an anti-nuclear activist. The first Dahlberg Peace Award, the highest peace award given by the American Baptist Churches USA, was given to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964.¹ Rev. Dahlberg's life echoed the sentiments of the vocational quote: "Where the need of the world and your talents meet, that is where you are called of God to go."



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what realms of society was Rev. Dahlberg active? How might the Baptist principle of separation of church and state have informed his activism in multiple arenas?
- Do you know someone who has been or is active in the areas of peace and justice? Pretend you are nominating them for the Dahlberg award. What would you say about them?

"Where the need of the world and your talents meet, that is where you are called of God to go."

- Consider the quote in the passage above. Where do the needs of the world and your talents meet?

† JAMES 5:7-12

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. ¹²Above all, my beloved, 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.

Active Waiting and Trusting God

In this section of the letter, the author uses an agricultural metaphor to illustrate what it means to be patient for the coming of the Lord. Though farmers wait for rains to come and nourish the crop, their waiting is not passive. There is much to do to prepare for the coming harvest. Tilling the ground, weeding, carefully watching the seeds’ progress—all these are activities that must be done in the interim. The farmers work with the Earth as a partner, eager for the harvest while also patiently doing their part.

As Christians, we must work alongside God for the coming of the kingdom of God, not abandoning our responsibility for caring for the world, as farmers do not abandon responsibility for their fields while waiting for their crops to grow. The author directs readers to “**strengthen your hearts**” in expectation of God’s

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 13: TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

August 28
(FRIDAY)

*Living
Gracefully with
One Another*
1 PETER 4:7-11

August 29
(SATURDAY)

*Wisdom in the
Prayer of Faith*
JAMES 5:13-20

August 30
(SUNDAY)

*Acting Wisely
with Patience
and Love*
JAMES 3:13-18;
5:7-12

coming revelation. Patience is not for the weak of heart but for those who are prepared to be strong in their convictions.

The author refers to the figure of Job as an example of patience and endurance. Despite layers of loss and grief and mistrust from friends, Job continued to remain aware of God's presence with him. For the author of James, Job is a model of integrity as he continued to seek God and trust God. The author writes that all aspects of one's life should be in collaboration with God, from speech to action.

One of the most well-known lines from the epistle of James is: “**Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no.**” Christ-followers are to live with integrity, which means saying what they mean and keeping their word. This is not only to prevent judgment but also to attest to faith in a caring and compassionate God. Their speech should not be deceptive but honest, encouraging one another to risk vulnerability that ultimately builds trust. Godly patience is rooted in trust in God's compassionate, trustworthy love.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is an example of something you asked of God that required you to work diligently over time to acquire and wait patiently for God to bring to fruition?
- In what ways did the hard work and your patience help you grow?

The Wisdom of an Open Table

Open Table Nashville is an interfaith homeless outreach organization that advocates for affordable housing for all in Nashville, Tennessee. OTN was founded in 2008 by outreach workers, volunteers, and ministers who built relationships with Tent City, the largest encampment of homeless people in Nashville. OTN advocates for those experiencing homelessness to have access to mental health services, addiction counseling, and permanent housing. In May 2010, due to excessive rainfall a disastrous flood struck Nashville, flooding tributaries. Tent City, which lay along the Cumberland River, was completely



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engulfed and more than 140 residents had to be evacuated.

Following the flood, the city of Nashville failed to adequately address housing solutions for the former residents of Tent City, whose makeshift homes were condemned. Several churches in Nashville and other local organizations offered temporary housing and/or land for an encampment of folks experiencing homelessness. The outreach workers and ministers who had begun relationships with Tent City gathered together and decided to incorporate their organization as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

The table
is never
too full and
there's
always
an open
seat . . .

The co-founder Ingrid McIntyre had this to say about their organization: “When people ask about the name ‘Open Table Nashville,’ they ask if it’s about a ‘food thing.’ I tell them that we’re all motivated by our faith and that to us, an open table means a place where everyone is welcome. The table is never too full and there’s always an open seat . . .”

Co-founder Lindsey Krinks adds, “For us, an open table signifies fellowship, community, and radical inclusion. In other words, we’re not here just to make sure our friends on the streets get crumbs from the table. That is no more than charity. We’re here to make sure our friends have a place at the table, and that is about justice.”²

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How were the founders of Open Table Nashville seeking to live lives of integrity? How were they seeking integrity for the people experiencing homelessness?
- How does the work of Open Table show characteristics of the “wisdom from above”?
- How is Open Table Nashville acting prophetically and keeping their oaths?

NOTES

1. Cook, Joan. “Edwin T. Dahlberg, 93, Dies; Headed U.S. Church Council,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 1986.

2. opentablenashville.org

Evaluation Form

JOURNEYS • SUMMER 2020

We want to hear from you!

Please take a few minutes to tell us what you think of this quarter's *Journeys*. Put this form (or a copy) in an envelope, and mail to:

Journeys Editor, Judson Press, ABHMS, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406.

If you wish, you may send your comments by e-mail to info@judsonpress.com, or by using the Feedback Form on the Judson Press website: www.judsonpress.com > Send Us Feedback.

1. How do you use *Journeys*? (Check all that apply.)

- I take it home and read it to prepare for the coming week's lesson.
- I use it in class.
- I leave it at home, and don't use it in class.

2. *Journeys* helped me to understand and relate to the text in the following ways:

3. *Journeys* could be improved by:

4. Would you have used online materials related to the lessons in *Journeys* if they were available?

5. Other comments/suggestions:

Please tell us about your Sunday school class:

Age range _____ Average attendance _____

Name: _____

Church: _____

Thanks for sharing your ideas! Your comments may be used to promote *Judson Bible Journeys for Adults*.