

Wisdom—Ours For The Asking • James 1:5-8

During the past five years, one out of four Americans has changed churches. Four out of ten have switched addresses. A majority of Americans have a different job now than they did five years ago, and over half of us live at a different financial level.

We are a society that is changing all the time. Sometimes change is forced upon us. Sometimes we choose it. There are those today who are looking for another job, planning to change addresses or considering finding a different church.

These are important decisions. The choices we make may determine our health and happiness, may impact who our children will meet and marry, and may shape our relationship to God and friends.

The good news is that we have a whole lot more information to work with than people in the past have. We have computers and consultants and counselors. It's said that human knowledge doubles every two and a half years, so I guess theoretically we have twice as much information to make these important decisions as we did two and a half years ago!

Yet it seems we see more and more bad choices being made. People choose to make decisions that they later regret. While we grow longer on knowledge we keep coming up short on wisdom.

That's why the words of James 1:5-8 are such good news:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

I think the best way to understand this important teaching from the Bible is for each of us to think of a specific decision we are facing. That way we can check out the principles in a real life situation. I think I'm safe in saying that just about everybody has some situation that they're currently dealing with that would be a grand opportunity to test out what the Bible says here.

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Surely there's somebody who's looking for a job. Someone else may well be deciding whether to stay married or to get a divorce. Another may have a relationship that is under very special and unusual stress right now. Perhaps you have to make a key financial decision; maybe it has to do with investments or buying a house. Or perhaps you are dealing with important spiritual matters. Whatever it is, let's use your situation to check out what the Bible is teaching and God is offering in James 1:5-8.

It's important to understand what is meant by "wisdom." Wisdom is not knowledge. Knowledge is important. Knowledge is facts—the information and data that we need in order to make a decision. It seems we can never get enough. Some people wait weeks, months and years and delay decisions until the decisions are made for them because they never feel that they have gathered quite enough information. But no matter how much information we have, knowledge does not guarantee that a right choice will be made. Good choices depend on what we do with the information we have.

Also, wisdom is not intelligence. We're all familiar with people who have very high IQ's but don't have common sense. They may be brilliant in some things, but they are very unwise in everyday decisions. So the wisdom that is being talked about here and elsewhere in the Bible is really the ability to apply knowledge and intelligence in the best possible way.

Let me give you an interesting example. During a cold wave that swept the Eastern United States a man in Ohio made the news when his car wouldn't run. He had a certain amount of information and knowledge and actually had the correct diagnosis. He

knew what was wrong. The gas line was frozen and the car wouldn't start until that was thawed.

But he was not wise in what he did with that information. He took a gallon of gas, put it in a container, took it into his

kitchen, put it on the stove and turned on the gas flame in order to heat it up. His rationale was that he would pour boiling gas into his tank in order to thaw the

frozen gas line. The news report said that he burned down his neighbor's houses on both sides in addition to his own house. He was not wise. He had information, but he did not use the information particularly well.

The wisdom that is being talked about in James 1:5 is very practical wisdom. It is practical wisdom that applies to the ordinary every day decisions all of us must make, but there is a spiritual and moral dimension that is also essential.

Think of this wisdom as understanding how God would make the same decision if he were in your situation. In other words, if God were in your marriage, what would he do? If God were dealing with your finances, how would he handle them? If God were struggling with your job, your health or some other problem, what would be his approach?

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God . . . and it will be given to him." That's me! There are lots of times when I don't know how God would deal with the situation if he were in my shoes. I face lots of dilemmas but often I really just don't know what to do; I don't have the wisdom that I need. All I need to do is to ask God! Imagine what a difference it would make in all of our lives if we could consistently get this wisdom and behave as if God were walking in our situation.

The question is: would God be willing to give us that wisdom? Indeed he would. James tells us that God "gives generously to all [who ask] without finding fault."

When it comes to generosity, God has no equal. This is the same God who "so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." He is the God who is the giver of "every good and perfect gift" that we have. It is as if God is waiting to be asked. He wants to give to us this supernatural wisdom.

A while back I bought an electronic gadget called a VCR+. Some of you may have one or you have seen them advertised. They don't quite say this in the ad, but they are designed for people of somewhat lesser technical and intellectual ability who find it difficult to program a VCR or record a program — probably the majority of Americans! For thirty-five dollars you get this device with a keypad that looks a lot like a channel changer. All you need to do is look up the VCR+ code number in the newspaper TV directory for the program you want to record. You punch in that number on the keypad and that's it. You don't have to

put in the time, the date or any of that other stuff and, when the time comes for that show to begin, this little device turns on the VCR, records the program and shuts it off afterwards.

That sounded good to me, so I bought it. I brought it home and I read the instructions that I think were written by the same person who wrote the instructions for my VCR. I spent a couple of hours fooling around with this thing and did everything you're supposed to do, tested it and it didn't work. I tried it a few more times. Still nothing. In the instructions there was a trouble-shooting section and the last part of it had a 1-800 number that you can call.

I don't know, maybe I'm easily embarrassed, but I was reluctant to call. I thought about using a different name. I could imagine the conversation: "Hi, this is Stupid calling. I'm the guy who couldn't program my VCR and now I can't even program the thing that's supposed to make it easy to program the VCR."

But, you know, I wanted to look good to my family. I'd spent thirty-five bucks on this thing and I wanted to make it work. So in the privacy of my room I called and this technician answered. He was very gracious and asked me a series of questions. He explained to me step-by-step what I needed to do. What he was really doing was telling me what he would do if he were in my house dealing with my VCR+. He described it to me and I did it. And it actually worked!

Wouldn't it be great if there were a 1-800 number for all of the problems in our life? We could call up and some nice, gracious person would tell us how to deal with raising children, managing money, getting along with difficult people — all the ten thousand decisions that comprise our lives.

Well, we can! The instruction book that comes with our Christian faith has a "trouble-shooting" section in James 1:5 that says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."

Now don't push the analogy so far as to think of God as some type of super computer. God is not a machine. He is a person. When we ask, he does not play a recording. He does not always give simple, quick answers. Sometimes they are long and complicated. But God always gives his wisdom to those who ask. He is very generous.

And God doesn't find fault. I'm glad that's explained. We've all experienced people who are initially very generous, but the second and third time around, they're fault-finders. These are the people who

give a gift, but when you need their help the next time they say, “Well, you didn’t manage it very well the last time. You didn’t follow my advice the way you were supposed to.”

Have you ever gone door-to-door collecting money in your neighborhood for the American Cancer Society or the United Way? You go back to a house where they were very generous last year, but when you ask for a gift this year, they are very critical. They tell you that since cancer wasn’t cured last year or because United Way did something they didn’t like, they won’t give any money this year.

If any donor could find such fault, it is God. People often come to him with their needs to which he generously responds and then we don’t handle his gifts very well. We don’t take his advice the way we should. We’re poor stewards of the money he gives us. We receive power from him and we abuse that power. He gives us opportunities and we often squander those opportunities. He entrusts with us the message of salvation with the expectation that we will share it with others, but we get busy and keep it to ourselves.

And when we find ourselves going back to God a second time, a third time and a hundredth time asking for wisdom, what does he do? He “gives generously to all without finding fault.” What a God!

I wonder how James figured this out. It’s possible God just told him and he wrote it down. But my guess is that he figured it out from his own experience.

Perhaps one day James just didn’t know what to do. He thought about it. He took out parchment and pen and made a list of the pros and cons. He asked his friends for advice, but when he gathered all the information and all the counsel, he still didn’t know what to do. Finally he prayed and asked God for wisdom and God gave him supernatural insight, showing James how God himself would deal with it.

Trouble is, James didn’t do it. And because he didn’t do it things got worse instead of better. So he went back to God, confessed his stupidity and asked for wisdom on how to get out of the mess he was now in. God gave him wisdom that was incredible — but James thought he had a better idea and made things even worse.

Now he was really in trouble, but he was embarrassed. He didn’t want to go and ask God a third time.

He was afraid that God would chew him out and point out all of the things that he had done wrong and refuse to give him any more wisdom. But James was desperate. There was no place else to turn. There was no one else to help him. And so one day, James fell down on his knees, lifted up his hands and said, “God, I need help. Give me wisdom. Help me figure out how to get out of the situation that I’m in. God, what would you do?”

To his great amazement and delight God was generous and found no fault and gave him wisdom from heaven. Maybe it was that day that James sat down and wrote, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

James added one other lesson that he had learned. In order for the request for wisdom to be granted, God requires a person to really believe. In James 1:6-8 he wrote, “When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.” It is a description of someone who sits on the spiritual fence, who wants it both ways: God’s way and his own way.

John Bunyon, the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, wrote about a character named “Mr. Facing Both Ways.” That’s kind of a description of this person. This is the person who wants to have it his way and wants to have it God’s way.

God will not answer the prayer of the person who seeks supernatural wisdom unless that person first makes up his or her mind for God.

St. Augustine, the great leader of the early Christian church, lived an immoral life and considered becoming a Christian but didn’t want to give up the sexual immorality that was so much a part of who he was. He was torn as to what to do. One day Augustine, by his own admission, prayed, “Oh God, grant me purity, but not yet.” That’s the kind of double-minded person whose prayers God will not answer. Actually, the Greek word that James used when he first wrote this in the first century was not “double-minded” but “a person with two souls” — one soul for God and one against God.

It’s a choice that has to be made. God will not answer the prayer of the person who seeks supernatural wisdom unless that person first makes up his or her mind for God. In Matthew 22:37 Jesus said, “Love

the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” It’s a precondition.

God does not ask us to be perfect. He does not tell us that we have to know everything. He doesn’t say that we have to be more intelligent than other people. But he does ask that we have hearts and minds and souls for Him and for Him alone. Otherwise we should not expect him to answer our requests for supernatural wisdom.

Perhaps that appears to be very demanding. When you think about it, that’s pretty much the way most things are in our lives. If you have long distance telephone service, you had to make a choice between MCI, AT&T, Sprint or any one of the other long distance carriers. You can’t have them all. When you dial 1 and a long distance area code and number, you go through the carrier that you chose, not some other carrier. It’s a mutually exclusive system. Or, if you work for a company that gives you health insurance options, you have pick the one you want. You can’t have them all. On April 15, the government says that you can file a 1040 or 1040A or a 1040EZ. If you’re married it’s up to you if you want to file a joint return or have separate returns, but you can’t do both. You have to pick which one. You weigh which is most advantageous for you and when you make the choice you exclude others.

Last week I met a woman who was born in Great Britain and recently became a United States citizen. She said that it was not particularly difficult because she did not have to learn a new language, she enjoys living in the United States and her husband is an American. The hardest part was when the judge said that before she could become a citizen of the United States she had to renounce her allegiance to any other sovereign. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be an American citizen, but it was hard to renounce her British citizenship and her allegiance to the Queen of England.

Well, if the phone company can do it, if businesses can do it with health insurance, if the IRS requires it and it’s a mandate for becoming a citizen of the United States, then it is not an unreasonable thing for God to require that we choose him. You’ve got to make up your mind. When you choose to be whole-souled or whole-minded for God, that means that there are a lot of things that need to be given up. It is pledging allegiance to God and to God alone.

We started with each one of us choosing our own problem for which we needed wisdom. We’ve read

what the Bible teaches and we’ve thought through all that it means. But now let’s try it.

Let’s take the situation that each of us brought to mind and spend a moment in private prayer. And here’s what I would suggest. First of all, let’s tell God that we pledge our allegiance to him — that we choose him one hundred percent to be the God of our lives. When we do that we clear the channels and eliminate the double-minded issue that keeps our prayers from working. Once that’s done, let’s each tell God the situation that we’re dealing with — the decision for which we need wisdom — and then ask God what he would do if he were in our shoes. How would he decide? How would he handle it? We’re asking God for the wisdom that he has promised to give.

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Our God, you are all knowing and all wise. It is breathtaking to hear you say that you will share your wisdom with us; that you would show us what you would do if you were in our situation. God, hear the pledge of allegiance of our hearts to you and to you alone. We choose you to be number one to the exclusion of any other allegiance. And now we tell you the situations we face, the problems that are ours and the decisions that we must make. We ask you, God, that you would give to us the wisdom that you have promised and we ask for the grace to take your wisdom and to do as you would do. Asking and promising in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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