

**Faith with Hands and Feet**  
**Part Three: Seeking Wisdom**  
**James 1.5-8**

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As we begin our message this morning, join with me in reading in our shared reading.

**Shared Reading**

We are the beloved of the Lord.

In love He created us.  
In love He came to us.  
In love He died for us.

In love He makes us His own –  
folding us into His love  
transforming us by His love  
sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –  
by our love this world will see Him in us –  
as He lives His life of love in us and through us,  
to the glory of God.

Before we go any further, I think it's just helpful to pause and think for a moment about how much of the Christian life is played out between these two statements:

We are the beloved of the Lord  
and  
In Love God makes us his own, transforming us by His love.

As an act of undeserved grace and love, he accepts us and welcomes us, and draws us into his love.

And then he sets about making us into objects worthy of that love and fit company for eternity, men and women and young people who reflect and fulfill the loving purposes of God. And this too is an expression of his undeserved love, as he makes us fit company for ourselves as well, fashioning us more and more into those he designed us to be from the start.

All of the joys and challenges, all of the gifts and costs of the Christian life, reside between those two ideas, don't they – that God's love leads him to accept me as I am, and that God's love leads him to transform me into who He intends me to be? That he is

the Savior who gives me himself. And that he is the Lord, who asks me to give him myself.

And it's into the gap between those two ideas that James writes almost everything he writes. That certainly is true in the passage we're looking at today:

James 1.5-8

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

Before we look at the specifics of this verse, I want to frame in an important part of our Christian beliefs that stands as the backdrop of this passage. It's the idea of the will, which is just the ability of a person to make decisions for themselves, to act on their own volition, to say "I will whatever – say this, choose this, do this."

According to the Bible, **God has a will**, and he exercises it all the time in both creation and redemption.

In Revelation chapter 4 it says that God created us according to his will or pleasure.

Revelation 4.11

You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being.

And in several different places in the book of Ephesians, and throughout the rest of Scripture, it speaks of the will of God governing redemption as well as creation.

Ephesians 1.11

In Christ we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,

So God has a will.

And God could have created everything else without a will, so that his was the only will being expressed in all of existence. But he didn't. **He gave us a will too.**

God didn't want to be worshiped by robots. He wanted us to worship him and obey him as a choice – a choice that he makes possible, yes, but a free choice nonetheless.

So God created us in his own image, meaning that, among others things, he also gave us as human beings the gift of a free will:

Genesis 2.15-17

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

You are free to choose, but this is what I ask of you. Here is your will, and here is mine.

So God has a will and we have a will.

So much of the spiritual life pivots on the relationship between those two wills.

God's desire is for our two wills to align, and so is ours. We want nothing more than for what pleases God to line up with what pleases us.

But there are two ways that can happen.

God wants us to line *our* wills up with *his*, but we want God to line up *his* will with *ours*.

I still remember walking along the streets of Montreat, North Carolina, praying about some of the challenges before me, and saying, "Wait a minute. When do I get a say?"

You may remember from our Christmas series and the Christmas Eve message that one of the primary reasons Jesus came to earth is to "enable humanity to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (Luke 1.74-75).

And the key to our doing that, as Mary so beautifully modeled when God chose her to carry his son, is for us to submit our wills to his. To say "yes" to him, as when Mary says,

Luke 1:38

I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

So God says to his people in Psalm 32.8-9 what he says in many different ways throughout the Scriptures – as an act of worship, line up your will and your understanding with my own:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;  
 I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.  
 Do not be like the horse or the mule,  
 which have no understanding  
 but must be controlled by bit and bridle  
 or they will not come to you.

As Alfred, Lord Tennyson, says in his poem "In Memoriam"

Our wills are ours, we know not how;

How in the world could we have this much freedom to choose and to act independently as human beings? It is a mystery to us, beyond our comprehending, that God would bestow on us so much freedom of will that we could exercise it even to oppose the very one who created us.

Our wills are ours, we know not how;  
 Our wills are ours, to make them thine.

God has a will that lies behind every good and loving purpose of his.

In love, God dignified us by giving us a will, and he invites us to line up our will with his. That's the best way we can love him as our creator. It's also the best way he can love us as his creatures.

That's the theological idea that lies behind and makes sense of the passage we're looking at this morning.

Let's walk through it now.

### **James 1.5**

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

You may remember that the passage we began with last time, verse two of chapter one in the letter of James, begins with the idea of "when" – *when* you fall into various trials

The passage we are exploring this morning, beginning in verse 5 of chapter one, starts with the idea of "if" – *if* you lack wisdom, though I think it would be fair to translate this as "when" or even "whenever."

In my devotional reading this week I came again to the story in I Kings 3 of the newly crowned King Solomon asking God for wisdom and understanding because "I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties." (I Kings 3.7)

How often we feel exactly that – like we're little kids and we really don't know what we're doing.

Well, James says, as often as you feel that, just ask God for wisdom.

A quick peek at what's to come in the chapters ahead makes us realize that there a whole lot of circumstances when, as followers of Christ, we might feel like we don't really know how to think about something or what to do. How do we see this from God's perspective?

Over these five chapters James will address the need for wisdom when we face trials, and when we feel tempted to cave in to desire, and when we have more money, or less money, than we think we need, and when we are confronted with someone who has a need, and when we feel hurt or angry with someone, and when we open our mouths to speak, and when we feel like we are having to do without something we feel we deserve or need, or when we are sick and at the end of ourselves, or when we are making plans for the future – just to name some of the themes James will address. All incredibly relevant and timely issues, wouldn't you say?

What is wisdom? The elders looked at this passage earlier this week and I think Tom Jameson put his finger right on what James has in mind here: wisdom is seeing how God sees things, and how God purposes things.

Remember we said last time that the wisdom from below leaves God out of the picture, but the wisdom from above puts God right in the center of the picture.

So James says, if you lack, *when* you lack, *whenever* you lack, *every time* you lack a sense of how God sees things and how God purposes things in the situation you're in, well then, just ask Him.

You may remember in a sermon a long time ago I used the example of life being like a box. In that box there's me, and there's all the stuff I face, and if I leave the lid on the box, then it's all up to me to deal with whatever life holds. That's the wisdom from below, that leaves God out of the picture.

But if I take the lid off the box, then there's me, and there's all the stuff I face, and there's the king of the universe who's involved in every part of my life, bringing all his resources to bear, and it's up to him to walk me through everything I face.

What will happen when I ask God for wisdom? The three fold promise is resounding.

God says:

I'm not stingy with my wisdom – I'll give it generously.

I don't play favorites with my wisdom – I'll give it to all who ask.

And I won't judge you when you ask for wisdom, or ask you why you couldn't figure it out for yourself, or why you're so spiritually immature – I'll give it without finding fault.

What a picture of the generous and gracious heart of God!

Behind the ways we relate to God stands our views of what God is really like.

Whenever my grandfather came to our door I always ran up to him and hugged him, partly because I knew his pockets were always filled with candy and he was eager to share it.

What is the heart of God really like? As we go along in James' letter, we'll realize that this is something that James is deeply concerned about – he wants to make sure we have a faithful understanding of the good heart of God.

Whether it's when we are going through trials (1.2-4), or at a loss for wisdom (1.5-8), or facing temptation (1.13-18), or experiencing needs (4.2), or praying for healing when we are sick (5.13-18), or waiting for Jesus' return (5.7), James wants to be sure we know how good and trustworthy and loving the God we are approaching really is.

So James says,

James 1.5

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

What is something that you would be helped to see from God's perspective? Where in your life do you need God's wisdom right now?

Take a moment right now to ask God to give you his wisdom – to see him at the center of it, and to see his purposes in it.

Several years ago we identified five values that we aspire towards as a church. The very first one is "expectant." It means that we believe God is actively present and involved in every single moment of our lives. This passage captures the basis for that value perfectly.

Our second value as a church is "yielded." It means our lives in their entirety are a "yes" to God, our wills are lined up with his. That's what the rest of this passage is getting at.

James 1.6-8

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

If verse 5 addresses what God is prepared to do when we ask for wisdom, verses 6 through 8 get at what we should be prepared to do when we ask for wisdom.

James 1.6

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt,

Believe and not doubt. What exactly is that getting at?

I'm persuaded it's not what we might think.

The way we usually think about them, belief and doubt happen in the realm of our minds. They suggest weighing what we know about God, the information we have about him, and we deciding whether or not we can confidence in him.

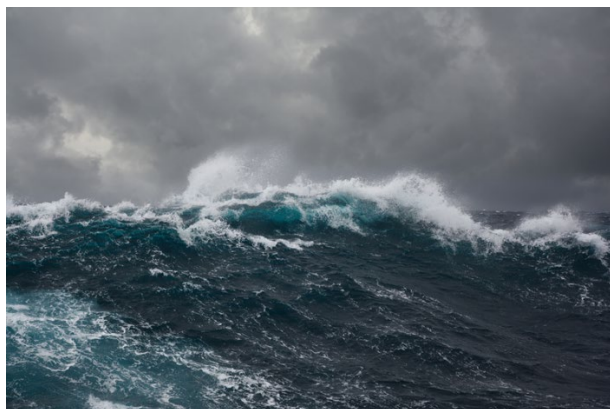
But this word "believe" has a whole spectrum of meaning that moves from the head and our thinking to the will and our choosing. Believe that. Believe in. Entrust to. And the farther along we go, the more we move out of the area of information about God and into the area of allegiance or submission to God, yieldedness.

In the same way, the word doubt *can* mean a thought process of questioning God's capacity or trustworthiness in some say, but this word at its root has the idea of submitting something to our scrutiny and approval. So rather than meaning something like "wondering if God really is a certain way, or really is capable of something we might ask him to do," it can mean something more in the realm of disputing or opposing or contending against his authority. Independence or autonomy of the will. Wanting what we want instead of what he wants.

So I think James is really saying: Ask for wisdom, yes, but when you ask, be ready to say yes. Stand under God rather than standing out from under him or worse, standing over him. Align your will to his, don't insist that he align his will to yours.

James 1.6

. . . because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.



This was a common image in the ancient world for someone who couldn't be relied on.

What's the problem with waves shoved about by the wind? They aren't reliable. You don't know when they'll rise and when they'll fall, and you can't predict which direction they'll go. Rather than being tethered or anchored, they act independently and unreliably.

Have you ever seen a video of two ships trying to come alongside one another in a wave tossed and windy sea and someone trying to board from to the other?

James 1.7

That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

This verse sounds like it directly contradicts the generous promise made in verse 5, where God says he will give generously without finding fault. Now it seems to say just the opposite, that if a person doesn't ask with the right heart that person won't be given anything,

But notice that verse 5 speaks about what will be *given* by God, and verses six through 8 speak about what will be received by us.





This is a Travis Kelce issue, not a Patrick Mahomes issue. It's not about what is being given, it's about what is being received.

Several times this football season I saw badly busted plays, when the receiver was supposed to turn right and he turned left, or he was supposed to take ten steps and then look around for the ball and he just kept running, or he was supposed to go long but he stopped and blocked someone instead.

When that happens, when the receiver is acting independently of the quarterback, the ball will where it is supposed to go but the receiver won't be, which will always means the receiver will come away empty handed, and sometimes that the receiver never even sees the pass that is intended for him.

James 1.8

Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

From everything we can tell, James invented this word "double-minded." It literally means "two-souled" or "two-selfed."

The soul was understood to be the source of a person's desires and affections, the place of the heart's deepest allegiance.

James says the person who asks for God's wisdom but hasn't placed himself under God's authority is like two people in one body, each with an separate will. I ask God for his perspective, but then I live on the basis of my own perspective. I say I want to put God in the center of the picture, but then I go and leave him out of it altogether. I'm like two different people trying to live two different lives inside a single body.

The one other use of this word "two-selfed" in the book of James happens in chapter four, in a section that begins with James saying,

James 4.7-8

Submit yourselves, then, to God.

Submit is a word that refers to arranging yourself under authority, subordinating or submitting your will to the will of another.

This other word in chapter one verse eight, translated "unstable," actually means "not standing under." It means I refuse to place myself properly under another person's authority.

When we were looking at this passage with the Session, Franki Kung, who is originally from Hong Kong, pointed out that the word used in the Chinese Bible for yield or submit is a word based on the character for a stream.

Think about how a stream flows. It doesn't debate with the land about which way it should go. It just follows the stream bed, surrendering to the contours of the land.

I love, and am challenged by, the truth found in

### **Jeremiah 10.17**

I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own.  
It is not for a man to direct his steps.

That's a passage that was instrumental in our going to Colorado Springs rather than State College PA when I first completed seminary, and that led to our coming here rather than Annapolis or several other places when we were led from Colorado Springs.

in both cases I knew what made sense to me, I knew what I wanted and what made sense to me. But in both cases, God quieted my soul enough to hear his call.

In the first instance, taking us to a small church where I would be the associate pastor rather than a large church where I would be the senior pastor, and saying, "David, right now I'm more concerned with what I'm going to do in you than through, and this is where I want to do it."

And in the second, as God was stirring in us to go to another church, and we were exploring a number of different possibilities, any number of which made sense to me, and coming here to the University Inn in the Union, and coming the next morning to Psalm 90.1, where God says, "Even before the mountains were formed, and the world was made, you have been our home from generation to generation." And this wasn't feeling like home. God said, "David, as I call you away from Colorado and the mountains, I want to be your home, and I want to do that here."

God invites us to seek his wisdom, to put him at the center of the picture, in the big decisions. But he also invites us to do that in the smaller, day to day decisions.

This past week I was blessed to attend a conference on CS Lewis and what we can learn from him about sharing our faith in our new cultural context.

My Airbnb host said something about being interested in hearing about the conference and maybe we could grab a glass of wine and talk about CS Lewis.

I was tired, I had work I'd brought along I needed to get to, and I was feeling introverted and ready for some time on my own. And I really didn't want to.

But I prayed and heard myself saying, “Of course I’d love to come up and grab a glass of wine with you.” We spent an hour and a half together, and I ended up hearing his story, and how he nearly lost his life during covid and was now wrestling with why he was here, and we talked about Jesus, and I was also able to pray for him and his brother. It was so clear it was a divine appointment. Fortunately, God helped me to say yes.

The earliest printed version of the Prayer of Indifference is only a hundred years old, but this prayer seems to have a life that goes back much earlier than that in the life of the church.

Call back to mind the aspect of your life where you recognized a need for God’s wisdom, and asked him for it, earlier during this message. Now with that in mind, let’s close by praying this.

The will of God – nothing less, nothing more, nothing else.