



Date: 08-17-2025

Sermon Title: Above or Below: Choosing Your Source of Wisdom

Text: James 3:13-18, 4:1-10 NLT

James 1:5 NLT

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.

Define Wisdom:

Merriam Websters – Insight, Judgment, Belief, Knowledge

Biblical Wisdom

Godly Wisdom

A way of living life that puts into practice the moral and ethical standards as put forth by God.

Worldly Wisdom

A way of living based on your own standards of morality and ethics or the collective community that you align yourself with. (i.e. political groups, clubs, etc.)

1 Corinthians 3:18–21 NLT

Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, "He traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness." And again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise; he knows they are worthless." So don't boast about following a particular human leader. For everything belongs to you—

2 Corinthians 1:12 NLT

We can say with confidence and a clear conscience that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings. We have depended on God's grace, not on our own human wisdom. That is how we have conducted ourselves before the world, and especially toward you.

Notes:

Your life is the _____ for your wisdom.

James 3:13–14 NLT

If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying.

Notes:

The _____ Fruit of Worldly Wisdom:

James 3:15–16 NLT

For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

Notes:

The _____ of Godly Wisdom:

James 3:17–18 NLT

But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

Numbers 12:3 NLT

(Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.)

Matthew 11:28–30 NLT

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

Notes:

The _____ of Worldly Wisdom

James 4:1–6 NLT

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Notes:

God's _____ for a Worldly Heart.

James 4:7–10 NLT

So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

Notes:

Next Steps

1. Ask God for His Wisdom Daily – Start each day this week with James 1:5, asking God for wisdom before making decisions.
2. Identify Your Wisdom Source – Take 15 minutes to reflect: In the past week, where did your actions look more like “rotten fruit” or “sweet harvest”? Write them down and pray over them.
3. Choose One “Above” Response – Pick one relationship, decision, or habit where you’ve been leaning on worldly wisdom, and intentionally apply a “wisdom from above” trait (peace, gentleness, mercy) this week.

Notes:

WISDOM, WISDOM LITERATURE

Dictionaries define wisdom as the ability to make sound judgments on what we know, especially as it relates to life and conduct. The wise do not value the quantity of knowledge by itself, but the ethical and moral dimensions of how we evaluate human experience and act on it. The sages of Israel lived in a time of much less scientific knowledge of the universe and its operations, and depended more heavily on traditional understandings and ways of acting than modern society does, so that they worked from a somewhat broader concept of wisdom. On the one hand, they saw wisdom as a serious intellectual pursuit of knowledge about the world and its rules of order and the dynamics behind its mysterious operations; on the other, they sought the proper human response to all dimensions of this world, especially in terms of understanding themselves in relation to their human nature and to God the Creator. To the ancient mind, the universe was profoundly interpersonal, and all things were the product of either the personal will of the deity or of human decisions.

Wisdom Books

Three biblical books are clearly identified as the product of wisdom thinking: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth). Two books that occur among the deuterocanonical books of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons should also be included: Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. Scholars note close connections to many elements of these books in other parts of Scripture as well. The following have been generally recognized as showing wisdom similarities: Gen. 2–3, the story of sin in creation; Gen. 37–46, the tale of Joseph; Deut. 1–4, the general introduction to the book; Deut. 32, the Song of Moses; 2 Sam. 9–20, the Succession Narrative of David; 1 Kgs. 3–11, the model story of Solomon; Amos, considered as a prophet from wisdom circles; Ezek. 28, metaphors of the king of Tyre; the Song of Songs, an extended meditation on creation and covenant based on old wedding songs; certain Psalms, namely Pss. 1, 19, 49, 73, 111, 112, 119, and others that contain expressions and themes similar to Proverbs; and the book of Daniel, in which the first six chapters describe the hero as a sage. Scholars have noted wisdom echoes here and there in most of the prophetic books, esp. Jeremiah and Isa. 1–39.

Much of the language found in the secondary examples may be merely a part of the general intellectual culture, so defining wisdom characteristics should be based on information taken from the five full wisdom books. However, two texts in the prophets strongly suggest that wisdom was

identified with a definite body of learned scholars who performed a role that corresponded to the roles of priests and prophets in seeking the divine will: “Come let us make plots against Jeremiah—for *torah* shall not perish from the priest, nor *counsel* from the wise, nor the *word* from the prophet” (Jer. 18:18; cf. Ezek. 7:26). Certainly, in the talmudic period, rabbis were considered successors to the sages of the Bible. Even Jesus is treated in part as a wisdom teacher (Matt. 11:19; 13:54; Luke 2:40, 52; Acts 6:3).

Characteristics

Although the books of wisdom are quite different in form and style, they possess certain elements in common:

1. Little interest in the history of Israel and its specific tradition of revelation: the torah as a body of laws, the covenant, the possession of the land, and the temple or cult.
2. Strong interest in the order of the universe and its rules of cause and effect, the nature of time, the limits to human mastery of the world, and the ability to find God revealed in creation.
3. A willingness to explore the difficult and painful mysteries of life experience: death and afterlife, divine reward and punishment, the inequality of fate and destiny in people’s lives, the apparent arbitrariness of divine blessing.
4. The inscrutability of God’s intentions and plans.
5. The education of the young in the tried and true ways of tradition.
6. An interest in developing skilled administrators, leaders, and good citizens.
7. Cultivation of a life of prudent behavior and virtue.

Wisdom books feature certain literary genres in order to express their concerns:

1. The proverb, found prevalently in Proverbs and Sirach, and to a lesser degree in Qoheleth.
2. The dialogue or disputation, the major genre of Job, and prominent in the Wisdom of Solomon.
3. The didactic lesson, often directed to the student, as in Prov. 1–9 and Ecclesiastes.
4. The metaphor or allegory, often in the form of hymns or poems (e.g., Ezek. 28; Prov. 8; 9; Wis. 7; Sir. 24). Also common and scattered throughout Wisdom Literature are rhetorical questions, numerical sayings, torah psalms, and a teacher’s summons to heed wisdom lessons.

Ancient Setting

Two settings need to be distinguished: the ancient Near Eastern context, and the specific role of wisdom in Israel's faith. Wisdom was not a unique possession of Israelite religion. Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies cherished wisdom and left a considerable body of wisdom works that often show remarkable similarities to biblical texts. Included are Mesopotamian dialogues on suffering and theodicy similar to Job and Qoheleth, collections of proverbs that appear among the earliest known writings in the world (between 3000 and 2000 B.C.E.), as well as fables, treatises on the value of sages and scribes, and didactic instructions to the young. Passages are often very close to Israelite thought. For example, the Words of Ahiqar advises, "Withhold not thy son from the rod, else thou will not be able to save [him from wickedness]" (*ANET*, 428), which is close to Prov. 13:24. Indeed, the same thought appears in Prov. 23:13, which seems to come from imitation of an Egyptian collection of Proverbs, the Wisdom of Amenemope. Since Egyptian literature is even richer than Mesopotamian in wisdom books, it seems highly likely that Israel, like many other smaller nations in the Near East, was influenced by the international intellectual currents that moved freely from the Nile to the Tigris rivers and incorporated the treasures of wisdom into their own thinking in a way that they could not with the specific religious cultic texts of these peoples. Scholars have long pointed to clear parallels between the Wisdom of Amenemope and Prov. 22:17–24:2. The translators of the NAB have even rediscovered a reference to Amenemope by name in Prov. 22:19. If so, it illustrates that Israel was not isolated in its cultural exposure and understanding but participated willingly in the thought world of the Near East except where specific polytheistic claims had to be refuted and rejected in light of its monotheistic faith development.

Almost all of the important wisdom themes in Israel's writings are also known in Egyptian or Mesopotamian works. This suggests that international or universal wisdom played a role in Israel's faith that served understanding of God's ways but did not directly challenge the central tenets of Israel's religious institutions represented by torah and prophecy. Scholars usually point to two separate social settings for Israelite wisdom: the home and the royal administration. Many proverbs probably originated before the dawn of writing, and seem to reflect the typical advice of parents to children in preparing them for life (e.g., the lesson on laziness in Prov. 6:6–11). Others are directed at parents about educating children (cf. Prov. 10:1). Perhaps many of the proverbial sayings of the prophets (e.g., Isa. 28:23–28) come from daily life.

The vast majority of our current wisdom texts seem to be cultivated in schools. Kings in ancient societies were considered to be especially endowed with divine wisdom to rule, and this is prominent in the story of Joseph in Gen. 37–46 and the portrait of Solomon. The necessity of a fully literate court and government apparatus able to deal on the international scene gave impetus to the new kingdom of David to foster special training modeled on typical Near Eastern patterns for its governors, ambassadors, accountants, and scribes. Although schools are rarely if ever even hinted at in the Bible, writing and mastering traditional literature, esp. proverbial maxims, seems to have formed the core of most ancient education for the elite. The close links of biblical wisdom to that of other nations stems from the need for a common ground of discourse and cultural understanding between peoples. Wisdom is often associated with courtiers and royal counselors (cf. esp. 2 Sam. 15–17; Dan. 1–6). The term “counsel” associated with the wise in Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26 is most easily identified as political advice for decision makers. But wisdom is also associated with teachers (Prov. 9:9–12; Jer. 8:8–9), insightful women (2 Sam. 14:1–20, 20:16–22), skilled craftspersons (Exod. 31:2–6), and even magicians (Exod. 7:11, 22). Thus it seems to be a wider category than merely political wisdom. It stands for skill learned from others, and is associated above all with training and schools. Sirach is identified as a teacher in the later wisdom tradition of the 2nd century, and the speaker of Proverbs assumes the role of teacher throughout.

Religious Values

Although wisdom is commonly associated with the noncultic side of Israel’s life, this does not mean it is simply pragmatic and a-religious. All ancient religion is about a personal god or gods who make decisions about the world of humans. This translates into wisdom’s concern with the mystery of the universe: certain questions reflect a problem about God, whether one is a member of Israel’s covenant or a foreign polytheist. How do the rules of creation work? How is divine providence manifested for people to understand? Why does suffering and death not respect piety and moral uprightness? The search for order, and determining the proper role of human ambition, and coping with the limits of knowledge consume wisdom teachers. These are all part of the conviction that God guides the universe and that discovering God’s will is crucial to human welfare. Because of this, wisdom can be described variously as a “tree of life” (Prov. 3:18) or the first created being in God’s plan for the world (8:22; Sir. 24). Qoheleth can affirm that God

gives us what we have in order to enjoy it and do God's will (Eccl. 7:15–19); Proverbs tells us to trust God with all our heart (Prov. 3:5), and Job rejoices that God can be found and seen even if beyond human understanding (Job 42:2–6). Prov. 1–9, 31 also develop an elaborate metaphor of wisdom as a woman whom a young scholar is to love and embrace. From there it was a small step to identify Lady Wisdom with the Torah itself in the postexilic period (Sir. 24:23).

Two themes stand out for the religious role of wisdom. The first is the choice between the way of evil and the way of uprightness. The idea of two ways for us to choose permeates Proverbs and stands as the theme statement for the book of Psalms in Ps. 1. It offers human freedom the option of moral adherence to God's will as manifested in the goodness of creation and in Israel's revelation. References, sometimes indirect, to blessings received from choosing faithful and trusting obedience to the God of the covenant and torah are woven throughout the wisdom books. Second, one regularly encounters the expression "fear of the Lord (is the beginning of wisdom)" (e.g., Prov. 1:7, 29; 9:10; 14:27; 15:16; 19:23; Eccl. 12:13). Like the NT "God-fearers" (Acts 13:26), it describes faithful believers who possess a fundamental orientation to God's will. But the concept also includes cultic practice, an awareness of God's presence, proper moral behavior, observance of torah, and just plain humbling oneself before the Almighty. Like the way of uprightness, an attitude of fear of the Lord encompasses one's entire life and focuses a person's behavior on doing God's will.

"Wisdom" as a major category gave way to Torah study in postbiblical Jewish reflection, but it was never excluded from the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures because it is identified with the restless human search for God, respect for the mystery of God's freedom, and awareness of the vast moral sphere of decision making beyond formal cultic worship. Even Qoheleth the sceptic could be brought into this vision by adding a final editorial note (Eccl. 12:13–14).

Bibliography. J. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom* (Atlanta, 1981); J. Gammie and L. G. Perdue, eds., *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, 1990); R. Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 1996); K. M. O'Connor, *The Wisdom Literature*. Message of Biblical Spirituality 5 (Wilmington, 1988).¹

¹ Lawrence Boadt, "[Wisdom, Wisdom Literature](#)," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1380–1382.