

Wisdom Literature

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, June 23, 2024
PASSAGES	James 1; James 2; James 3; James 4; James 5
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:04:45 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

James is not the New Testament's answer to Proverbs, and he is not Paul's opponent. He is defending faith — dusting it off and showing what the real thing looks like when it is out walking around. And the wisdom that makes that life possible is not native to us. It has to be asked for, by people humble enough to admit they don't have it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The first step in growing in wisdom is admitting you lack it. Our foolishness is what persuades us we already have God's wisdom.
- ◆ Everyone stands before God without their possessions or their lack of them. That fact is meant to reorder how you live now, not just how you feel later.
- ◆ Temptation is never God's doing. The chain runs desire, then sin, then death — which is one more reason to distrust our own appetites and ask for his wisdom instead.
- ◆ The man who forgets the mirror isn't forgetting a list of rules. He is forgetting that he is a child of God and genuinely free.
- ◆ **James 1:27** has two halves, and people quote one. Care for widows and orphans in their distress *and* keep yourself unstained from the world.
- ◆ James is not attacking faith. He is attacking a so-called faith that is only facts — the kind demons have, and shudder.
- ◆ Wisdom, like faith, is something you show rather than something you claim. If it is real it turns up in your conduct.

- ◆ There is one spiritual opponent you will never overcome, and he is not a devil. God opposes the proud.

► 1:04:45

Having finished Hebrews, Matt said he keeps meaning to start the Gospel of John and keeps deciding not to begin it in the summer. So instead: a tour of tiny texts, one book a Sunday, starting with James.

1. A tour of tiny texts, and why now

► 1:05:16

Commentators like to call James the New Testament's answer to Proverbs. Matt allowed it as a fine analogy and then set it aside — he does not think James sat down to write a new book of Proverbs. He thinks James was writing a letter to encourage faith, the same thing the other authors of scripture were doing.

► 1:07:35

Then a word about why this letter lands now. We take a barrage of data through screens, and much of what we do all day does not feel especially human. Before the internet, Matt guessed, the truly bizarre theories stayed contained to the local tavern; now those people find each other worldwide and broadcast at you. His own observation, from a job that involves talking to a great many people: nearly everyone feels ostracized by the world around them — secularists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, the dreaded straight white male, and the person who is none of those things. Which is exactly why being rooted in the wisdom of scripture is worth the time. “The scriptures are grounding — an extremely grounding experience.” His encouragement was to go home and read the whole letter, chapter numbers ignored, the way you would read anything: get comfy, get your cookies and your milk, and ask the Lord to speak.

2. Ask for wisdom — after admitting you lack it

► 1:08:36

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

JAMES 1:5 ↗

God is inclined to give it. It is good for you, it is good for everyone near you, and it pleases him. “It’s a total 360-degree win when you grow in wisdom.” And yet we mostly don’t have it, because we mostly don’t pursue it.

► 1:09:35

Matt’s picture for the problem: the sign taped over the office sink. The people who read signs were already doing the right thing; the people the sign is for do not read signs. Wisdom works the same way. “It’s an incredibly wise thing to stand before the Lord and say, I need your wisdom. And it’s often our foolishness that drives us to the opinion that we already have God’s wisdom.”

3. All of it fades, so live now by what will last

► 1:10:09

The lowly brother boasts in his exaltation and the rich man in his humiliation, and both are set in parallel with grass whose flower falls (James 1:9–11) — an echo of the older line that the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever. Both men die. Both stand before the Lord without their possessions or their lack of them. Matt imagined the sting of amassing a treasure and not getting to spend it, and set it beside riches that surpass anything the poor man ever longed for.

► 1:12:34

The point of the contrast is not the accounting; it is the reordering.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, because God’s standards and rewards move to center stage. In this life his opinions get treated as peripheral and our desires take the middle of the room. If we have any sense, we would rather orient around what he thinks now than later.

► 1:13:42

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

JAMES 1:13–15 ↗

God does not want us walking in evil, so why would he prompt it. We can try blaming him and we can try blaming our brother, but the chain lays the blame at human desire — and that is one more reason to distrust our natural inclinations. Follow whatever we happen to want at any given moment and the reaction ends in death. Better to ask.

4. Doers, not hearers — and what the mirror actually shows

► 1:14:57

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

JAMES 1:19–21 ↗

► 1:16:42

Matt flagged the double meaning in *word*. In Hebrew and in Greek alike it can mean a single word, a whole message, even an event. And one of Jesus’ own titles is the Word of God — which is why he could tell people

they pore over the scriptures thinking they have life in them, when the scriptures point to him. The implanted word that saves souls is at least the gospel message, and probably the person himself.

► 1:17:49

“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”

JAMES 1:22–25 ↗

Some read James here as pushing back on

Paul’s insistence that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. Matt would not have it.

Look at what the man is staring into: the law of liberty. Not a funhouse mirror, not an Instagram filter — a real one, showing what is really there. So what is he forgetting when he walks away? “That you are really a child of God. That you are really free.” The blessing is walking in a freedom you actually believe in, and that freedom was established by Christ alone.

5. Religion worth the name

► 1:19:27

The word *religion* has been surrendered, Matt said — we joined the world in saying we are spiritual, not religious, and conceded linguistic ground we did not need to. In Greek the word carries an attitude and a behavior that come out of the fear of God, which is not a bad thing at all.

And then James attaches a test to it, which is where the tongue comes in: you say you fear God, but you do not control your mouth. Matt turned it into a question about honesty — “think about what you’re confessing. Is what you confess true?” If you confess the Lord, then you want to walk in the real fear of God, and this is what walking it out looks like.

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

JAMES 1:26–27 ↗

► 1:20:25

He noted, as a pastor, how often only the first half of that gets quoted at him. It is both — it is not just caring for the widow and the orphan in their distress, and it is not just staying unstained from the world. And the phrase *in their affliction* is doing work too — “we don’t want to just bother widows all the time. We want to help them, not never leave their living room.”

6. Partiality, and the mercy that triumphs

► 1:21:24

Keep the royal law and you do well; show partiality and you are a transgressor — and whoever fails at one point is guilty of all of it. Matt read that as another indirect proof that James writes from the kingdom of grace: he is not saying you could probably mostly make it.

We all fall short of the glory of God, and failing at one point puts you opposite his word. That is not a man handing out partial credit. Matt’s picture: two prisoners comparing which section of the legal code they violated. You both violated it. And elsewhere in the letter James is after preferential treatment of the rich in particular — as though the church had a velvet rope for big givers up front, and the new or the poor or the smelly could watch from a screen in the foyer. Partiality treats people by what I happen to like about them instead of by an objective standard. Matt put the standard plainly: we were his enemies when he died for us; he pursued us though we spat at him, and laid a table for us though we bit his hand.

► 1:23:24

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

JAMES 2:12-13 ↗

There it is again — the law of liberty. Even in a letter about faith in action, our works are judged under freedom. Matt read the verse as a statement about God’s disposition before it is a demand on ours: his inclination is to show mercy. “Long live the mercy of God — therefore we should show it to one another.” It is the servant forgiven millions who throttles a friend over a few dollars: something in you revolts at it, because he plainly did not understand what he had just been given. Treat people the way you are longing for Jesus to treat you — with the leniency and affection you want from him.

7. The faith James is actually attacking

► 1:24:28

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”

JAMES 2:14 ↗

Read the phrasing, Matt urged. Not *can faith save* — *can that faith save*. He is casting shade on a particular kind of so-called faith, one you can spot because it has no transformative effect. Which is exactly Paul’s point when he says what really counts is a new creation.

► 1:25:38

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder!”

JAMES 2:18-19 ↗

Notice who is talking. The man dividing faith from works is James’ opponent, not James. And notice what James promises to show: *my faith*. “He’s not poo-pooing on faith. He’s dusting it off and polishing it and defending what faith really is, because that’s still the main program. You’re going to look far and wide in the kingdom of God, you’re only going to see one program — grace through faith.”

► 1:26:56

What he is attacking is lip-service faith, faith in word only, just facts. And who holds facts about God without trusting him? Demons. They know who is in charge and they know who to be afraid of — and James' response to that creed is a flat "you do well," an atta-boy, good for you. Matt named the danger for us: reduce the gospel to a road and a prayer and a checkbox, and "you only need two ministries at that point — an evangelist and an assassin." He called the joke terrible and retired it on the spot, but the warning stands. His better picture was the glass-bottomed walkway at the Grand Canyon. Standing fifty yards back saying you are confident it was built to code is one thing. Stepping out on it is another — different levels of trust entirely. There will be times Christ says come this way, or do this, and the question is whether you trust him.

8. Wisdom you can see — and passions you cannot feed

► 1:28:30

Chapter 3 runs the identical argument about wisdom.

Who is wise among you? Let him show it by his good conduct, in the meekness of wisdom — and if what is actually in you is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, do not boast about it. Matt tracked the rising intensity of the verdict: earthly, then unspiritual, then demonic. All three describe the same thing, wisdom that struts and never shows up in a life. Then he turned it on us: all the more reason not to be ruled by our natural appetites, because our appetites can be exactly that — earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

► 1:30:11

"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

JAMES 4:1-3 ↗

Submitting our desires to God for his feedback, correction and provision is wisdom. Taking what we want is the oldest pattern there is: in the garden he saw, he desired, he took; on the roof, David saw, desired and took. "This is not American. We didn't invent that. We just have more technology to do it." The alternative is to ask: if he does not want us to have a thing he can say so, and if we need something he can provide it — but either way the passions get handed over for feedback first.

9. Friendship with the world, and the opponent you cannot beat

► 1:31:58

Saying yes to the Lord means saying no to some things, which is why friendship with the world is hostility with God. Matt went after both ways of mishandling that verse. Some, he suspected especially on the conservative end, use it to license combat — “I’m going to attack you to show my friendship with God.” Others are so anxious for everyone to be comfortable with Jesus that they let the verse fade into oblivion. What the verse asks for is humility and strength working together. And the world here is not the clouds and the trees, or even necessarily the people. It is the system, that earthly and unspiritual wisdom, and to that we get a firm no — “we can’t say yes to everyone and we can’t straddle the fence forever.”

► 1:33:58

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Matt loves talking about spiritual warfare — people say they feel under attack, and we pray, and we ask the Lord to clear the roadblocks. But he named the exception. “There is a kind of spiritual opponent you will never overcome, and that’s God himself. We’re not going to cast out that devil, because that’s not the devil. God’s resisting you — and I don’t think you’re going to win.” Sometimes it takes us a long while to notice; sometimes we back off right away. There is nothing wrong with dignity and honor. We just want him doing the exalting.

10. Grumbling, and going after the one who wandered

► 1:34:56

Do not grumble against one another, brothers — behold, the Judge is standing at the door. Matt admitted he was tempted to preach instead on the most quoted verse of our moment, “judge not,” which gets twisted into a demand that nobody hold a conviction out loud — and pointed out that the same Jesus said to judge rightly. Judge is one of God’s titles, and we should serve and worship the one who holds it without apologizing for it. His picture of the verse was siblings mid-fight when Dad fills the doorway. Take inventory: who am I grumbling at lately, and why.

► 1:35:31

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

JAMES 5:19–20 ↗

An extremely noble thing, Matt said — and then he asked the practical question: what are the mechanics of it? Props to you if you have ever actually done it, because it takes bravery. You are, by definition, at odds with the person — they are walking away and you are asking them to turn. So you run a real risk of being called divisive or judgmental. We don't want to be either. But we should be willing to be called both for doing what is right. "People's labels shouldn't deter us." You might be insulted briefly; you may have helped a brother avoid death. It is worth that.

Four things to carry out the door

► 1:37:05

First, see James clearly as coming from the kingdom of grace — pointing to true faith, not faith plus. He was attacking fake faith, not faith. Not one ounce of deviation from the message that we are sinners saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and it is his loving sacrifice that set us free. Second, pray for wisdom, which starts with the hardest step of all: admitting you need it. Third, fight for humility, or expect opposition from God — the right answer is obvious and doing it is very hard. Fourth, refuse friendship with the world's system, or expect the same opposition.

► 1:38:41

He skipped around, and he knew it — there are verses in James you love that did not come up. So read it this week. It will not take long; out loud is better if you can. If you don't own a Bible, take one out of the pew as a gift or download it. Next Sunday the tour continues in [2 Peter](#), and since it is shorter he promised to cut less.

► 1:39:58

Then something new, which he and Andy had been "colluding" about: worship ends earlier, the message runs the same length, and the time saved goes to prayer at the end rather than the exit. Andy came back up, the Heart Ministry teams came forward, children's ministry kept going, and the room stayed in worship — sit and reflect, pray for God's wisdom, pray with a friend, or go stand in for someone the Spirit brings to mind. It is experimental, and they want feedback. Matt's sending words were the old ones: go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [James 1:5](#)
- [James 1:9–11](#)
- [Isaiah 40:8](#)
- [James 1:12](#)
- [James 1:13–15](#)
- [James 1:19–21](#)
- [John 5:39](#)
- [James 1:22–25](#)
- [Galatians 2:16](#)
- [James 1:26–27](#)
- [James 2:8–10](#)
- [Romans 3:23](#)
- [James 2:12–13](#)
- [Matthew 18:23–35](#)
- [James 2:14](#)
- [Galatians 6:15](#)
- [James 2:18–19](#)
- [James 3:13–15](#)
- [James 4:1–3](#)
- [Genesis 3:6](#)
- [2 Samuel 11:2–4](#)
- [James 4:4](#)
- [James 4:10](#)
- [James 4:6](#)
- [James 5:9](#)
- [Matthew 7:1](#)
- [John 7:24](#)
- [James 5:19–20](#)
- [2 Peter](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said our foolishness is what convinces us we already have God's wisdom. Where have you recently assumed you had it rather than asked for it?
2. James 1:9–11 puts the lowly man and the rich man in the same fading grass. What would change about your week if you actually believed that about your own possessions?
3. The man walks away from the mirror and forgets that he is free. What do you keep forgetting about who you are in Christ, and what makes you forget it?
4. Which half of James 1:27 do you naturally quote — caring for widows and orphans, or staying unstained from the world — and what does the other half ask of you?
5. Matt asked who he had been grumbling at lately, and why. Answer that for yourself, and name what you will do about it this week.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqDDbbo3FD0&t=3885s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.