

THE   
PRESENT  
WORD   
ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

SUMMER 2020

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

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# PARTICIPANT’S BOOK

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## Introduction

We live in a culture in which information hold sways. Our digital technologies place a vast universe of facts and data at the swipe of a fingertip or the click of a mouse. So much information—and misinformation—is available, in fact, that it is easy to be overwhelmed. Get the facts straight! Check for reliable sources! Don't pass on an intriguing Facebook post unless you fact check it to be sure of its veracity. Knowledge is power, we say. Yet it seems that true wisdom is often in short supply.

Over many centuries, wisdom was woven through the warp of Scripture. Sometimes the threads of wisdom reveal themselves as straightforward pragmatism; at other times wisdom comes in metaphors that glimmer as they seek to illumine. Whether expressed in proverbs or in sayings, in the words and actions of Jesus, or in the words of a letter addressed to Christians living in diaspora communities in the first centuries of the church, wisdom adds an essential element to the pattern of the fabric of God's word.

Over the weeks of this summer quarter, participants will have the opportunity to ponder the things we learned as children, the contrast between the wise and the foolish, the nature of true wealth, the trouble people had understanding Jesus, and finally the call from James that our actions must stand as testimony to our faith. May your encounters with the wisdom God desires for us guide your actions and interactions with family, neighbors, and the wider world.

## The Uniform Series

*The Present Word* quarterly Bible study is based on the Uniform Series, a plan for reading and studying the Bible. The objectives of the series are to help persons increasingly:

1. to know the content of the Bible,
2. to understand the message of the Bible in light of their experiences and relationships, and
3. to be aware of God's self-disclosure, especially God's redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ, that they may respond in faith and love—to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, grow as the children of God rooted in the Christian community, live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and abide in the Christian hope.

The emphasis in these objectives is on the Bible as the record of the revelation of God in Christ as the primary source of understanding the meaning of the Christian faith and as the most effective means of confronting persons with the significant concerns of the gospel. These concerns include personal faith, values, human relationships, social responsibility, Christian hope, and the implications of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ and in the fellowship of his Spirit.

One of the distinctive features of the Uniform Series is the collaborative process through which denominational partners engage in the common task of developing the Lesson Guides. The development process begins with a Scope and Sequence subcommittee whose work sets a framework for the biblical themes of each six-year cycle. The Scope and Sequence team for Cycle 23 (2016–2022) chose themes that are creatively expressed in this statement of Christian faith:

*The God of the Bible, the source of creation, loves us and calls us in covenant through our faith to worship and to do justice.*

The underlined words in the statement compose the eight recurring themes throughout each quarterly segment of *The Present Word*.

## Quarter in Brief

God is experienced as wisdom in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. During this quarter, we explore the many facets of wisdom as recorded in the Book of Proverbs, in the Gospels, and in the letter written by James.

Unit I, “Wisdom in Proverbs,” in four sessions, explores the nature of God’s wisdom as found in the book of Proverbs. These sessions describe how Wisdom calls to us; the value of Wisdom and the gifts she offers; and ends by exploring the metaphor of the feast of Wisdom.

Unit II, “Wisdom in the Gospels,” offers four sessions, 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. The study ends by contrasting two kinds of wisdom.

# THE CALL OF WISDOM

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## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 1

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:7)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Most of us grew up hearing proverbs, whether or not we studied the biblical book of Proverbs. The word is a translation of the Hebrew *mashal*, “a saying.” The truisms our elders passed along to us functioned in the same way as this book, which was composed to instruct a young man on the brink of adulthood. A trusted elder took the time to create a collection of things he would need to know, just as our family members and mentors offered truisms to communicate beliefs they believed would prepare us for a righteous life. “Make yourself useful as well as decorative,” says a grandmother urging us to pitch in with the dishes, or “an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” offers an auntie focused on our eating habits.

Jesus, influenced by the Hebrew Scriptures, offered his own wisdom in memorable sound bytes: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21) and “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). Short sayings may not feel applicable to every situation; when we engage in study of the Scripture, we would be wise to study the meaning of the verses in context as well as examining what arises for us in the reading.

*Gracious God, guide our study of your word. Open our hearts and minds to new understandings as we seek your wisdom, stretching beyond time and place. Amen.*



**SCRIPTURE**

Proverbs 1:1–4, 7–8, 10, 20–22, 32–33

**1:1** The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:  
<sup>2</sup>For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,  
<sup>3</sup>for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;  
<sup>4</sup>to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—  
.....

<sup>7</sup>The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.  
<sup>8</sup>Hear, my child, your father’s instruction,  
and do not reject your mother’s teaching;  
.....

<sup>10</sup>My child, if sinners entice you,  
do not consent.  
.....

<sup>20</sup>Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
<sup>21</sup>At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:  
<sup>22</sup>“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?  
.....

<sup>32</sup>For waywardness kills the simple,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
<sup>33</sup>but those who listen to me will be secure  
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

**A WORD ABOUT WISDOM**

“**T**op 10 Insights from the Top 10 Blog Posts of the Year” reads the headline on a church leadership blog published a few years ago. While it might sound like secondary self-promotion, the author draws insights from his own work and particularly from reader response to it. Is this wisdom?



A religion scholar receives a grant allowing her time to create a new lectionary focused on biblical stories about women. She invites groups of clergywomen to brainstorm with her, both online and in person, sharing her scholarship and incorporating the suggestions they bring from a pastoral perspective. Is this wisdom?

An intergenerational group gathers for a retreat that begins with the speaker unpacking generational differences of experience and expectations. Anxiety mounts and then tempers flare, but when a good-humored joke is told, the room relaxes and people begin to hear each other across their divides. Is this wisdom?

Wisdom is, first, a concept. It is the idea that there are ways of being, thinking, and doing that transcend the ordinary. Wisdom is something more than knowledge, and it is something more complicated than practical experience. It is rarely gained in a vacuum, yet it is not attained by polling the general population either.

Wisdom is a practice. While some wisdom may seem to come from a flash of inspiration, we attain it by a commitment to going deeper, reaching higher, pondering carefully, and reckoning humbly. It does not come with a guarantee of material wealth or worldly success. Often we gain wisdom through painful experiences of loss, disappointment, or failure.

Wisdom can be intellectual, emotional, or practical. Its expression is not limited to the work of scholars, although we find it in the minds of theologians, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who challenged the attitudes and assumptions of his peers and took on the regime of Hitler. We also find it in the hearts of those who love beyond boundaries, like Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who cared for the sick and the poor. We find it in the actions of those whose grounding is holy, like former president Jimmy Carter, who uses his understanding of divine wisdom coupled with practical skills to create housing through Habitat for Humanity.

Wisdom is transcendent. Perhaps ultimate wisdom can only be found beyond the constraints of mortal life, yet people of faith continue to seek it to guide the choices we make in daily living. Wisdom is a gift from God, but it is not a passive one; we cannot receive it without wanting to have it.



**What words of wisdom guide you in daily life? Which forms of wisdom speak to you most clearly: intellectual, emotional, or practical?**

## TEACHABLE MOMENTS

In a famous scene from the Disney movie *Bambi*, Thumper is a young rabbit caught making unflattering remarks about Bambi when he is a newborn fawn. When his mother cautions him, he recites the lesson his unseen father has taught him: if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. The book of Proverbs hinges on the idea that your elders will prepare you to live a worthy life. "Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching," reads chapter 1, verse 8. Are we like Thumper? He hears the teaching, and he clearly listens to it, because he is able to repeat the lesson and embody it. He may be a bunny, but he is teachable. Thumper is no fool.

Many of the first lessons we learn in life are intended to keep us safe. We are warned to look both ways before we cross the street or to wait thirty minutes after eating before we go swimming. Our parents and other elders hope to keep us from harm. We are taught to pay attention to our surroundings and to the instruction being offered by our elders.

As mature people, we may look back and remember the people who influenced us, whether literal parents or people who stood as parents to us. Sunday school teachers, coaches, babysitters, and neighbors may have formed us with the proverbs and sayings they offered along the way. Books and movies planted ideas and truisms in our minds and hearts. Experience and observation play a part as well.

My younger son spent the special occasions of childhood in the company of a slightly older cousin. Both boys were picky eaters. My son tended to be quiet at family events and make do, but his cousin grew more vocal about his preferences and dislikes as adolescence approached. At a birthday party, I provided an organic deli tray with a range of sandwich options, none of which suited the cousin, who called out his displeasure to the gathered family, putting me in an awkward position. After the party, my son spoke to me quietly. "I don't want to be *that guy*," he said. From that day forward, he chose not only to eat more adventurously but to reconsider the impact of his actions on others. His early faith learning influenced him in a teachable moment of realization. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

There is more to wisdom than knowing what is right. Applied wisdom can guide our actions and our interactions with our family, our neighbors, and the wider world.



How has something you learned from a faith leader or elder become applicable in daily life?

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In the 1800s, the book *Struwwelpeter* contained cautionary stories with gruesome illustrations intended as wisdom for children. If you do not groom yourself, you will be unpopular. If you tease a dog, he could bite you. If you play with matches, you might burn yourself to death! The author of Proverbs offers similar threats of disaster and doom, both in the selected verses we are reading today and in the portions of Proverbs 1 not chosen for this lesson. Threats of harm are a classic teaching tool, as anyone whose parents spanked them will remember, but Baby Boomer and Gen X parents have lived through a change in parenting philosophy that moved away from physical punishment to time-out chairs and “1-2-3 Magic.” Now time-out is passé, and parents are encouraged to reinforce good behavior with affirmation rather than discouraging bad behavior with punishment.

Even so, media directed at adults still employs fear to sway the thinking of its consumers. Newspaper headlines agitate readers; cable news chyrons declare menace; social media posts incite anxiety. How can we make wise decisions about what to believe and do when we are whipped up into a frenzy?

Jonathan Walton, Dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, calls upon Christians to develop a moral framework for living by considering the key influences of Scripture and religious tradition. Look at what Jesus taught, who he spoke to, what kind of stories he told. For Walton, the key to the moral framework is love.<sup>1</sup> Reading Scripture, we might also make the case for a moral framework of peace, justice, or mercy.

Perhaps we can pull through some threads from Proverbs and interlace them with the wisdom of the gospels to build our framework. Wisdom comes from God, who wants to be in relationship with us and teach us. When we have choices to make, things we pray about, we might consider what it would be like to talk out the matter with God and apply the values we have learned in a life of faith to the situation we face. Which choice would please God? Does a potential decision align with the mercy and justice

1. Dr. Walton’s book might be of interest: *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in its World for Our World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

the prophets proclaimed as God’s desire? Can we view the outcome through the lens of love and feel it would be wise?

**?** This reading leaves out some verses in Proverbs 1 that further emphasize the punishment of those who do not heed Wisdom’s call. How does the idea of punishment fit with your moral framework and your understanding of God?

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. “Proverb” is a translation of the Hebrew word *mashal*, which means “a saying.”
2. While the Book of Proverbs begins by ascribing its sayings to Solomon, internal evidence points to it being a collection of wisdom from a variety of individuals, edited and compiled over time.
3. The prologue to the Book of Proverbs clearly indicates the collection’s intended audience: inexperienced young men about to enter adulthood.
4. Proverbs 1:7 is considered the motto for the entire collection and firmly connects human wisdom and knowledge to service of God. (See also 8:13; 9:10; 14:27; 15:33; 19:23.)
5. Though Wisdom is personified as a woman in Proverbs (1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–6), women are noticeably absent from it, appearing primarily in relation to the young men the book addresses.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jun. 8	Work for the Good of All	Galatians 6:1–10
<b>T</b>	Jun. 9	Live Together in Harmony	Romans 15:1–6
<b>W</b>	Jun. 10	Wisdom Is Walking Together in Love	2 John 4–11
<b>Th</b>	Jun. 11	Joseph Resists Temptation	Genesis 39:6b–18
<b>F</b>	Jun. 12	Wisdom Saves from Temptation	Proverbs 2:12–19
<b>Sa</b>	Jun. 13	Walk on Just and Good Paths	Proverbs 2:20–22; 4:24–27

# THE VALUE OF WISDOM

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 39; Proverbs 2

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Prov. 2:6)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

More than any preceding generations, we live surrounded by and bombarded with words. From news reports to tweets to song lyrics on our televisions or radios or mobile devices, the average person's brain sorts out a lot of input every single day. Whether the content creators believe they are sharing crucial knowledge or trying to sway us to a point of view or sell us a product, the result can be the same. We process an immense quantity of words and have to decide what we care about retaining, what we will act upon, or whether we will dismiss the ideas and values expressed.

Some of those phrases, and particularly the ones set to music, can get in our heads and take up residence whether we want them to or not. A catchy song (for instance, "I Want It That Way") featured in a popular culture moment (an episode of *Brooklyn 99*) and repeated in a commercial (Doritos's Super Bowl ad) might stick with you for weeks. Just as it begins to recede, you hear it over the loudspeaker at a school event, and the earworm is back. "Tell me why-y!" Why that lyric again?

How, then, do we make space for the things that might really matter to us and make us better people? We turn down the noise, turn off the devices, and listen.

*Holy God, meet us in this moment. We are looking for you and hoping for a word we can hear and understand. Help us to turn away from distractions and focus on you as we study ancient wisdom and seek insight for this time in our lives. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 2:1–11

**2:1** My child, if you accept my words  
and treasure up my commandments within you,  
<sup>2</sup>making your ear attentive to wisdom  
and inclining your heart to understanding;  
<sup>3</sup>if you indeed cry out for insight,  
and raise your voice for understanding;  
<sup>4</sup>if you seek it like silver,  
and search for it as for hidden treasures—  
<sup>5</sup>then you will understand the fear of the Lord  
and find the knowledge of God.  
<sup>6</sup>For the Lord gives wisdom;  
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;  
<sup>7</sup>he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,  
<sup>8</sup>guarding the paths of justice  
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.  
<sup>9</sup>Then you will understand righteousness and justice  
and equity, every good path;  
<sup>10</sup>for wisdom will come into your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;  
<sup>11</sup>prudence will watch over you;  
and understanding will guard you.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.


## A WORD ABOUT LISTENING

**A**lmost every Tuesday morning, I stop at a Starbucks after a regularly scheduled appointment. All coffee shops feature a layered soundtrack of grinding beans and cappuccino makers, indie music played a bit too loud, and the voices of customers and staff. This one seems to have added a layer of white noise that I cannot attribute to a machine, and while it might protect conversation from being overheard, it also makes it hard for the barista to hear me when I order my drink. Every week we go through the same exercise. She asks what I would like to have, and I say, “A Tall Mocha,” and she says, “Excuse me?” or “Can you speak a little louder?” I repeat myself, sometimes twice. She focuses intently, but the combination of the ambient cacophony and my soft voice work against her actually hearing me.

The reality of most everyday situations is similar. There is a lot going on at the same time. At home, the washer and dryer are running, the cat is meowing, the letter carrier comes up the driveway, and a branch that needs trimming rubs against the window. At the office, a folding machine ka-thunks, the water cooler glub-glubs, phones ring, and a coworker has a story to tell, but we keep an ear out for the ding of email anyway. We operate on the assumption that we can do more than one thing at a time.

The writer of Proverbs encourages the reader to make “your ear attentive to wisdom” (v. 2:2a). Hearing is passive; it happens without our intention or permission. Listening is active and attentive. To begin, we must choose to tune out whatever distracts us and make time and space for God’s wisdom. That might look like turning off the TV earlier than usual and allowing some quiet in our minds before we fall asleep. Or it might look like going for a walk without headphones in and a podcast playing. It might happen on the commute to work if we don’t turn on drive-time radio.

We might also read a book of godly wisdom, one from the Bible, or one written by a person of mature faith. We might ask a trusted elder or peer to talk about what he or she has learned in life. Or we might spend time in study and discussion with other people committed to growing together, as you are doing in class today.

 **When was a time when you found space for listening to God? What distractions keep you from making your ear attentive to wisdom?**

## A HEART FOR UNDERSTANDING

**O**n Sunday morning, Pastor Jay looked forward to being just like the other parents of kids in the confirmation class, taking a family photo and enjoying cake at the reception in the fellowship hall. But his son Billy was less excited about celebrating and instead felt stressed about getting to a scheduled tennis match on time. “I left my phone at home. How will I know if I need to be there?”

Meredith had plans for lunch with a friend until her cell phone rang midmorning on Monday, the number a familiar one. The nurse at her daughter’s high school said, “Shuri came in complaining of a headache, and we let her lie down for a few minutes. Then she threw up a little. Can you come and pick her up?”



Each of these scenarios called for the parent to curb an initial reaction of irritation and read between the lines. Jay had joyful expectations about the events of the day, but he also knew that Billy was experiencing the strain of reconciling conflicting demands. Meredith felt pretty sure that Shuri was not sick but actually felt anxious about a major project for French class. Jay and Meredith both understood the situations; more importantly, they understood their children. Jay allowed Billy to go home to their manse across the street and check his phone for a text from the tennis coach. Meredith cancelled her plans and picked Shuri up from school. Both parents took the time to talk about what happened later, offering reassurances and encouragement.

Of course, becoming a parent does not automatically result in mature understanding. Some parents would have been impatient or angry in these situations, and others would have given in too easily without focusing on what might be learned from the experience. Both parents and children benefited from unpacking what happened and wondering together what fueled the stress in the moment.

Embodying God's wisdom requires more than intellectual attainment. Proverbs specifies "inclining your heart to understanding." God wants to be in a relationship with us that goes beyond what we learn in books or how we behave in the world. While emotional connection seems to come more naturally to some people than to others, we may all cultivate this understanding if we commit to it. For a parent that might mean remembering what it felt like to be the age your child is now. For a boss it could mean taking an employee's circumstances into consideration. As people of faith who hope to live in a godly way, we open our hearts to try and understand God.

 **What makes it harder to understand persons in some situations than others?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**P**rudence may be one of those words that we have heard but find ourselves hard-pressed to define specifically. It sounds a bit old-fashioned, like the name of a great-aunt or a great-great grandmother. Or it might strike us as uptight, a word for people who judge us. "Prudence will watch over you" (v. 11) could sound more judgmental than reassuring. Merriam-




Webster offers this definition geared to kids: prudence is “careful good judgment that allows someone to avoid danger or risks.”<sup>1</sup> The emphasis is on judgment and understanding ourselves.

Recently, a church leader at a conference offered a wise and powerful reflection on building multicultural understanding in the church. He highlighted the Roman centurion who saw the crucified Jesus not as a criminal but as the Son of God (Matt. 27:54). How often do we affirm someone we think of as “other” and question ourselves, rather than questioning others and resting confident in our own world view? The leader challenged the attendees, saying, “Insight precedes eyesight. And if you want to see the other clearly, you need to see yourself better.” We need to understand where we are coming from first in order to understand others.

A pastor of a church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, began a workshop called “The Color of Whiteness: Engaging White Privilege In and Through the Church” by asking participants to write a racial autobiography. It proved challenging to the white people in the room to answer even the first question. “How do you self-identify in terms of race?” Is it okay to say white and not feel sheepish about it? What does being white actually mean? The pastor pointed us to our early experiences and family influences.

Proverbs 2 reminds us that insight is not the same thing as intuition, a knowing we cannot explain or something we just “get.” The text exhorts the reader to “cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding.” It takes intentional effort to gain understanding and develop the careful good judgment we can call prudence. Wisdom is not just about avoiding risk or developing our one-on-one relationship with God. Wisdom requires awareness of the way we relate to others and move in the world.

While we can never fully understand God, when all people understand themselves, and then each other, the whole world will be in a condition of knowledge and prudence that is pleasant to our souls.

** When have you been surprised by another person’s experience? What would you want others in your class to know about you that might surprise them?**

1. “Prudence,” Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prudence](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prudence).

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Like other Old Testament Wisdom books, Proverbs defines wisdom, explains how to find it, and describes the benefits of living by it. Unlike the books of Ecclesiastes and Job, Proverbs keeps the reality of unjust suffering in the background and presents a more optimistic view.
2. Proverbs affirms that “the fear of the LORD” will lead to relative security, a good reputation, and meaning in life.
3. In Hebrew, Proverbs 2:1–22 is one elaborate sentence of 22 lines, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.
4. Although the parent speaks (Proverbs 2:1), he points beyond himself and advises the son to listen to “wisdom” and “understanding,” which come from the Lord.
5. Proverbs 1 and 2 affirm the reciprocal relationship between humans and wisdom. Whereas Wisdom “cries out” and “raises her voice” (1:20–21), the parent urges the son to do the same in his search for insight and understanding (2:3)
6. The long “if” condition beginning in 2:1 offers the son two “then” outcomes resulting from wisdom: relationship with God (vv. 5–8) and positive relationship to humans (vv. 9–11).

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jun. 15	Christ, the Wisdom of God	1 Corinthians 1:18–25
<b>T</b>	Jun. 16	God Abundantly Rewards Job's Faithfulness	Job 1:1–5
<b>W</b>	Jun. 17	God Restores Job's Family and Wealth	Job 42:10–17
<b>Th</b>	Jun. 18	Wisdom Calls the People to Respond	Proverbs 8:1–7
<b>F</b>	Jun. 19	Wisdom Present and Active During Creation	Proverbs 8:22–31
<b>Sa</b>	Jun. 20	Choose Wisdom and Live	Proverbs 8:32–36

# THE GIFTS OF WISDOM

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Job 1; 42; Proverbs 8

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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. (Prov. 8:10–11)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In Greek, the Hebrew word for wisdom, *chokmhah*, is translated *sophia*, and in the book of Proverbs, Wisdom/Sophia appears as a woman. She stands at the city gates, and she calls out to the people going by, demanding their attention and advising they learn prudence, intelligence, and understanding. Readers may be surprised at this portrayal given the historic patriarchal nature of Christian interpretation of Hebrew Scripture, yet here stands Wisdom, telling us what we need to know.

Proverbs portrays human women primarily in relationship to the young men intended to be educated by the book, often as sources of temptation and trouble. In contrast, Proverbs 31 offers a description of a human woman who is a woman of valor, a valued wife, a successful businesswoman, and a model citizen. She has all the qualities wisdom provides.

Proverbs 8:22–31 tells us Wisdom was present with the first person of God before anything else existed, before the first act of creation. Christians with a Trinitarian understanding might consider that, here and elsewhere in Scripture, we find both masculine and feminine descriptions used for aspects of God. Both are metaphoric, an attempt to frame the unknowable divine in terms human beings recognize. Like God, wisdom cannot be limited to our human definitions of gender expression or other forms of identity, but the use of familiar images can enable us to imagine both God and wisdom in ways that have meaning for us.

*Holy One, you call us to listen and learn. Challenge us to deepen our faith, to grow in understanding, and to gain the wealth of spirit that is true wisdom. Amen.*



**SCRIPTURE**

Proverbs 8:8-14; 17-21

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

<sup>9</sup>They are all straight to one who understands  
and right to those who find knowledge.

<sup>10</sup>Take my instruction instead of silver,  
and knowledge rather than choice gold;

<sup>11</sup>for wisdom is better than jewels,  
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

<sup>12</sup>I, wisdom, live with prudence,  
and I attain knowledge and discretion.

<sup>13</sup>The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.  
Pride and arrogance and the way of evil  
and perverted speech I hate.

<sup>14</sup>I have good advice and sound wisdom;  
I have insight, I have strength.

.....

<sup>17</sup>I love those who love me,  
and those who seek me diligently find me.

<sup>18</sup>Riches and honor are with me,  
enduring wealth and prosperity.

<sup>19</sup>My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,  
and my yield than choice silver.

<sup>20</sup>I walk in the way of righteousness,  
along the paths of justice,

<sup>21</sup>endowing with wealth those who love me,  
and filling their treasuries.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

**A WORD ABOUT WEALTH**

**H**GTV's schedule includes a show called *My Lottery Dream Home*, hosted by David Bromstad. David travels to meet with people who want to use their lottery winnings to buy a new home and guides them through the process of finding the home of their dreams. Many of the winners are people of modest means, and even their dreams may seem humble to the viewer: a secure home in a suburban neighborhood for a young family, or a rustic vacation cottage in the woods or at the beach to be passed down to the next generation. It is not uncommon to hear

the winners thank God or describe themselves as blessed when a \$10 scratch ticket has yielded a \$1,000,000 jackpot. The two pastors at my house cringe when we hear them; certainly the winners were lucky, but is that the same thing as being blessed? Sometimes one of us will nudge the other or cock an eyebrow and say, “I hope they tithed on their winnings!”

One of the risks of reading Scripture literally is concluding that all faithful people will acquire earthly riches, with its corollary understanding that anyone who does not have those riches must be doing something wrong. Just as Scripture employs metaphor to portray God in terms accessible to human minds, the wealth referred to in Proverbs is not a promise of financial security to those who live according to a particular set of rules. Proverbs 8:17–21 offers wealth as a metaphor. We risk missing the figures of speech if we do not read the passage for context, looking back to verses 10–11: “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.”

In recent decades, ministries have arisen based firmly in the most literal Biblical interpretation of the concept of wealth. These churches teach the Prosperity Gospel, and they do not hesitate to associate poverty with sin. Yet Scripture in its most expansive reading tells us to care for those in need. The Rev. Carol Howard Merritt writes, “God-loving people are poor. People go into bankruptcy every day. Good, faithful people whom God loves dearly.”<sup>1</sup> If, then, we are not talking about actual monetary wealth, what kind of riches do we gain if we attain wisdom? If we read to the end of the chapter, Woman Wisdom tells us. Wisdom’s wealth is found in our relationship with God.



**What is the difference between being lucky and being blessed? What wisdom did your elders pass down about wealth?**

## **I HAVE INSIGHT, I HAVE STRENGTH**

The writer Rachel Held Evans came to the attention of Christian readers with a book about growing up in the Tennessee town where the Scopes Monkey Trial took place. Raised in the evangelical church, Evans found a conflict between what she came to know as true and what she had been taught to believe.

1. Carol Howard Merritt, “Money Anxiety and the Ministry,” *The Christian Century*, [www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2014-03/money-anxiety-and-ministry](http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2014-03/money-anxiety-and-ministry).

*Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*<sup>1</sup> laid the foundation for her later books, in which she unpacked the difference between seeming truths grounded in literal interpretations of Scripture and an authentic search for faith that allows space for questioning.

“I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength,” we read in Proverbs 8:14. Evans required strength to continue in her faithful work of gaining insight about Scripture. Her writing of books and articles and blog posts spilled over into the wider world through her active engagement on social media. What some people perceived as words of encouragement for their faith lives would be branded as heresy by Christians who held to a more fundamentalist faith, particularly those who discounted the possibility that a woman might know something. Reasonable theological opponents noted her grace and good humor in disagreement.

“I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me,” reads verse 17. While Evans left the evangelical church and later became an Episcopalian, she always spoke in her writing to both the evangelical and mainline churches, exhorting readers to employ love as their lens for interpreting Scripture and encouraging the church to include people traditionally shunted to the margins. She amplified the voices of women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community.

Evans died in 2019 at age 37 after a brief illness with tragic complications that left behind a husband and two young children. Her readers grieved on social media with their own tweets, Facebook statuses, and blog posts. Many referred to her as *Eshet Chayil*, the phrase found in Proverbs 31 that means “a woman of valor.” Writing for Working Preacher, the Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney translates the phrase from the Hebrew as “a woman of warrior strength.”<sup>2</sup> Hailed as a prophet, a saint, and a holy troublemaker, in her quest for insight, Evans demonstrated the warrior strength exemplified by the woman in Proverbs 31 and the righteousness called for by Woman Wisdom. Evans’s wealth of wisdom remains available to us, both in her published writing and in the video series that accompanies her book *Searching for Sunday*.



### What would it look like to seek wisdom diligently?

1. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. You will find her other books at [rachelheldevans.com/](http://rachelheldevans.com/).
2. “Commentary on Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Working Preacher*, [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2538](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2538).



## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Tucked into the Revised Standard Version Bible I received in third grade is a letter from my fifth grade Sunday school teacher. Apparently I missed a week of class in which plans were made for a family night presentation on our study of the Old Testament. The letter outlined the work I needed to do to prepare my portion of our journey through the Bible map and pointed me to resources in our Bible story book, which I guess I took home with me each week. I do not remember those details at all, but I do remember Mrs. Sengel. She was tall, or seemed so to me, and wore one of those hair-sprayed bouffants favored by most middle-aged and middle class women in Virginia in the late 1960s.


Mrs. Sengel taught the late elementary age group using drama and puppetry that embedded the ancient stories in her students' body memory. When you have dressed as Gomer on the slave block or helped build a marionette version of Salome with her seven veils holding John the Baptist's head on a platter, you do not forget them. She was the wife of the preacher, whose voice rang through the historic sanctuary every Sunday morning, but I am not sure I ever saw them together. She existed for me in the red brick Sunday school building, in the second-floor classroom where we wrote our own scripts and built papier-mâché faces for our puppets.

My assignment for the Bible map sounds demanding as I read it now, to write a paragraph or two each about slave conditions in Egypt, the plagues, the Exodus, and the Ten Commandments. At the end of her letter to me are these words: "I know you will do a good job and it is really not as much work as it might seem at first glance." That wise combination of gentle encouragement and firm expectation moved all her students to do their best.

The transmission of wisdom does not require fame. In every community of faith, teachers pass down what they know to the next generation. When Marian Sengel died at age 91, her obituary noted that her husband often spoke of their "joint ministry" with their congregation.<sup>1</sup> Her work as a religious educator included serving on the committee that created a new curriculum for her denomination. Her sphere of influence includes this writer and many hundreds of Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers who

1. [www.legacy.com/obituaries/washingtonpost/obituary.aspx?n=marian-s-sengel&pid=168965252](http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/washingtonpost/obituary.aspx?n=marian-s-sengel&pid=168965252).

sat in her classrooms, benefiting from her instruction and knowledge, which were better than jewels.

 **Whose wisdom has influenced you?**

**SCRIPTURE NOTES**

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Proverbs 8 is the Bible's most detailed personification of wisdom.
2. Proverbs 8 provides background for Christians' understanding of Christ as the Wisdom and Word of God.
3. The Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1–14) and its understanding of Jesus' identity is informed by Proverbs 8.
4. Use of words such as “call,” “cry,” “speak,” “lips,” “mouth,” and “utter” in the opening verses of Proverbs 8 to attest to the quality and character of Wisdom's teaching stand in sharp contrast to the “speech” of the “loose woman” in Chapter 5.

**A LOOK AHEAD**

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jun. 22	Law Provides the Edge	Psalms 119:97–104
<b>T</b>	Jun. 23	Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids	Matthew 25:1–13
<b>W</b>	Jun. 24	Church Proclaims the Wisdom of God	Ephesians 3:7–13
<b>Th</b>	Jun. 25	No Wise Person among You?	1 Corinthians 6:1–6
<b>F</b>	Jun. 26	Wise and Foolish Builders	Matthew 7:24–27
<b>Sa</b>	Jun. 27	Benefits of Making the Wise Choice	Psalms 1



# WISDOM'S FEAST

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 9

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight. (Prov. 9:6)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

**L**in-Manuel Miranda, creator of the Tony Award-winning musical *Hamilton*, had his first Broadway triumph while still in his twenties. He started writing the music and lyrics for *In the Heights* while he was a student at Wesleyan University. It tells a fictional story set in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in the northern portion of New York City. A documentary aired on PBS's Great Performances relates the Broadway opening of *In the Heights*, interviewing cast members about their participation in the show and their journeys to becoming professional actors and dancers. The opening number expands beyond expected forms for musicals by adding salsa and hip-hop rhythms to introduce the main characters, their hopes, and their setting. The set consists of a busy corner anchored by a bodega, a hair salon, and the dispatch office of a taxi company. On the backdrop, the audience can see in the distance the familiar silhouette of the George Washington Bridge. The opening number ends with a flourish—known in musical theatre lingo as “the button”—as the cast emphasizes the place it all happens with the words, “In Washington Heights!”

Miranda, who grew up enamored of musicals, began his work with a grounding in the form and function of an opening number, but in the PBS documentary he admits that the only thing left from the first draft is that musical button. In the years between Wesleyan and Broadway, he rewrote every other aspect of the song.

Wisdom comes through experience, but it also comes through commitment and determination. We cannot reach the button without considering how to compose, edit, toss out, and revise the words and music that lead to it.

*Holy One, when we set our hearts on learning from you, give us the perseverance we need to reach the end. Amen.*



**SCRIPTURE**

Proverbs 9:1–6, 8–10, 13–18

**9:1** Wisdom has built her house,  
she has hewn her seven pillars.

<sup>2</sup>She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,  
she has also set her table.

<sup>3</sup>She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls  
from the highest places in the town,

<sup>4</sup>“You that are simple, turn in here!”  
To those without sense she says,

<sup>5</sup>“Come, eat of my bread  
and drink of the wine I have mixed.

<sup>6</sup>Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
and walk in the way of insight.”  
.....

<sup>8</sup>A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you;  
the wise, when rebuked, will love you.

<sup>9</sup>Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still;  
teach the righteous and they will gain in learning.

<sup>10</sup>The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.  
.....

<sup>13</sup>The foolish woman is loud;  
she is ignorant and knows nothing.

<sup>14</sup>She sits at the door of her house,  
on a seat at the high places of the town,

<sup>15</sup>calling to those who pass by,  
who are going straight on their way,

<sup>16</sup>“You who are simple, turn in here!”  
And to those without sense she says,

<sup>17</sup>“Stolen water is sweet,  
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.”

<sup>18</sup>But they do not know that the dead are there,  
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

**A WORD ABOUT FEAR**


**W**hen Kathryn was a little girl in the 1970s, her grandfather still piloted international flights for Pan Am. He began that work after serving in the military, in the now near-mythical era of air

travel, when passengers dressed up to fly. She remembers him, tall and handsome, with silver hair, in his uniform lined with shiny buttons. He represented a world literally beyond hers. Anytime he invited her to join him for anything, it felt like an honor. What Kathryn felt for her grandfather went beyond respect; he evoked a sense of awe so powerful that forty years later she still nods respectfully to airline pilots and calls them “Sir” or “Ma’am.”

We live in a time when the word “awesome” has been so over-used to describe casual delights that it almost means nothing, but the root word, “awe,” is crucial to our understanding of the primary thesis statement of the book of Proverbs. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,” states chapter 1, verse 7, and in chapter 9, verse 10, we read, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The Hebrew word for fear in this verse, *yirah*, conveys more than one meaning in a range of contexts in Scripture. It can surely mean fear of pain or injury, but it can also mean reverence.

What do the words “the fear of the Lord” mean to us? In our twenty-first-century context, the go-to definition for fear will likely reflect an anxiety about uncertainty and a reasonable worry about random circumstances that might cause harm to us or those we love. Some theological interpretations lean on that quality of fear and project it onto God. Be good or be in trouble, they say. God will strike down those who do not fall into line. We might not want to argue this if we view God as having that power.

Yet given that Scripture reminds us over and over to “be not afraid,” we might want to consider awe or reverence as guide words for defining the starting point of wisdom. We understand God to be all-powerful and all-knowing. If we also understand God to be all-loving, as both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scripture claim, we can grow in knowledge and move toward wisdom from a foundation that is built not on terror but on reverence for the power and actions of the One who created us. To grow in knowledge of God who loves us would be truly awesome.

 **What are qualities that you have respected in other people? How do those qualities parallel your reverence for God?**

## TWO INVITATIONS

Proverbs 9 continues the metaphor of chapter 8, but Woman Wisdom has now settled down in town to build a house of her own. The seven pillars remind us of the seven days of the creation

story, offering an image of completeness. Her household is well-organized; she sends her servant-girls out with an invitation. If you are simple, come on over. Immature? You are invited to sit at my table and learn, she says, offering hospitality and generosity.

On the other side of town, a foolish woman offers an alternative. She sits on the doorstep, and shouts to the passersby. She does not have a staff helping her get the word out to the world. She simply hollers, knowing some people will listen. Her door is also open, her table laid, but the water she serves is stolen, and the bread may be too. The people who sit at her table are the dead, also translated as “shades;” foolishness will bring you to the same fate.

Remember that Proverbs is a book written for a young man. Hyperbole, a literary form of exaggeration, provokes the reader’s imagination and invites a heightened response. The contrasting images are extreme, even a bit cartoonish if we want to picture the two women as they might be drawn by Disney animators. Woman Wisdom might be a strong, mature, and serene figure; the Foolish Woman by contrast might look sloppy and frowsy but somehow still charming enough that her offer will be tempting.

Behind Door Number One is the Way of Insight; behind Door Number Two lies Doom. The contrast must be obvious so the person being taught will not choose what seems easy instead of what sounds harder, even if it also sounds right.

Most families have some kind of story in the archives of memory employed to teach these kinds of lessons. Your cousin Jimbo was the one boy in the group jumping off the roof of the boathouse who broke an arm. Your family friend Jane came to visit with her fiancé, and you heard your parents say later she seemed too young for marriage; you remembered her knee socks and headband when you heard about her divorce a year later and thought maybe your parents were right. Your Uncle Bill worked for a company that valued him so much they sent him to dry out more than once, but in the end he died of cirrhosis of the liver. The cautions offered are genuine. Be more careful; don’t hurry into adulthood; remember there is a history of addiction in the family.

 **How did your parents and other elders point you toward wisdom? What stories did they tell?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**O**n the last Sunday of the choir season, Pastor Kate planned a Panera-catered appreciation breakfast in the choir room

during the religious education hour between services. It sounded like the perfect plan until a few days before, when a choir member gave her two cents worth after Bible study. “The choir room is too crowded,” she said, “and we can’t balance plates on our laps. Why can’t we meet here in the conference room? Or in the parlor?” Both rooms were used by year-long classes, Kate explained. The church was large, but most of the classrooms were used by the weekday preschool and had chairs and tables scaled to little children.

“Then why can’t we use the fellowship hall?”

Kate explained that it was being used for a panel discussion on prison conditions. She thought this information would bring the conversation to a close, but the choir member continued to complain, now in a rising tone of voice, about the plates and the crowding. “Well, then,” said Kate, her voice rising too, “we’ll cancel the breakfast.” She left the conference room and walked down the hall to her office, where another church member was waiting to meet with her, but she could still hear the choir member, now shouting, “Don’t you walk away from me!”

When Kate got home later that day, she called a longtime friend and colleague and unfolded the problem, adding that her staff reported that the choir member had continued her complaints in the main office for another twenty minutes. “I know I should have handled it better,” she said, “but I got angry. We are trying to do something nice, and our space is limited, and I couldn’t solve the problem.”

Her colleague listened thoughtfully and then offered a suggestion. “Why couldn’t you hold the panel discussion in the sanctuary and use fellowship hall for the breakfast?”

The logistical issue solved, they turned to the human problem. Kate’s colleague asked, “How will you address this with your choir member?” Although there might be fault found on both sides of the interaction, Kate knew she needed to apologize. Somewhere under the argument was a genuine concern, and it was the pastor’s responsibility to be in touch and resolve things.

“When I was younger,” Kate said, “I would have stayed mad.”

Her colleague chuckled and said, “Yes, I remember times you stayed mad at me!”

“Thanks for telling me what I needed to hear then so I can do this better now.”



**Proverbs 9:8** tells us, “A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you; the wise, when rebuked, will love you.” How do you handle critique? How do you offer it to others?

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Proverbs 9 marks the conclusion of the first major section of the book.
2. The “seven pillars” of Wisdom’s house (9:1) have prompted speculation and debate for centuries. Given the cosmic context of this reference, they probably refer to the “pillars of the earth” (Psalm 75:3; 1 Samuel 2:8; Job 9:6; contrast Job 26:11).
3. As “seven” in the Old Testament often symbolizes completeness, the “seven pillars” of Proverbs 9:1 may refer to creation’s perfection and stability.
4. Wisdom’s activity of building, preparing for a feast, and efforts at inviting people to the feast contrast sharply with the foolish woman, who simply “sits at the door of her house . . . calling to those who pass by” (vv. 14–15) and offers them “stolen water” and bread (v. 17).
5. Wisdom and the foolish woman use identical language (vv. 4, 16), but while Wisdom’s feast leads to maturity, insight, and life, the foolish woman’s deceptive offer leads to death.
6. The Hebrew word translated “ignorant” in verse 13 suggests a gullible person who is easily persuaded.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jun. 29	Wise Counsel for Defending Your Faith	Matthew 10:16–23
<b>T</b>	Jun. 30	Wise Deeds of the Coming Messiah	Isaiah 35:3–10
<b>W</b>	Jul. 1	John the Baptist, God’s Messenger	Luke 7:24–28
<b>Th</b>	Jul. 2	The Messiah’s Wise Deeds	Matthew 11:1–6
<b>F</b>	Jul. 3	Woes on Unwise Cities	Matthew 11:20–24
<b>Sa</b>	Jul. 4	Wisdom’s Invitation to Come and Rest	Matthew 11:25–30

# WISDOM'S VINDICATION

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 11:1–19

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“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.”  
(Matt. 11:19)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In this unit, our study moves to the Gospels, giving us glimpses of Jesus and his wisdom. As our lessons trace a path through all four Gospels, the passages chosen will show how each Gospel writer described Jesus in ways that made sense for the context of the original audience. Scholars date the Gospel of Matthew somewhere in the last quarter of the first century of the Common Era, likely in the 80s. Fifty years had gone by since the Resurrection. Matthew draws from the Gospel of Mark, written around the year 70 CE, from a collection of sayings (Q) used in both Matthew and Luke, and from other material unique to this Gospel. Matthew was written in Greek, so it may have been written somewhere in Galilee or in Antioch of Syria.

It is important to remember that in 70 CE, Roman forces destroyed not only the Temple but also the city of Jerusalem. A substantial portion of the population died during the siege, and the traumatized survivors dispersed and resettled elsewhere in the region, disconnected from their holy city. The early followers of Jesus were themselves Jewish and tried to remain in the synagogue community; those tensions with local religious leaders are echoed in the Gospel. By the mid-80s, they had withdrawn and were developing a new identity. Beginning with the genealogy in Chapter 1, the Gospel of Matthew equipped its first hearers and readers to draw a scriptural connection between their historic faith and the Savior whose way they chose to follow, affirming that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

*Gracious God, as we turn to the Gospels, help us to make connections that offer deeper insight and wider viewpoints about the world of the early Christians and the world in which we live today. Amen.*





## SCRIPTURE

Matthew 11:7–19

**11:7** 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? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,

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

<sup>11</sup>Truly 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. <sup>12</sup>From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. <sup>13</sup>For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; <sup>14</sup>and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!

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

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

<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; <sup>19</sup>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.”

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT PROPHETS

**F**rom the safe remove of thousands of years, we read the biblical prophets and appreciate the poetry of Isaiah and Jeremiah, or cushion ourselves against the dramatic exclamations of Ezekiel and Hosea, but almost nobody likes to hear from prophets in the present tense. Their task is too often to bring us bad news about our own behavior, what it causes in the world, and how it affects our relationship with God. In his prophetic career, Elijah alienated the political leaders around him and ended up hiding in a cave to escape his enemies. Yet in the past tense, he is remembered and praised for being closer to God than other people could ever be, having been taken up into heaven while



still living (2 Kgs. 2). Malachi 4:5 promises Elijah will return before the Day of the Lord. Alongside Moses, Elijah appears in the New Testament during the Transfiguration, the two of them representing the Law and the Prophets. While being compared to Elijah would be an honor for a prophetic voice, it will not make a person popular, because it is the job of a prophet to name the uncomfortable truth.


In the first session of a thoughtfully prepared Sunday school class on peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness, which included all ages, from sixth grade to senior citizens, participants broke into small groups and shared the names of people we thought of as truly good. I was pleased when my sixth-grader named the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and then saddened to hear one of his trusted adult friends respond, “He was good, but he was not perfect.”

This was going to be the further point of the discussion—we are all in need of God’s grace—but I felt frustrated that an adult would administer that kind of corrective to the one student in our group. No one questioned any other suggestions, and when the full class shared ideas, my son whispered, “Don’t say it. Don’t say it.”

Later, as we sat in our pew before worship, he picked up the bulletin and saw a quote on the cover.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness;  
Only light can do that.  
Hate cannot drive out hate;  
Only love can do that.<sup>1</sup>

He pointed out the words and the name to me and said, “I wasn’t wrong!” No, son, you were not wrong; but thus it has ever been with prophets, even the ones in sixth-grade.

 **How does it feel when you hear an uncomfortable truth? How do you respond? Who would you call a prophet in our time?**

## **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

**I**f you have ever been the person who recommended a candidate for pastor, or a medical specialist, or a piano teacher, or a landscaper whose work did not turn out as expected, you will sympathize with John the Baptist. Sitting in a jail cell in Matthew


1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 86.

11, he worried about whether he had put in a good word for the wrong guy. After building his reputation on living in the wilderness, dressing in and eating only what he could scavenge from the land, John must have been getting some questions from his followers about Jesus and his different approach to both teaching and living. How could John justify his support of a so-called Messiah who spent his time eating dinner with people no one would ever call righteous?

He sent his followers out with the question he could not ask in person. “Are you the one who is to come?” The subtext is clear. John is in trouble, in jail, at risk of losing his life because he followed God’s call; was it all for nothing? If we have read the first ten chapters of Matthew, we may wonder why John is so dubious. We might point to the evidence of the Sermon on the Mount, and many stories of healings, and John’s own acclamation. If Jesus is on the wrong side of the religious authorities too, that should satisfy John. Jesus tells John’s emissaries to report what they have heard and seen: “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” (Matt. 11:6).

Jesus, surrounded by crowds, then begins to teach in his style. He starts by affirming John as the prophet described in Isaiah, the messenger who comes ahead of the Savior, and even “Elijah who is to come,” as described by the prophet Malachi. God’s great day is coming, and John is the one who pointed to it. Jesus has no problem with John.

But the people have a problem with both John and Jesus. They think John is strange for living in a manner that is almost aggressively simple, but they also think Jesus is careless about his social connections, sitting down to eat with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus points the crowd back to the same evidence he offered to John’s disciples. We can recognize wisdom by the results it brings in our lives and in the world. Wisdom brings healing, new life, and good news for people on the margins. “Let anyone with ears listen!” (v. 15).

 **If Jesus came into the world today, how would you expect him to appear and behave?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**W**hen Jesus speaks of “this generation,” we can fairly read ourselves into the story, because every generation seems to

struggle with understanding him. We tend to seek a version of Jesus who does what we want rather than forming ourselves based on what he asks of us. If we take away nothing else, we can reflect on the last thing Jesus says in today's passage, which can be translated differently. Instead of "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," it can also be read as "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her children." Vindication is the kind of win that gets you out of trouble by proving you were innocent all along. The world will know whether we were wise by the results of our actions.

Nonprofit organizations depend on donations, and large nonprofits rely on the gifts of wealthy people. In May of 2019, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City announced that it would no longer accept gifts from the Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma. A few months earlier, the company had settled a lawsuit over complaints that Purdue marketed opioid drugs and offered doctors incentives to prescribe them despite knowing about the harm they cause. Leadership of the Met and other museums such as the Guggenheim and the Tate in London noted that money earned in harmful ways is tainted and cannot be made good simply by the donation of a portion to worthy causes. These three museums made a first step in evaluating what might make money too corrupted to accept and took a stand against what amounts to a kind of moral money-laundering.

What is good? What is right? On this Independence Sunday, in a presidential election year, those questions are actively before us. We may fear having the topic of politics come up at our family barbecues and company picnics because people we love, or people with whom we work, may see things differently than we do. If our values conflict, how do we come to an understanding?

The priority for those who follow Jesus cannot be what is good for "me and mine" but rather what is good for all people who do not have the advantages of health, education, social position, and economic resources. Jesus demonstrated his care both through his actions and through his teaching. If wisdom is vindicated by her children, then Christians will want to consider the legacy we leave to our families, our communities, and the world. Will people look back at us and call us wise? They will if we act in a way that honors Jesus.



**How does your church bring good news to the poor? How could you do more?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

7. Matthew 11:10 is drawn from Malachi 3:1 and is also reflected in Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27.
8. A translation problem in Matthew 11:12 concerns whether the verb βιάζεται should be rendered as middle voice (“been forcefully advancing,” NIV footnote) or as passive voice (“has suffered violence,” NRSV).
9. Jesus expected John the Baptist to recognize Jesus’ identity as Messiah from the wise actions Jesus had been performing (Matthew 11:2–5). In Luke 4:16–21 Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, who describes such acts as those of the Messiah and proclaims their fulfillment in him. Malachi 4:5 indicates that Elijah was to return to prepare the Messiah’s way. John the Baptist does not recognize himself in that role, at least in John 1:19–21, but Jesus ascribes it to him (Matthew 11:14).
10. Jesus intimates that wisdom means recognizing what is fitting, such as playing wedding music for a wedding, and what is not, playing funeral music instead.
11. Luke 7:35 remembers Jesus’ statement in Matthew 11:19 as “wisdom is vindicated by her children,” suggesting the link between John, Jesus, and their disciples.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jul. 6	Everything Has Its Time and Season	Ecclesiastes 3:2–8
<b>T</b>	Jul. 7	Perform Your God-Given Task	Ecclesiastes 3:9–15
<b>W</b>	Jul. 8	The Firstborn Belong to God	Numbers 3:11–13
<b>Th</b>	Jul. 9	Jesus Presented to the Lord	Luke 2:21–24
<b>F</b>	Jul. 10	Simeon Praises God for the Child	Luke 2:25–35
<b>Sa</b>	Jul. 11	Anna Speaks about the Christ Child	Luke 2:36–38

# THE BOY JESUS

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Ecclesiastes 3:1–15;  
Luke 2:39–52

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

This week we move to the Gospel of Luke and go back in narrative time for the only story in which we meet Jesus in his boyhood. Luke dates from about the same period as Matthew and also draws from both Mark and Q (a collection of sayings). The author, who we believe composed both Luke and Acts, wrote for educated Greek-speaking Gentiles like himself. Although his background was not Jewish, and he did not always present Jewish practices with accuracy, the author nevertheless drew a thread through the history of Israel to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There are a number of famous characters and stories found only in Luke, including Zacchaeus, the Persistent Widow, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan. They ask us to reconsider what we believe about community and privilege. This story from Jesus' childhood creates its own upheaval in our assumptions about wisdom, who can have it, and when it may be shared.

The Gospel begins in classic Greek style. The first act concerns the conception and birth of John the Baptist and features a meeting between his mother, Elizabeth, and her cousin, Mary, who is also pregnant. Jesus is connected through Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, to the elite and historic priesthood of Israel. Yet Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), lets us know that his ministry will not uphold the establishment but rather will lift up the lowly. Jesus' concern for the poor and marginalized is the strongest theme in Luke's Gospel. As many pastors would note, they are sometimes accused of preaching politics when they simply read from the Gospel of Luke.

*Holy God, when you agitate our spirits with wisdom from unexpected sources, settle us into new awareness. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b; Luke 2:39–52

**3:1** For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

.....

<sup>7b</sup>A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

.....

**2:39** When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

<sup>41</sup>Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup>And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup>When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. <sup>44</sup>Assuming 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. <sup>45</sup>When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. <sup>46</sup>After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup>And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup>When his parents saw him they were astonished; 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.” <sup>49</sup>He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” <sup>50</sup>But they did not understand what he said to them. <sup>51</sup>Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

<sup>52</sup>And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT TIMING

**E**cclesiastes includes one of the best-known pieces of Scripture in the Bible, so famous it found its way into The Byrds’ song “Turn, Turn, Turn.” The wisdom writer speaks to us of time in two senses. The word “seasons” evokes the planting and harvesting of a farming culture. A time to weep and a time to laugh may make us think



of phases of life when sadness overwhelmed us and of times when we felt carefree, as if anything might be possible. Sometimes read at funerals, in that setting the text points to the long arc of life, from our youth to our maturity to our waning toward death. In that context, the passage feels reassuring; there is a time for everything. Perhaps that timing is beyond our control.

Ecclesiastes connects to the story of the boy Jesus in the Temple in the specific phrase, “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” Some of us may have been raised in the era of “children should be seen and not heard.” It is important to note not only that Jesus went somewhere without telling Mary and Joseph, but that he went to a place where a twelve-year-old boy would not have been particularly welcome to speak. During Jesus’ time, he would have reached maturity at the age of thirteen according to Jewish law, but at that time, there was no temple ceremony celebrating his Bar Mitzvah.

If we compare the depiction of twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple to his counterpart in John 2, there is a fascinating contrast. John’s Jesus is nudged by his mother to a sign of power he is reluctant to reveal; it is not the time yet, he says. Luke’s Jesus takes his mother by surprise; she knows very well who he is to be, but the timing is in his hands.

A season can also suggest a moment in time, a crucial intersection of the right timing and the right circumstances that shows we have arrived at a crossroads. Beth remembers a contentious congregational meeting during which accusations flew and power players in the church community said things she knew were simply not true. She stepped out and went to the ladies room, where she looked at herself in the mirror, right in the eye, and asked herself, “Who am I going to be?” Sometimes we keep silent to lessen the damage, or to protect the system for the overall good. Sometimes we keep silent to shield ourselves.

Beth returned to the meeting and lined up at a microphone. When her turn came to speak, she told the truth.



**What season is it in your life? Are you called to be silent or to speak?**

## MY FATHER’S BUSINESS

The novelist Anne Rice, perhaps best known for her vampire stories, also wrote a two-part fiction series beginning with *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (2005), which imagined Jesus as a

boy learning to harness his cosmic powers. She drew from the Gospel of Luke to describe a young Jesus already on the side of the underdog. When he encounters a bully, he uses his powers both to strike the boy down and to bring him back to life, a story Rice drew from ancient tales understood to be invented as a sort of early version of what we now call fan fiction.

Luke's author might be considered to have done the same in telling a story about twelve-year-old Jesus, since it has no other known source. If so, he hopes to show us something crucial about Jesus before turning to his recounting of stories found in the other Gospels as well. For Luke's audience, Christian converts influenced by Greek literature, the exceptional wisdom of a young person would be a familiar indicator that he is a true hero.

The generations that grew up hearing the King James Version of Luke 2 might remember the now-archaic sounding translation of Jesus' reproof to his mother in verse 49: "And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" Contrary to the apocryphal stories, Jesus doesn't center this revelation on actions, such as bringing another child back from the dead. Instead his business concerns the Temple, understood as a place not only where God would be discussed by scholars but a place where God could be seen by the priests in the Holy of Holies. Jesus shows himself in the Temple.

Mary, as we have read earlier in the Gospel, will ponder these things in her heart, but surely this felt like the undeniable confirmation of what was to come. We find him firmly replying to his mother, who recounts the terrible worry she felt while she and his father spent three days searching for him. Jesus wonders why she didn't know he would be in his (heavenly) Father's house, making it clear he knows who he is and that he knows she knows too. Her son will not take up his earthly father's business; instead, Jesus will claim his divine identity.

**?** This story about Jesus includes the Temple priests, Mary and Joseph, Jesus, and the unnamed relatives, friends, and fellow travelers who heard the alarm sounded and helped look for the boy. Who do you identify with in the story?

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

I was the child who had to arrange the remotely-controlled TV antenna for my family, so I am not a stranger to the idea that there are technological skills one generation may have that the



older folks do not. My youngest regularly helps his grandmother with the settings on her iPad, and in my work for a nonprofit that takes place primarily online, I note I am less interested these days in gaining new computer skills.

I want to think, however, that I have retained general knowledge such as that tested on the television show *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?*<sup>1</sup> When I took an online quiz that used actual questions from the show, I scored 9 out of 12, which the website tells me would have been enough to win, and I would note that one of the wrong answers about geography occurred due to a loss of control of the cursor on my laptop. But the two math questions I got completely wrong. I can still do basic arithmetic, but even the upper elementary level math concepts tested on the show have left my brain.

While we might be willing to admit that young people have superior technical skill and school-taught knowledge that surpasses what might have been retained by their elders, the Gospel story shows us a young person with wisdom so impressive that his elders, not just in years but in religious authority, accept him as a peer in their conversations. He does not only listen and ask questions; the teachers are “amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47).

When I need a shift in perspective, I often find my children, who range in age from their mid-teen years to their early thirties, open the window to a different view. My friend Nancy, a grandmother in her eighties, loved Facebook because it allowed her to see photos of her grandchildren and to keep up with their activities both nearby and far away. She grew increasingly distressed, however, as political conversation turned to debates and then arguments between her friends and neighbors. At a family gathering, she announced, “I will miss seeing what you are all up to, but I am going to give up Facebook. It is too stressful for me.”

Hearing her grandmother’s regretful tone, fifteen-year-old Grace made a suggestion. “Why don’t you just join Instagram and follow us there? Then you will only see the pictures.”

Sometimes the answers that amaze us come from a perspective we cannot access alone.

### **When have you learned something from an uncannily wise younger person?**

1. Find a sample quiz here: [www.buzzfeed.com/staceygrant/who-actually-remembers-this-stuff?](http://www.buzzfeed.com/staceygrant/who-actually-remembers-this-stuff?).

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Luke 2:51 echoes Luke 2:19.
2. Jesus' interaction with the Temple scholars is consistent with the affirmation in Ecclesiastes 3:7b.
3. Jews were required to make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year: Passover/Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:6, 15–20, etc.), Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15–21; etc.), and Tabernacles (Exodus 23:16b; 34:22; etc.). Therefore the Temple was a familiar place to Jesus by the time he was twelve (Luke 2:41–42).
4. “Be in my Father’s house” can also be translated “be involved in my Father’s affairs” and “be among those belonging to my Father.” In either case, Jesus’ response indicates awareness that relationship with the heavenly Father was of greater importance than the earthly one of Mary’s question in Luke 2:48.
5. Luke tells us that Jesus was raised by a devout Jewish family. His presence in the Temple with the teachers further shows his foundation in the law and prophets.
6. Contrary to traditional interpretations, Jesus does not teach the elders; rather, he impresses them with his questions. Wisdom is exercised through cogent questions.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jul. 13	Jesus Restores Leader’s Daughter to Life	Mark 5:35–43
<b>T</b>	Jul. 14	Samaritans Testify to Wisdom of Jesus	John 4:27–29, 39–42
<b>W</b>	Jul. 15	All Wisdom Dwells in Christ	Colossians 2:1–5
<b>Th</b>	Jul. 16	Jesus Denounces Human Traditions	Mark 7:1–8
<b>F</b>	Jul. 17	God’s Wisdom Trumps Human Commands	Mark 7:9–15
<b>Sa</b>	Jul. 18	The Heart Not the Stomach Defiles	Mark 7:17–23

# WISDOM THAT ASTOUNDS AND OFFENDS

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:1–6; 7:1–23

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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 this wisdom that has been given to him? . . . And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:2–3)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

The Gospel of Mark appeared before the other three, and scholars date it to 70 CE, the same year of the Siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Roman army. Written to be read aloud in *koiné* Greek, a common form of the language that would have been broadly understood by listeners, this Gospel gives us the most human portrayal of Jesus. It seems he only begins to understand his identity at the time of his baptism in chapter 1. The early chapters of the Gospel show Jesus and his newly-called disciples ministering in Capernaum and the surrounding towns. He tangles with religious leaders, performs dramatic healings, draws huge crowds for his teaching, and raises a young girl from the dead before he makes a trip home to Nazareth in chapter 6.

Mark’s Gospel is intricately composed, with the transfiguration (chapter 9) at its exact center. It is the only time in Mark that his followers see Jesus in a divine form. After that, he asks his most trusted disciples to keep his identity a secret. This Jesus is both a bit esoteric and profoundly down-to-earth. While later editors tacked on an ending combining familiar events from the other Gospels with some more obscure tales, the oldest versions end at 16:8 with the women finding the tomb empty and then running away, too afraid to tell anyone what they have seen. This sense of disbelief and shock seems to mirror the feelings Jesus’ Jewish followers must have experienced after fleeing Jerusalem, as they dwelt in the same kind of in-between space his disciples inhabited before they saw the resurrected Christ.

*Holy One, help us to find ourselves in the Gospel story, in our belief and in our disbelief. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Mark 6:1–6

**6:1** [Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. <sup>2</sup>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 this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! <sup>3</sup>Is 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. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” <sup>5</sup>And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. <sup>6</sup>And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT GOING HOME

Jesus goes home to Nazareth in this week’s lesson, where he gets the kind of hostile welcome anyone might dread on a return to familiar places. How will our family, old friends, and neighbors respond to us? What will they think of the work we do, or the clothes we wear, or the partner we hope to marry? Jesus’ prior encounter with his family in chapter 3 had them wondering, along with a group of religious leaders dispatched from Jerusalem to check on his activities, whether he might be possessed by demons.

*You Can’t Go Home Again* is a novel by Thomas Wolfe about this same problem. His central character, also a writer, has written a successful novel about his hometown. Incensed at their portrayal, the neighbors send him angry letters that include threats on his life. While no one tries to harm Jesus physically in Mark’s Gospel, the parallel story in Luke tells us the hometown synagogue crowd tried to throw him off a cliff! Even without a show of violence, their resentment is palpable. That they call him “Son of Mary” in verse 3 shows they intended to insult him, since men were generally called the sons of their fathers. Even though there is no birth narrative in Mark, the implication that there were questions about who fathered Jesus is found here.

Neither Nazareth nor its residents sounds particularly progressive, and it was certainly not cosmopolitan. Jesus came from a small, poor, Jewish town, and like many other small towns, the Gospel suggests it operated with an understanding that people keep to their place. Jesus left them as a regular worker; when he came back and started teaching in the synagogue, he upset the larger family system of the town.

Although the Gospel does not specify the themes of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue, the extended portion of our lesson in chapter 7 unpacks some of the ideas Jesus preached that would have doubtless upset his old neighbors. In chapter 7, the Pharisees question his religious hygiene. Why don't your followers wash according to the rituals we all hold as important? He has a question for them in return: Why can't you see that the real hygiene problem is with what comes out of your mouth, not what goes into it?

Nobody likes to hear that kind of thing. When the identity or beliefs of someone we thought we knew turn out to be different than we assumed, it can shift our relationships and be hard to accept. The people of Nazareth may be more like us than not.

 **Have you been through a shift of identity or purpose? How did others respond?**

## GUT REACTION

Sometimes even the people who grew up with us, who went to school with us, who had the same Sunday School teachers, who lived under the same roof with us, who were born from the same mothers or who were raised by us do not believe what we know to be the truth. Whether it is the team we cheer, the party we support, or the diet we follow, we can sometimes get hot under the collar about our differences of opinion, even and perhaps especially with the people we know best.

When Jesus sat down in the synagogue and started teaching in Mark 6, he found himself in that kind of situation. People started “roasting” or trash-talking him, as a middle school student might say, using some classic forms of the takedown genre. Who does he think he is? What makes him think he is so great? They knew him, and all his family. He was nothing special. He had a mother, and four brothers, and some sisters not even worth naming. After all, they had watched him grow up, right there in town.

In the NRSV, the people take “offense,” and Jesus is “amazed at their unbelief.” The choice of words makes the encounter sound more genteel than raucous, like the cool disdain we might expect in a disagreement at the country club. But in a more recent translation aimed at choosing words in common usage today, the Common English Bible employs more visceral word choices to describe the feelings of the two parties to the disagreement. “They were repulsed by him and fell into sin,” reads this translation, and “He was appalled by their disbelief” (Mark 6:3b and 6:6, emphasis mine). The Greek ἐσκανδαλίζοντο (*eskandalizonto*) is the word for how the townsfolk react. They were scandalized, and they shook up Jesus with their response. We might note that “appalled” is also a strong word. It is more common to translate that word as he “wondered” or “marveled” at their unbelief.

This encounter distressed both Jesus and his lifelong neighbors in a physical sense. There was a gut reaction, a recoil, a denial of who Jesus really was, which could be both the cause and the outcome of their fall into sin, another very physical word. When we react passionately against a person or an idea, we may feel the same way, unable to act the way we prefer or do the things that matter to us. Even Jesus experienced a diminishment of his powers, although he still managed to heal a few sick people before he wisely moved on to teach in other towns.

 **How do you handle yourself when someone gets under your skin?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

“Shake it off.”

Long before Taylor Swift sang them, those were the mild words of my father, whether I suffered a skinned knee or a disappointed heart or an outraged mind. “Shake it off” was his advice no matter what injury or offense life brought my way. But how could I shake it off when I got the blame for something my little brother did, or the girls in my class picked on me?

If we look ahead to see what happened next in Mark 6, we find Jesus sent out the twelve and shared a key piece of wisdom when he told them what to do if they received the same rejection he faced in Nazareth. He told them to keep moving, to shake the dust off, to focus their efforts where people might actually listen.



“Shake it off,” he must have said to himself too. Shake the dust off your sandals as a witness when people cannot, or will not, hear what you are telling them. If they won’t listen to you, if they can’t offer you the decency of basic hospitality and a fair hearing, shake the dust off and keep moving.

We might picture the disciples and think they only had to shake off the rejection of strangers. It’s harder when we’re trying to tell the truth to people who know us, especially when they have known us all our lives. It’s hard to talk about something that means everything to us when the people who should understand reject us.

That is exactly what the disciples faced and the reason Jesus gave them the advice he did.

He didn’t send them to Egypt or Syria or Asia on their first solo missions to spread the word. He sent them to places that were within walking distance, places where people would recognize them, places where their third cousins, or their wives’ uncles, or their more successful older brothers lived. Those were the people who would close the doors in their faces.

The people following Jesus were not that different from us. We just have more ways to have our feelings hurt by the people who know us best. We can slight each other at home and at church, just like they did, and in the marketplace, but we’ve added email, voicemail, Facebook, and text messages.

If we find ourselves rejected when we know we have good news to share, we can remember the wisdom of Jesus: Shake it off. Then take the message to the next person who needs to hear it.

 **How do you know when a determined effort is faithful and when you are just trying to win a fight?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Whereas Matthew and Mark say that Jesus went to his hometown and began to teach in their synagogue (Matthew 13:54–58; Mark 6:1–6), Luke portrays Jesus as making a formal sermonic presentation in the synagogue, reading from the Book of Isaiah and expounding on the Scripture and its fulfillment in himself (Luke 4:16–29). In all three Gospels the people are both astounded and offended at him.



2. Jesus’ teaching and preaching are very sharp and critical especially of religious leaders who have varied from the truth of God. This style reflects what the writer of Hebrews says of the word of God: “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” (Hebrews 4:12–13).
3. The Greek word *tekton* (v. 3) can mean carpenter, woodworker, and also one who builds with stone.
4. “Son of Mary” may be an insult: people were known by their father’s name, not their mother’s.
5. Verse 4 indicates that Jesus is among the prophets, whose message from God is rejected by their own people.
6. Mark 7:9–13—*korban*. A child could, per the aural Torah, declare possessions to be *korban*, i.e., an offering to God. The commandment to “Honor your father and mother” was interpreted as giving parents a right to a child’s possessions. Making possessions *korban* circumvented a child’s obligations to his parents under the Law.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jul. 20	Wisdom, Source of Abundant Life	Proverbs 3:13–18
<b>T</b>	Jul. 21	Jesus Does What the Father Does	John 5:19–24
<b>W</b>	Jul. 22	Love as I Loved You	John 13:31–35
<b>Th</b>	Jul. 23	Spirit of Truth Dwells in You	John 14:15–17
<b>F</b>	Jul. 24	Love Binds Believers to God	John 14:18–24
<b>Sa</b>	Jul. 25	Spirit of Wisdom Promised to All	John 14:25–31

# WISDOM: THE WAY, TRUTH, AND LIFE

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 3:17; 8:32–36; John 14:1–14

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In the Gospel of John, we find a version of Jesus very different from the one we studied last week in Mark. John’s Jesus never has a doubt or question about who he is in relationship to God. He is the Word, in the beginning with God before there was a beginning. He is part of God. As he states in John 10:20, “The Father and I are one.” Yet he finds himself with the same human disciples who have the same kinds of questions as the disciples in the other Gospels and the same trouble understanding who he is and what he wants them to do.

John is believed to have the latest composition date among the Gospels, somewhere between 85 CE and the early years of the second century. We have no solid evidence for the location of what we call the Johannine community, but reading between the lines suggests struggles with the synagogue. Unfortunately, John has been used to justify anti-Semitism, although the conflict would have been theological, not racial, since John’s first readers would largely have been Jewish Christians. When reading the Gospel of John, consider replacing references to “the Jews” with “religious leaders” or “religious authorities.”

Wherever and whenever John was written, it includes several beloved stories that enrich our sense of Jesus’ life and ministry, stories not found in the other three Gospels. These include the lengthy encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, the vivid story of the Man Born Blind and the religious leaders who questioned his healing, and the raising of Mary’s and Martha’s brother Lazarus after he had been in the tomb for three days.

*Loving God, as we continue our study of your word in the Gospel of John, enlighten us and inspire us to follow your way. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

John 14:1-14

**14:1** “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In 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? <sup>3</sup>And 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. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

<sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” <sup>9</sup>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’? <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Very 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. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT FAREWELLS

**W**hen we bid farewell to people we love, particularly those we have nurtured or mentored, it feels natural to share with them the things we believe are most important. Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon who had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, gave a “Last Lecture.” The concept of the lecture would be theoretical for most professors who have given them, based in the notion of having one final opportunity to tell their students what they want them to know. Pausch, knowing his time was actually limited, shared the things

he wanted his young children to know, including stories from his life and the lessons he wanted them to learn but would not survive to teach them.

John's Gospel gives us a very different start to the night we now call Maundy Thursday than the other Gospels. Instead of the breaking of bread and the sharing of a cup, the ritual action at supper in John 13 is the washing of feet. Jesus' last lecture began with a demonstration of servant leadership. Then he offered his parting thoughts to his friends, a speech which goes on for the next four chapters. Like Ecclesiastes 3, a portion of which appeared in our lesson two weeks ago, the first few verses of John 14 often appear in funeral services. They feel appropriate not just because Jesus speaks of the place he goes to prepare for us, but because they are part of his long goodbye to the disciples known as the Farewell Discourse.

Jesus spoke knowing that he would not have ongoing opportunities to teach his followers. Later that night he would be arrested and put on trial; the next day he would be crucified. When Jesus explained in the final verses of chapter 13 that he would be leaving and they could not follow him, the disciples reacted in distress. Chapter 14 thus begins with words of comfort. Jesus offers an assurance that he will expand on later in the Farewell Discourse, saying that even though they won't see him for a while, they will see him again. "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (v. 1).

In the church we turn to these words when we need comfort. As mourners we build on the image of many dwelling places to envision where our loved ones might be in spirit, a place where we someday hope to join them. He's going ahead to prepare a place for them. In his Father's house there are many dwelling places, many mansions, enough room for all of us.

 **What words of wisdom would you want to share with your loved ones if time were short?**

### **"I HAVE A QUESTION"**

**W**hat do you suppose would have happened if Jesus had stopped speaking after verse 3 of John 14? If he had spoken his words of assurance without adding that the disciples knew the way to where he was going, would that have been the end of the Farewell Discourse? Will you, readers, grow frustrated if every sentence in this section of the lesson ends with a question mark?


At my house, the brief sentence, “I have a question,” comes out of the mouth of our youngest son at least daily, and usually many times a day. What seemed like a developmental phase when he was younger began to look later like a personality quirk. As parents we have worked through our own phases, from thinking it was cute, to wondering why he did not seem to trust our answers, to concluding that the questioning is a feature, not a bug. He wants to know things and gain clarity, so naturally our boy has a lot of questions.

Thomas asks the question the rest of the disciples probably shared. They have no idea where Jesus is going. Without knowing the destination, they cannot find the route. Afraid he will be left behind, Thomas assumes there is an itinerary, but Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. The way is not geographical.

Philip does not put his statement in the form of a question, but he is asking one too. Just show us, he says, as if he missed the remarks Jesus made at the Temple in chapter 10. Jesus and the Father are one. If you have seen Jesus, you have seen God. What looks straightforward in sentence construction still baffles the disciples. And who can blame them? We have the benefit of almost two thousand years of studying these stories, and Christians today still have more to learn.

We might find it encouraging that Jesus surrounded himself with disciples who regularly said, “I have a question.” Some Christian traditions discourage questions. Wisdom is dispensed, and people are expected to listen, believe, and behave accordingly. Yet the gospels show acts of great faith expressed in the form of a question. Thomas in chapter 14, like Peter in the previous chapter, shows that asking for an explanation can help us reach a truer understanding.

In the tradition of Proverbs, Jesus taught through stories, images, and figures of speech, not lists of directions or explicit requirements. He presses us to follow him, not to follow a map. Gaining from his wisdom requires our willingness to consider possibilities, develop interpretations, gain insight, and then to do it all again.

 **What questions do you have about your faith?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**A**t a church in a central Atlantic city, the confirmation class has included children from families with both Jewish and

Christian parents. The kids have attended worship and religious education in both traditions. Church leaders have decided to prioritize relationship with these families that are part of their faith community rather than drawing a hard line. The Jewish kids write a statement of faith at the end of the class, just like their Christian counterparts, but it is not a Christian statement, and they do not join the church. The pastor admits that it is both in line with the congregation's inclusive values yet also very complicated.

The pastor's colleagues wondered with him whether there were more potential problems than benefits. Having read today's passage, you may be wondering how it could work at all. Isn't Jesus the way, according to John 14? This sounds like an irreconcilable difference, not just with our Jewish friends, but with people of other faiths and no faith at all.

It is easy to see how one verse has formed the basis for centuries of religious prejudice and persecution against Jewish people. John 14:6 seems to give permission for absolute thinking, a sort of "my way or the highway" approach. John's Gospel as a whole has been employed against Jewish people historically and even today is offered up as an indictment against them in some Christian thinking. If Christians can be so hostile to the faith practiced by Jesus himself, it is little wonder that some also express religious prejudice toward Muslims, Buddhists, and believers in other religions.

Sometimes Christians accuse other Christians of getting it wrong too. How can we counteract such hostility?

On 9/11, moved by an interfaith service at her home church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the late Edie Howe wanted to start the kind of dialogue that would promote understanding. Along with her pastor, the Rev. Dr. Mary Luti, and a college professor, Anne Minton, she founded Daughters of Abraham,<sup>1</sup> a book group that has grown to forty chapters in fifteen states. Membership is open to women who are committed to the life of faith in any of the three Abrahamic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The organization's guidelines require that Christians be no more than half of each local group. The books chosen encourage discussion of faith practices with a goal of deep, mutual understanding. Dr. Luti, in an interview with Tony Robinson, said, "We want to

1. [daughtersofabraham.com/](http://daughtersofabraham.com/).

develop an appreciative understanding of one another's faith as a way of life."<sup>1</sup>

That sounds like a higher way.

 **What have you learned about another faith that surprised you?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Jesus' words and proclamations in John 14:1–14 offer similarities to Wisdom's speech in Proverbs 8:1–36.
2. Chapters 14–17 are known as The Farewell Discourse of Jesus. Jesus bequeaths wisdom and power to the disciples.
3. John 14 shows the difficulty the disciples had in understanding Jesus. These things he spoke of were very new to them and hard to perceive. They asked questions to get clarity, but they would only later come to a better understanding.
4. The unity of the Father and the Son (14:11) is a recurrent theme in John's Gospel.
5. Jesus as truth in John 14:6 aligns with "the truth" in 1:14.
6. Verse 13: "in my name" means to ask as Jesus' representative rather than invoking the name *Jesus* as a kind of magic spell.

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Jul. 27	Suffering on Behalf of the Church	Colossians 1:24–29
<b>T</b>	Jul. 28	Saved by God's Mercy	Titus 3:3–7
<b>W</b>	Jul. 29	Ask: God Will Supply Your Needs	Luke 11:9–13
<b>Th</b>	Jul. 30	Rejoice in Your Sufferings	Romans 5:1–5
<b>F</b>	Jul. 31	God's Loving Actions toward Sinners	Romans 5:6–11
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 1	Grass Withers But God's Word Stands	Isaiah 40:1–8

1. Anthony B. Robinson, "Articles of Faith: Daughters of Abraham Live in Each Other's Faith," Seattlepi.com, [www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Articles-of-Faith-Daughters-of-Abraham-live-in-1276517.php](http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/Articles-of-Faith-Daughters-of-Abraham-live-in-1276517.php).



# FAITH AND WISDOM

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 1:1–11

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. (James 1:5)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

The final five sessions of our study of Wisdom concern the Epistle of James. This letter is categorized as a general epistle because it does not appear to have been written to a particular church among the faith communities established by Jewish Christians in dispersion. Unlike Paul's letters, then, it does not address controversies unique to a specific group of people but rather dispenses general wisdom for the faithful. It is a bit of a hybrid, a wisdom text that begins like a letter, with a salutation, but does not have the closing we find in other epistles.

Scholars consider the likely identification for the letter-writer to be James, the brother of Jesus, or someone writing in his name. Many scholars date the book within his lifetime (James was martyred in 69 CE), but its dating is speculative and ranges from the 40s CE to the second century. We know from the book of Acts that James became the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem and a major player in the dispute over whether circumcision and other Jewish religious practices should be required for Gentile converts (Acts 15). The epistle does not take on such controversial topics but sticks to more basic expectations for Christians, particularly the care we show for others.

Martin Luther did not like the letter from James, with its emphasis on actions as a measure of righteousness. In the coming weeks we will examine the claims made by James and attempt to acknowledge both the wisdom and the theological challenges found in this ancient text. Which matters most for Christians, our faith or our works?

*Saving God, give us the lively minds of enthusiastic students and grace with each other as our conversations unfold. We ask in the name of the Great Teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

James 1:1–11

**1:1** James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:  
Greetings.

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

<sup>5</sup>If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. <sup>6</sup>But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; <sup>7,8</sup>for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

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

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT DOUBT


**T**he opening verses of James include a harsh description of people who doubt (vv. 7–8). Because last week’s lesson emphasized the importance of asking questions, we will want to consider how intellectual and spiritual curiosity both resemble and differ from doubt in the life of faith. We will also want to consider potential harm these verses might do in our faith communities.

James writes that God will give us wisdom if we ask for it, but we know from reading the Gospels that even with Jesus in the room, the disciples did not always understand what he tried to tell them. Their questions might have been frustrating, as a child’s can be to a parent, but asking for explanations and wrestling with the Scripture to better comprehend its meaning are time-honored and faithful spiritual pursuits. Asking a question for deeper understanding does not necessarily equate to having doubts.

Doubt in Scripture is inextricably tied to the story of Thomas in John 20, who missed the first appearance the risen Christ made to the disciples in the upper room. We might wonder whether Thomas doubted the resurrection or perhaps whether he doubted his own place among the disciples, having been left out of an important event. When Thomas saw him there a week later, Christ taught that deep faith can require believing even what we cannot see, a challenge we face as Christians today.

He did not teach that Thomas or others who had doubts were “double-minded and unstable,” as James does. It would be helpful to know where the writer was coming from. The word “double-minded” does not appear elsewhere in Scripture, and some scholars view it as having been invented by the writer of the letter. Did James speak from experience with a double-crosser who harmed the early Christian community?

Without context, we can only evaluate the words themselves. They seem to leave no room for doubt at all and describe God as favoring the confident claimants while cutting off the doubtful. Those words may sound especially concerning if we know and care for neighbors, friends, or family members who struggle with mental illness and if we suffer from them ourselves. Doubt about faith matters or one’s place in the faith community can be among the cognitive distortions that plague people who live with depression or anxiety. We will want to take care in discussing this assertion by James and show empathy for those who may be harmed by hearing the words as exclusionary. James’s assertion must not be the last word on doubt or God’s response to it.

 **How would you describe the difference between having questions and having doubts?**

## **NOTHING BUT JOY**

**A**lthough the letter from James became part of the Christian canon, its teaching does not recount any of the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It does, however, include themes familiar from the Pauline epistles and 1 Peter. James echoes their encouragement to the faithful in adversity. They all agree that we can grow in our faith by developing endurance in suffering. What sounds acceptable in the second person—finding joy in a test of your faith—can read as much harder in the first person—

finding joy in a test of mine. To embrace this, we might want to consider the experiences of leaders among the early Christians, some of whom went to prison, while others died for their beliefs. They held onto their faith in Jesus Christ while under threat, and at the same time they both spread the good news and began to organize the communities of faith they led. Working for something we believe deeply can inspire us to stay in the struggle and help us to feel close to the God we follow.

We might also think of people we know whose faith carries them through difficulties we have never experienced. Consider the young widow who writes about her sense of loss but never seems defeated by it, although that is not the same thing as never feeling it. Her honesty about the process of adjusting with her children to a new life she never wanted reveals both the challenges she faces and the joy she finds in her family.

It is not unusual to turn to God and ask for help when we are faced with ultimate questions. For most of us, however, the trials of life take more ordinary form. We face disappointments in love, conflict in the workplace, too much or not enough money, or the decline in health or ability that comes as we age. We may understate how hard those things feel, even when they are commonplace; we may think they do not rise to the level of a test. What would it be like to give our less dramatic life conflicts and endeavors the respect we give to larger trials? Seeking wisdom from God helps us mature in faith in all circumstances.

Hard times in life come to all of us, sometimes for no reason we can see, and other times because of the actions of the people in our lives or the circumstances of the world. God does not set these tests for us, but God will help us find and develop the inner qualities we need to mature in spirit.

 **When have you called on God for wisdom in a particular situation?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**W**hen we read the final verses of this week's passage, we might remember the early days of the Christian community in Jerusalem as described in Acts 2, where the believers "held all things in common," making sure that they met the needs of the least advantaged. We also hear echoes of Jesus and his formula of the first being last and the last being first in James's imagery for believers who are poor and those who are rich. Those

without will be raised up and those with it all will wilt like flowers.

In the United States, our culture values both individualism and financial success, both of which conflict with the message James conveys and the teachings of Jesus. It would surprise us to hear of a local congregation in which members hold all assets in common. There are very few Protestant movements where people live in intentional community and share resources. One example is Shane Claiborne's The Simple Way, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> In 1995, a group of college students sought to show solidarity with a group of homeless moms and children who took action by refusing to leave the shelter of a Catholic church. A few years later, those students moved into the same neighborhood to form a spiritual community. After twenty years of growth, they continue to hold resources in common and serve the neighborhood, with an emphasis on care for those in need.

Not only do Protestant Christians prefer to manage their own resources, they don't even come close to tithing in their giving. A 2014 study indicates mainline Protestants give on average 2.54 percent of their income to their churches, and evangelical Protestants' giving was not much higher, at 3.2 percent. While giving by individuals is down in both categories over the past thirty years, Evangelical giving is declining at a faster pace. A current concern for churches is the impact on giving caused by a change in US tax laws, as fewer people itemize deductions and have lost the past benefits of charitable giving.

The truth is that both an ancient story, such as Jesus' statement about the first and last, and the changes in the tax code will sound different to us depending on our own economic status. We might be afraid to be called up to the front of the crowd. We might need that deduction to justify giving or giving as much as we have done. That might be smart, but would it be wise?

**?** How do you think the members of your congregation would feel about living in community like the early Christians in Acts? What aspect of sharing resources sounds appealing? What could be a deal breaker?

1. [www.thesimpleway.org/our-story](http://www.thesimpleway.org/our-story).

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Most likely the James who wrote this book is “James, the Lord’s brother” (see Galatians 1:19).
2. Verse 2 represents the first of fourteen times James addresses his readers as “brothers” (or “brothers and sisters”; Greek, *adelphoi*). See 1:16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 10, 12, 19 (except the NRSV does not translate *adelphoi* in 1:16, 19; 5:7, 10, 12).
3. James’s perspective on trials’ producing character echoes that of Paul (Romans 5:3) and of Peter (1 Peter 1:6).
4. The description “double-minded” is unique in the New Testament and ancient Greek literature. Some biblical scholars believe that James coined the term.
5. Verses 9 and 10 reflect Jesus’ warnings about the difficulty (impossibility) of the rich to be saved as well as the concept of the first being last and the last first (cf. Matthew 19:23–30).

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 3	Impartial Relationships with One Another	Leviticus 19:13–18
<b>T</b>	Aug. 4	Praised for Steadfast Faith in Persecution	2 Thessalonians 1:3–5, 11–12
<b>W</b>	Aug. 5	The Poor Blessed; the Rich Criticized	Luke 6:20–26
<b>Th</b>	Aug. 6	Suffering for Doing the Right Thing	1 Peter 3:13–19
<b>F</b>	Aug. 7	God’s Choice—the Foolish, Weak, Lowly	1 Corinthians 1:26–31
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 8	Treat the Rich and Poor Impartially	James 2:1–7

# HEARING AND DOING THE WORD

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 1:19–27

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

But be doers of  
the word, and not  
merely hearers who  
deceive themselves.  
(James 1:22)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Many weeks ago we considered the wisdom handed down to us in pithy phrases by our elders. One so well-known it has come to permeate our culture is “God helps those who help themselves.” Some people believe it is in the Bible, but that is incorrect. The phrasing we know best comes from Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Like the *Old Farmer’s Almanac* today, Franklin’s almanac included weather predictions and astronomical data, but it is best-known for Franklin’s proverbs. As a deist, Franklin believed in a hands-off creator who did not intervene in human life. The proverb can be traced to Aesop’s fable “Hercules and the Wagoner,” in which a man cries out for assistance when his horses cannot pull his wagon out of the mud. Hercules replies, “Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel.” The moral of the fable: The gods help those who help themselves.

The whole of Christian Scripture speaks in contrast. Jesus calls us to care for the poor, the sick, the naked, and those in prison. He warns us that unless we do, we will go to The Bad Place, as it is called on the NBC TV show *The Good Place*. While the show does not espouse a particular religion, its discussion of moral philosophy as a guide for life emphasizes the interdependence of humankind. The writers lean on the work of philosopher T. M. Scanlon in his book *What We Owe to Each Other*. In the show’s universe, every person’s actions will be scored after death to determine their ultimate destination. Harmful actions take points away, while acts of generosity add to our score. It is not our beliefs that count, but the things we do.

*Saving God, help us to see the difference between our beliefs and our actions. Amen.*





## SCRIPTURE

James 1:19–27

**1:19** You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore 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.

<sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>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.

<sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>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.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT DOING


**M**etuchen is an upper-middle-class borough in central New Jersey, surrounded entirely by the larger township of Edison. To its residents, it feels protected more than geographically. The population of over thirteen thousand is politically moderate. The public schools are highly rated, and crime there is 51 percent below the national average. Metuchen’s small downtown includes the kinds of businesses and services favored by commuters using its nearby train station: a farmer’s market, restaurants serving Thai and Greek and pizza, a deli, a pub, a wine store, and—of course—a coffee shop serving local coffee and tea and featuring live music by local artists.

Cai’s Cafe calls itself “Metuchen’s living room,” and on any given day you might find people of all ages grabbing coffee, sitting quietly with their laptops, meeting with friends or colleagues, or dropping by to hang out after school. When a man carrying a camera started talking to a pair of young teens, asking if they had ever modeled, an older woman waiting for a friend at

the next table immediately sensed something was wrong. She tried to intervene gently, asking questions of the photographer. Her friend arrived just as the girls walked out the door with him. The two women quickly conferred and followed them to the sidewalk, arguing with the man. There they learned that the scene had been staged and they were being filmed for television.

Since 2008, John Quiñones has been the host of the hidden-camera show on ABC called *What Would You Do?* The show creates scenarios intended to provoke people in public spaces to respond. Whether it is a photographer trying to lure young girls, a bigot mistreating a perceived member of a religious minority, or a bully threatening physical harm, the show asks viewers to consider whether they would intervene. What would be a dire enough situation to move us to action? In Metuchen, the safety of young girls felt crucial enough to the older women, yet there are some people who never get involved.

When our study began in Proverbs, we learned that the book was written as a teaching tool for a young person. First we need to learn what is right, and then we must do what is right in order to live wisely. James takes a similar angle on right living. While the letter contains faith principles, the call of the letter is to do something about what we believe. For James, the congregation sitting in the pews on Sundays that does not live out its faith in service to others misses the mark. Once you understand what your faith requires, says James, just do it.

 **When have you stepped into a situation to offer help?**

### **“THE DESERVING POOR”**

**M**y two best pastor friends are both named Kathryn. Kathryn F. is a priest in the Church of England. She previously worked for a private charity founded in the Victorian era. She described that job as a strange mixture of something she loved, which is genuine service to people in need, and something she despised, which is ego service to the upper class members of the charity’s board. The charity had been established to assist only “the deserving poor,” by which her board meant widows and orphans in need through no fault of their own.

Into her office, week in and week out, came people who truly needed help but would never have qualified under the harsh

standard set in another time. Kathryn F.'s definition of deserving included unmarried mothers, immigrants starting a new life, homeless LGBT teens, people living with addiction, and those struggling with mental health diagnoses. Surely, she thought, the "widows and orphans" category could be expanded to include them.

Kathryn J. is a Presbyterian pastor serving in a Pennsylvania suburb who admits her approach to helping people in need is less emotional and more pragmatic. The gauge in her mind often swings toward "undeserving" first. Resources are available in the community, and by agreement, local pastors avoid handing out cash or grocery store gift cards when local folk drop by asking for help.

When Kathryn J. was new in her position, she was surprised to see Connie come into the church office on a weekday with a few dollars in hand, saying, "I'm here to pay my tithe." She handed the money to the treasurer, and Kathryn J. expressed surprise when he opened his desk drawer after Connie left.

"I keep an envelope with Connie's name on it," he said. "When she comes back to ask for help, I'll give it back again."

The stack of bills in the envelope would rise and fall over the years. One day Connie asked for \$15 for groceries, but the envelope had only one dollar in it. Kathryn looked in her own wallet and found a twenty, a five, and a one. "Could you manage with \$7?" Connie explained what she needed to buy, and what it would cost exactly; she could cut the mold off the bread she got at the food pantry. Kathryn held out the twenty, but Connie said, "No, no, I couldn't take that." "Why don't you do me a favor, get me a Diet Coke and drop it off on your way back." Connie took the twenty then, gladly.

The gauge swung to "deserving," for both of them.

 **How do you weigh practicality with caring for those in need? What balance works best?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**A**t the 2019 Commencement ceremony at Morehouse College, the speaker made a stunning announcement. Billionaire Robert F. Smith told the four hundred graduates his family would create a grant to pay off all their student debt. Smith said, "On behalf of the eight generations of my family who have been

in this country, we're gonna put a little fuel in your bus. This is my class, and I know my class will pay this forward."

Morehouse estimates the student debt for this one class totals about 40 million dollars, an average of \$100,000 per graduate. Surely this was purely good news? But this is the Internet era, and while many celebrated online with the young men whose lives were changed, critique began to appear too. That's great for these graduates, said some, but what about the larger question of education costs? We need changes to our public policy to make higher education more accessible.

Elsewhere, things got petty and not a little bitter. What about the families who paid for their sons' educations, said others, how is this fair to them? Hey, you people praising Smith, don't you know how he made his money? Billionaires exploit the working class. In the Facebook and Twitter threads, beneath the posts of commentators and politicians, agitators bent the subject even further from the situation with hot takes intended to promote their own topics of interest.

In other words, a fantastic day for Morehouse grads and their families and supporters became just another opportunity for think pieces and flame wars designed to get attention for both the famous and the obscure people who make up the online community.

It is not just on the Internet that exchanges about important matters can become heated or confrontational. James warns us about the human propensity for jumping in too hastily, which suggests that people have been doing this kind of arguing forever. Here is wisdom, he says: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness" (1:19).

When conflicting opinions derail us, how do we determine what is wise counsel and what is not? We might want to consider whose opinions we tend to trust and then go both wider and deeper. We can start by naming our social location—our race, class, level of education, gender identity, orientation, political party, and faith stances. Then we can seek out the thoughts of people who do not match up with us in all those categories and, quick to listen and slow to speak, find out what they think.



**When have you been too quick to speak? When have you been quick to listen?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. Verse 19 is a proverb that James coins to provide the structure for what follows. Verses 20 and 21 expand on the third part of the proverb, with verses 22–25 on the first and verse 26 on the second.
2. The word anger here does not refer simply to the emotional reaction to wrongdoing or injustice, which can be helpful (cf. occasions when Jesus was angry). Here it seems to represent the unregulated, hurtful words people shout at others when they are angry.
3. The Greek word translated “sordidness” in verse 21 is used nowhere else in the New Testament. A form of the word appears later in James (describing the poor man’s “dirty” clothes; James 2:2) and another form appears in First Peter (describing the “dirt” on the body that baptism does not remove; 1 Peter 3:21).
4. James’s insistence that pure religion looks out for the most vulnerable (vv. 26–27) reflects the same concept as Jesus’ teaching of the sheep-and-goat judgment (Matt. 25:31–46).
5. James’s insistence that we be doers of the word and not mere hearers finds a parallel in 1 John 3:18: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 10	Abraham Blessed for Fearing God	Genesis 22:9–19
<b>T</b>	Aug. 11	Spies Saved by Rahab’s Quick Actions	Joshua 2:1–7
<b>W</b>	Aug. 12	Forgive Others like God Forgave You	Matthew 18:23–35
<b>Th</b>	Aug. 13	Devoted to Good Works, Avoiding Distractions	Titus 3:1–2, 8–11
<b>F</b>	Aug. 14	Works Guided by Loyalty to God	Deuteronomy 6:4–9
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 15	Receive God’s Mercy by Showing Mercy	James 2:8–13

# FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 2:14–26

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2:26)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Every Sunday morning for over a year, her name has been spoken during the Prayers of the People in a church in Pennsylvania, and one in Mississippi, and another in Georgia, and many others she does not even know. After a doctor sent her home saying what appeared on her lung scan was probably nothing, a year elapsed before more dramatic symptoms arose. A new doctor diagnosed that cancer had been present and growing. At first it did not seem clear whether she would survive the weekend, the week, the month. Her congregation, her friends near and far, and people she had never met began praying for her health, her spirits, and her family. They also prayed for her medical team to do its work, for the medications prescribed to be effective, and for each surgery she faced to be successful. Without action, in this case medical, she did not stand a chance of survival.

While this may seem self-evident in relation to a serious health situation, there are many other times we hear bad news and declare that those affected are in our thoughts and prayers but do not ask what we can do to resolve the situation. Thoughts are not deeds, and we may let the moment go by, excusing ourselves from action. We must think about what we believe, and we can and must pray for those in crisis, danger, and chronic need. But James does not prioritize our theological pondering or encourage our prayer practices. They are not only not enough, but they are dead to him; he declares our works are our faith.

*Holy God, as we search our minds and hearts, may we also search our gifts and skills for serving you and find opportunities to put our faith into action. Amen.*





## SCRIPTURE

James 2:14–26

**2:14** What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and 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? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

<sup>18</sup>But 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. <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. <sup>20</sup>Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? <sup>21</sup>Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. <sup>23</sup>Thus 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. <sup>24</sup>You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup>Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? <sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT WORKS

**M**artin Luther, author of the Protestant Reformation, did not care much for the letter from James. He thought the author’s themes contradicted the tradition of Paul’s teaching, and he particularly objected to the idea that Christians could be saved by anything other than faith. If we approach the epistle with Luther’s criticism in mind, we might be suspicious of the principles James declared. “Can faith save you?” This question in James 2:14 may provoke us if our faith background teaches us to rely on changes of heart or commitments of mind. James is practical. How will it help a hungry person or a person without warm clothes to say you are praying for them? For James, our actions express our faith.

Pastor Betty Rendón came to the United States from Colombia and applied for asylum. As a school principal in her home coun-



try, she faced death threats from guerrilla forces after she prevented their members from recruiting among her students. Her asylum request was denied in 2009, but no action was taken by US immigration officials. She stayed in the United States with her family, risking arrest rather than returning to Colombia to face certain death.

Over the next ten years, Betty, her husband, Carlos, and their daughter settled into lives and work. A granddaughter was born. Betty became a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was called to serve a local church, and was about to begin doctoral studies at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago when ICE agents arrested the family.<sup>1</sup> Betty was in her pajamas when agents burst into her home. It was left unlocked and then burgled before her daughter, protected by DACA, was released to return home with her five-year-old.

At the time of Pastor Betty's arrest, I was leading an online community of clergywomen from many denominations. A pastor who knows Betty personally, Rev. Emily Heitzman, reached out to me and asked if she could write something for our group's website about the family's situation. When the post<sup>2</sup> was published, it did more than tell the story and place the immigration questions in theological context. Emily made sure to include a Call to Action, with steps to take to support Pastor Betty. These included links and addresses for making donations both to a legal fund and a general expenses fund, the address of her church for sending cards and letters, the link to a petition demanding the family's release, and suggestions for supporting detained immigrants in our own communities. All of those actions are expressions of faith.



**How have you helped people in trouble? How did you know what to do?**

## RECEIPTS

James includes two references to Hebrew Scripture in this passage, arguing that Abraham (in Genesis 15 and 22) and Rahab

1. Carlos Ballesteros, "She's a DACA recipient. ICE agents still arrested her. Then they went after her parents," *Chicago Sun Times*, [chicago.suntimes.com/2019/5/21/18628337/daca-ice-chicago-detention-immigration-arrest-paula-hincapie-rendon-lutheran-school-theology](http://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/5/21/18628337/daca-ice-chicago-detention-immigration-arrest-paula-hincapie-rendon-lutheran-school-theology).
2. [revgalblogpals.org/2019/05/20/the-pastoral-is-political-free-pastor-betty-rendon/](http://revgalblogpals.org/2019/05/20/the-pastoral-is-political-free-pastor-betty-rendon/).

(in Joshua 2) exemplify the kind of faith-seen-in-works he promotes. James takes a sharp turn in his reasoning in this passage. Even if we parse the word “works” as “acts” or “deeds,” up to this point James’s emphasis has been on offering help to people in need. We may have some questions, then, about the meaning of the Abraham story he references, in which Abraham comes very close to sacrificing his son, Isaac, on an altar.

The binding of Isaac was meant to illustrate our God’s difference from the pagan gods who demanded worship through sacrifice. Perhaps James means to indicate Abraham’s active faith in God, a belief so deep that it compelled him to trust and to act on that trust even to the point of risking his long-awaited son. As twenty-first century Christians, we may find the scenario uncomfortable or even intolerable. It would be an easier connection to make if Abraham and Isaac had gone down to the soup kitchen as an example for service to the community. James may have chosen Abraham as an example because Paul did, in order to make a contrasting argument.

Rahab also stretches James’s model. She offered help to a pair of Israelite spies who had sneaked into Jericho to get the lay of the land, hiding them on the roof of her brothel. When the king’s forces came looking for the men, she lies to keep them safe. She tells the spies she knows about the destruction perpetrated on other towns. Their God must really be God! They agree to protect her extended family as long as she keeps their secret. Rahab’s testimony to God’s power is more than words; her works help preserve the Israelites.

Perhaps James meant to have his readers know that works of faith will not always be neat and tidy. We may be called to risk our own safety or the safety of those we love. Certainly James, the brother of Jesus, and the other leaders of the early church did just that. The risk may be to our bodies, but it may also be to our reputations, our social positions, or our expectations of success. It may take simpler forms, such as changing jobs, or moving, or sacrificing time and money to respond to God’s call. These actions and others like them demonstrate our trust in God and meet James’s definition of works. James is not looking for a change of heart or a new mindset; he wants receipts for what we have done.



**What risks have you taken because you trust God?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Okay then, churches. How do we know what to do so that our works will show our faith? Lots of congregations write checks, but the most life-changing faith expressions come through hands-on action. The kind of works that do the most good in the world grow out of our genuine concerns for the people around us and employ the gifts God has given us. Community organizing can provide a framework for discerning and acting on needs outside the church.

In 2006, a church in Herndon, Virginia, wondered how to respond to the increase of predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrant day laborers living and seeking work in their suburban community. A day labor center had opened to aid in placement for the workers and discourage them from hanging around in public spaces hoping to be hired. Church leaders decided to invite workers to come for lunch and went to the center with the church van. It was an experiment to which only four said yes the first day. Now three churches provide lunch followed by Spanish language worship and Bible study. They feed between 40 to 180 people weekly, in body and spirit.

Co-pastor Rev. Becca Gillespie-Messman was the new associate pastor when the work began; church members relied on her Spanish-language skills to help start the program. A decade later she teaches the community organizing principles that helped the congregation move not only to a sense of mutual understanding but also to an action plan. The foundation of community organizing is people talking to people, one at a time. A one-on-one is not an interview but a conversation in which people talk about what their interests are. (Unitarian Universalist pastor Rev. Louise Green has written a helpful article about how to organize yourself for relational meetings, “Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing.”<sup>1</sup>) Another building block is a power analysis, a careful consideration of who has influence in the congregation and could either help a new effort fly or shoot it down. It’s worth noting that people with power may or may not hold official leadership positions, and people with official leadership positions may or may not have influence.

The components of organizing are straightforward: people take the time to assess needs in the community, find their

1. [www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/greenlouise/seeds\\_relationalorg.pdf](http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/greenlouise/seeds_relationalorg.pdf).

mutual interest, note available gifts and talents, include people who have influence, plan the actions they will take, and finally debrief with those involved. Everyone has a chance to offer feedback and learn from what went well and what did not. In our collective effort, we can show our faith by our works.

 **What are the needs in your community? What gifts does your congregation have to meet them?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. James alludes to Genesis 15:6 when he says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (v. 23).
2. Paul also alludes to Genesis 15:6 in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6, but in those instances, Paul's emphasis is faith over works as a basis of salvation.
3. Verse 19, "You believe that God is one," refers to one of the most basic tenets of the Jewish faith. See Deuteronomy 6:4.
4. The actions of Rahab are recounted in Joshua 2:1–21.
5. Abraham and Rahab are both cited as examples of faith in Hebrews 11 (verses 8–19 and verse 31, respectively).

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 17	Unwise Not to Listen to Teachers	Proverbs 5:7–14
<b>T</b>	Aug. 18	Testimony of a Wise Teacher	Isaiah 50:4–11
<b>W</b>	Aug. 19	Slander and Abusive Language Not Allowed	Colossians 3:1–11
<b>Th</b>	Aug. 20	Use Tongue to Speak God's Praise	Psalms 119:169–76
<b>F</b>	Aug. 21	Believers Anointed with Fire and Tongues	Acts 2:1–12
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 22	Tongues and Teachers Are God's Gifts	1 Corinthians 12:27–31

# TAMING THE TONGUE

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 3:1–12

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. (James 3:5)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

“I once caught a fish THIS big,” said my friend, spreading her arms as wide as possible. She is my favorite preacher, a woman with impeccable intuition about what a congregation needs to hear, whether it is the local church she serves or the transitory community gathered at a wider church event. She often jokes that exaggeration is an important tool for preachers, or perhaps it is not a joke at all. The talent for taking an ordinary story—catching a fish—and making it distinctive enough in its details to illustrate a teaching point that will be remembered is a gift. Even her less spectacular sermons tend to succeed because, as she says, “I end well.”

Rhetorical power is a real thing. My preacher friend uses her verbal force for positive reasons: to break forth the good news, to motivate the passive, to comfort the downhearted, and to educate the willing. That same power can be used for negative purposes too. If you had ever heard her yell at a \*&@\$#\*^ Little League umpire, you would not want to be on her bad side.

Our words have an impact on others, and our unkind words most of all. James feels strongly enough about the harmful potential of gossip and other forms of hate speech that he uses all the metaphors he can gather to direct his readers toward blessing rather than cursing one another. Whether with our families, our faith communities, or our neighbors beyond the church walls, Christians need to practice using our words for good, because it does not come naturally.

*Creator of All That is Good, you made us, and you know us, and you love us, even when we lose control of our tongues. Help us to manage ourselves better, for Christ’s sake. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

James 3:1–12

**3:1** Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup>For 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. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup>Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And 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. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A WORD ABOUT METAPHOR

**E**arlier in this unit, we considered the use of metaphor in Scripture and the risk of reading something literally when it is intended to be a figure of speech. The images used by James as a teaching tool in chapter 3 are all intended to be read as metaphors, common images that help us understand a concept better. In this case, he emphasizes the power of the tongue to cause trouble and injury and offers warnings against its misuse.

Aficionados of horseback riding will recognize the function of a bridle and bit, both used by a rider to guide a horse. The bit sits in the horse's mouth, in a section where there are no teeth, and is held in place by the headgear of the bridle. The rider uses the attached reins to reinforce what is desirable; a reward for doing

something right comes through the release of pressure. James reminds us that people who always use speech well are under the same pressure as the rest of us. They are just better at keeping themselves in check.

He goes on to use the metaphor of a ship, in this case a sailing vessel, propelled by wind. Even a very large ship is steered by a rudder that is relatively small compared to the size of the ship. The rudder of the tongue is under the control of the pilot; James encourages us to steer ourselves and our speech with a conscious will.

As a favored camp song reminds us, “it only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Left uncontrolled, fire destroys. While the references James makes in the section on fire are unclear to scholars, he connects the fires started by our tongues to the fires of hell. Our talk can exacerbate a situation or burn the whole thing down.

James warns of the tongue’s power to poison. In 2003 an angry parishioner at a Lutheran church in New Sweden, Maine, literally poisoned the congregation by putting arsenic in the coffee urn. One man died in the immediate aftermath, and a woman died later of complications related to the poisoning. Thankfully an antidote was available that saved others. When the tongue poisons with lies and insinuations, it can do the same damage to a community’s spirit. The poisoner confessed in a suicide note, naming church politics as his reason.

This section concludes with a practical use of images to remind us that we cannot be two things at the same time. James compares fresh and brackish springs; the fruit produced by fig trees, olive trees, and grapevines; and fresh and salt water.

 Which metaphor in the passage speaks most clearly to you?

## WHY SO SALTY?

One of my favorite jobs in ministry was teaching Introduction to Christian Worship as an adjunct professor at Bangor Theological Seminary. It was a big commitment given that I also served a church fulltime, but I was excited to be asked. When I prepared my first lecture, I wavered between using a manuscript or an outline. Some things I wanted to express in exactly the right words, while others I trusted myself to simply tell in “close enough” to the right words. By the end of the three hour class I



was exhausted from making sure to say everything the right way, from filtering things as perfectly as possible.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes,” writes James. No kidding. While I had been leading worship as a pastor for a decade before I taught the class, my wisdom about worship was largely situational. I avidly studied the history text we used to be sure I remembered the basics about architecture and the liturgical calendar. I took my role so seriously that when a student made excuses for a late paper by telling me he had other responsibilities related to commencement and ordination, I got a little salty, as my youngest would say. I rose up to my full height of 5 feet 9.5 inches while responding to his email and reminded him that my class was required for graduation. Because the communication was in writing, I managed to choose my words carefully. It would have been more difficult face-to-face, because I was angry that the student did not take my class, or me, as seriously as I did.

By the time the letter from James was written, people had been living in Christian community for decades, maybe even a century or more. While its date is uncertain, we can conclude from his writing that people in the first century were not that different from people in the twenty-first. Even those committed to following in the way of Christ got into disputes with each other, or forget to put the good of others or the community ahead of their own needs. Out of the same mouths speaking of the good news also came words of pride, condemnation, provocation and cruelty. People gossiped and issued sick burns and trash talk. James offers a warning against the way our tongues get us into trouble when we take off the filters that matter most.

Sometimes the filter is off before we know it.



**What have you said that you later regretted? How did you make amends?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**I**t is a Sufi saying: “Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates. At the first gate, ask yourself ‘Is it true?’ At the second gate ask, ‘Is it necessary?’ At the third gate ask, ‘Is it

kind?”” Evangelist Alan Redpath formulated a similar rubric, using the word “think.” T—Is it true? H—Is it helpful? I—Is it inspiring? N—Is it necessary? K—Is it kind? Perhaps you remember this from an earlier lesson in our study of wisdom: “If you can’t say something nice . . . don’t say anything at all.” Any principle so broadly accepted that it is espoused by Islamic mystics, evangelical Christian ministers, and Walt Disney must have something to it.

These principles sound reasonable and sensible and high-minded, but they can be challenging to remember on the fly. My daughter, Lucy, grew up going to Pilgrim Lodge, a church summer camp in Maine. When she attended Counselor-in-Training orientation at age sixteen, it came as a slightly disappointing surprise that so much of what she thought just happened at camp was intentional. The rules, the boundaries, sure, she knew those must be thought through and planned for good reason. The schedule, the option times and special activities—yes, those require planning. But what surprised Lucy was that the counselors, junior and otherwise, learned how to create the atmosphere of trust and acceptance and gentle discipline that they call “being Pilgrim Lodge-ical.”

Lucy was excited to CIT for a second summer. When she told me on the eve of camp that she needed to bring a watch and couldn’t find the one I bought for her the previous year, my response was not Pilgrim Lodge-ical. I did not take the time to think before I spoke. I walked my thoughts through none of the three gates. I most assuredly didn’t say “nothing at all.” And while it might have been true that the top of her dresser was a mess, the way I named it was not helpful, inspirational, or necessary, and it wasn’t even close to kind.

There may be rare people who come to this naturally, but most of us need to work at it. Kind communication is a tough spiritual discipline. It takes intention and practice. Here are some starting points to try. We remind ourselves what is “Pilgrim Lodge-ical.” We post the THINK list on the Sunday bulletin or the meeting wall. We write ourselves a note or draw a picture of the three gates. Or maybe we start with Thumper, picturing a bunny, and quietly, kindly biting our tongues until we find the right words.



**What helps you to hold your tongue?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. The warning that those who teach will be judged more strictly expands on what Jesus said in Matthew 12:36–37.
2. “Able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle” (v. 2) is the verb form of the same word that appears in verse 3, where it is a plural noun and translated as “bits.”
3. The word hell is the Greek *gehenna*; this is the only use of this term in the New Testament outside the Synoptic Gospels.
4. James speaks of the tongue as if it operates independently (boasting great things, etc.). This must be tempered with what Jesus says about the role of the heart in what comes out of the mouth (Matt. 12:34–35). Controlling the heart, then, becomes key to controlling the tongue.
5. The irony of blessing the Lord with the same mouth that curses those made in his likeness (v. 9) has a parallel in 1 John 4:20: “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 24	Wisdom about End Time Signs	Matthew 24:3–14
<b>T</b>	Aug. 25	Wisdom for Speaking a Prophetic Message	Jeremiah 38:1–6
<b>W</b>	Aug. 26	Wisdom in Knowing Hearts without Blame	1 Thessalonians 3:6–13
<b>Th</b>	Aug. 27	Wisdom in Speaking Clearly	Matthew 5:33–37
<b>F</b>	Aug. 28	Living Gracefully with One Another	1 Peter 4:7–11
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 29	Wisdom in the Prayer of Faith	James 5:13–20

# TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 3:13–18; 5:7–12

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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)

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

As we come to the end of our study of wisdom in the Bible, we also come to the end of the letter from James. Over thirteen weeks, we have pondered the things we learned as children, the contrast between the wise and the foolish, the nature of true wealth, the trouble people had understanding Jesus, and the call of James that our actions stand as the testimony of our faith.

We may use all the passages we have studied as a lens for viewing whose authority we respect, whose counsel we value, and whose lives will be a model for our faithfulness. In this session, we will consider the lives of three Christian people whose works express their faith clearly. One is more widely-known than the other two, and all three are living as of this writing.

When considering their witness in light of the letter from James we might also think about people we know who put themselves out there to make the world a better place, and who are motivated to it by their faith in God. Who does the work of feeding the hungry in your community? Who advocates for the people who cannot afford a lawyer, or for children with special needs, or for families with inadequate or no housing? Who takes the time to visit people in prison and accompany them to court dates? Who shows up when young black men are shot, or women are abused, or immigrants are at risk of being deported? Following Jesus' way requires more than coming to church on Sunday; Wisdom calls us to act in the world.

*Wise and Gracious God, continue to shine your light on the path before us, enabling us to see what matters most and act on that knowledge in your name. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

James 3:13–18; 5:7–12

**3:13** Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. <sup>17</sup>But 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. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

<sup>5:7</sup>Be 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. <sup>8</sup>You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. <sup>9</sup>Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! <sup>10</sup>As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup>Indeed 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.

<sup>12</sup>Above 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.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## WISE AND UNDERSTANDING

“Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom,” writes James to the churches, noting once again that the evidence of our actions tells the story of how wise and faithful we are (3:13). Among political leaders in the United States, President Jimmy Carter stands out for his post-presidential commitment to the practical works that improve life where circumstances are difficult. Whatever political beliefs we hold, we can admire his life of service after the White House years. Those of us who remember the 1970s can picture him on television, prophetically wearing a sweater and

encouraging us to turn down our thermostats during the energy crisis, but a more lasting image might be the former president in work clothes holding a hammer and building houses.

In the early 1980s, after he left office, Carter and his wife Rosalyn were looking for meaningful ways to use their time, energy, and influence. In 1984, they volunteered to help build a house with Habitat for Humanity, a program that creates housing for low-income people who put in their own sweat equity. Habitat's work was a great match for the Carters, who helped raise visibility for the organization, which in turn raised volunteers and building opportunities not only in the United States, but around the world. According to Habitat for Humanity's website, through their annual Carter Work Project building event established in 1986, "President and Mrs. Carter have worked alongside 101,276 volunteers in 14 countries to build, renovate and repair 4,290 homes."<sup>1</sup>

This very practical good work is an expression of President Carter's faith. He told *Parade Magazine* in a 2018 interview that Habitat "was a good way to put my religious faith into practical use. It's very biblical to break down the wall between well-off people like most of us volunteers and very poor people, having them work side-by-side as equals, as we do on Habitat builds."<sup>2</sup> His faith also inspired the mission of The Carter Center, which is devoted to improving the lives of people around the world through work in conflict resolution, human rights advocacy, and medical and mental health care.

In 2018, Carter published a book, *Faith: A Journey for All*, unfolding the ways in which faith sustained him in both happiness and disappointment and emphasizing the power of believing in something unshakable. Continuing to teach a popular Sunday school class at Maranatha Baptist Church in his hometown of Plains, Georgia, well into his nineties, he has shown us by his good life a gentle heart and works of wisdom.

 **Who are the elder statesmen/women in your church community? How do their good lives show gentleness born of wisdom?**

1. [www.habitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/CWP-2018\\_MAP.pdf](http://www.habitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/CWP-2018_MAP.pdf).
2. [parade.com/697145/kneal-2/jimmy-carter-reflects-on-building-more-than-4000-houses-with-habitat-for-humanity/](http://parade.com/697145/kneal-2/jimmy-carter-reflects-on-building-more-than-4000-houses-with-habitat-for-humanity/).



## A HARVEST OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Rev. Traci Blackmon is the Executive Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries of The United Church of Christ and Senior Pastor of Christ the King United Church of Christ in Florissant, Missouri. On August 9, 2014, Reverend Traci received a text from a woman who had attended a funeral at Christ the King. “The police have killed a boy I know. Can you come?” Blackmon says, “I did what any of the rest of you would do. I checked Twitter to see if it was really happening.” It was. Yet she waited. She thought she wasn’t prepared for this kind of work. She couldn’t be the one who was supposed to respond, could she?

She waited some more. She prayed. And then she got in her car and drove the short distance to Ferguson, where a community had begun to grieve and protest the death of Michael Brown. The pastoral care she provided that night led to an expanding presence in the work of racial and economic justice in St. Louis and beyond, from an appointment to President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, to health care actions in Washington, DC, and preaching and marching in Charlottesville as people of faith gathered to counter the Unite the Right Rally. *The St. Louis American* named Rev. Blackmon 2017 Person of the Year, writing, “She is no longer ours alone. She belongs to America now. This nation sorely needs her.”<sup>1</sup>

What America gets in Rev. Blackmon is a faith powerhouse uniquely prepared for this moment and unafraid to call things as she sees them. As a young girl in Alabama she integrated two schools. Her social media posts, many tagged “Confessions of a Woman Who Preaches,” allow access to her experiences as a black woman in the United States, both validating her followers who are people of color and educating her followers who are not.


Speaking at the Yale Divinity School in 2018 about justice work and the gospel, Rev. Blackmon put her works in context. “I don’t preach a progressive gospel. I preach the gospel. The gospel is a social gospel, a liberating gospel. We will not be defined by other people’s labels. We are disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Blackmon went to Ferguson because she read that text and those tweets through the lens of the gospel and the call of God

1. “2017 Person of the Year: Rev. Traci Blackmon,” *The St. Louis American*, [www.stlamerican.com/news/editorials/person-of-the-year-rev-traci-blackmon/article\\_e6e25dd8-eb7b-11e7-b177-ff0157442fed.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/editorials/person-of-the-year-rev-traci-blackmon/article_e6e25dd8-eb7b-11e7-b177-ff0157442fed.html).
2. “Justice Work and the Gospel: A Conversation with Traci Blackmon,” Yale Divinity School, [divinity.yale.edu/news/justice-work-and-gospel-conversation-traci-blackmon](http://divinity.yale.edu/news/justice-work-and-gospel-conversation-traci-blackmon).



upon her life to respond to “wisdom from above [that] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (3:17). Truly her ministry yields a “harvest of righteousness.”

 **What works has your life prepared you to do?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

**O**n a Facebook Live video in 2015, Rev. Hannah Adair Bonner, a United Methodist pastor, stood outside the Waller County Jail in Prairie View, Texas, with other protestors, determined that the world would not forget Sandra Bland. For eighty days, Bonner camped there to raise awareness of the injustice perpetrated on Bland, who died while in custody after being arrested during a traffic stop.

At the time, Bonner led a new church in Houston called The Shout, aimed at reimagining worship with a focus on the arts and activism. She did not know Sandra Bland, but after Bland’s death, she began to watch the videos Bland had left behind, on one of which Bland said of her own justice work, “God has truly opened my eyes and shown me that there is something out there we can do.”<sup>1</sup>

Bonner’s vigil at the jail gained greater news attention when the sheriff falsely accused her group of causing a riot and told Bonner, “Why don’t you go back to the church of Satan that you run.” Bonner, a petite blonde, continued to sit outside the jail playing a guitar and singing with other activists. Eventually the county barricaded the shady areas around a tree where they had found shelter and ultimately cut the tree down to discourage the vigil being kept in Bland’s memory.

The Center for American Progress named Bonner one of sixteen Faith Leaders to Watch in 2016. Now the Director of Frontera Wesley in Tucson, a ministry to college students at the University of Arizona, Bonner continues to be a presence in justice work by showing up and telling stories. She has testified on live video from the tent cities holding children in Tornillo, Texas, noting that as a white woman in a clergy collar she can get closer than her colleagues of color.

Rev. Bonner stood as a witness wearing a rainbow stole at the 2019 UMC Special General Conference that voted for a plan that

1. Hannah Adair Bonner, “Sandra Bland Believed in You,” January 15, 2016, [hannahadairbonner.com/tag/sandy-speaks-on/](http://hannahadairbonner.com/tag/sandy-speaks-on/).

would punish LGBTQ clergy and their supporters. Returning to her work in Tucson with students facing discrimination for their own race, citizenship, or orientation, Bonner wrote for the *Washington Post*, “We will move forward. We will grieve, but we will not let the events of this past week shake us in our resolve to continue God’s work.”<sup>1</sup> Whether standing outside a jail, beside a border fence, or at the communion table, Hannah Adair Bonner exemplifies the endurance James exhorts as we wait for the day when God’s wisdom reaches fullness on earth.

## Who inspires you to endure in faith?

### SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.*

1. The word translated “life” in 3:13 is not the typical Greek word for life (*zoe*), which is used over 130 times in the New Testament. It is a word that means manner of life, conduct, behavior, or deportment.
2. The word for “gentleness” in 3:13 is derived from the root word translated “meek” in Matthew 5:5.
3. James’s contrast between wisdom that is “earthly” with that which is “heavenly” has parallels in Paul’s writing. See 1 Corinthians 1:20; 2:5–6.
4. The word *patient* [5:7–8] does not mean that they were to sit idly by, doing nothing. Rather, the word carries the idea of endurance, bearing the burdens and fighting the battles until the Lord comes.
5. James’s prohibition on swearing (taking oaths) draws from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:33–37).
6. James 3:17–18 provides a list of what might be called the “fruits of wisdom,” similar to the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5.

1. Hannah Adair Bonner, “We Queer Clergy Begged Our Fellow Methodists to Love Us. They Voted No,” *Washington Post*, March 1, 2019, [www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/queer-clergy-begged-our-fellow-methodists-to-love-us-they-voted-no/2019/03/01/ac1a232c-3b87-11e9-aaae-69364b2ed137\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6473d36aac03](http://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/queer-clergy-begged-our-fellow-methodists-to-love-us-they-voted-no/2019/03/01/ac1a232c-3b87-11e9-aaae-69364b2ed137_story.html?utm_term=.6473d36aac03).

## A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 31	Rachel, Mother of Joseph and Benjamin	Genesis 30:22-24; 35:16-20
<b>T</b>	Sept. 1	Joseph Checks on Brothers at Dothan	Genesis 37:12-17
<b>W</b>	Sept. 2	Jacob Convinced that Joseph Is Dead	Genesis 37:29-36
<b>Th</b>	Sept. 3	From Slave to Ruler of Egypt	Psalm 106:1-6, 16-22
<b>F</b>	Sept. 4	Jacob Lives with Joseph in Egypt	Acts 7:9-15a
<b>Sa</b>	Sept. 5	Caution, Disputes May Lead to Violence	James 4:1-7



## About the Writer

**THE REVEREND MARTHA K. SPONG** is a clergy leadership coach and a pastor ordained in the United Church of Christ. She is coauthor of *Denial is My Spiritual Practice and Other Failures of Faith* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018) and editor of *There's a Woman in the Pulpit* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2015), a collection of essays by members of RevGalBlogPals, an ecumenical community of clergywomen from around the world.

## Coming Next Quarter

God commands us to love one another as God loves us. The fall quarter begins with a widely known story about Joseph, which deals with love within Jacob's family. From the Joseph story we proceed with God's laws requiring care and concern for the poor and needy, loving and embracing the stranger, and the demands of love for one another in the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. These sessions elaborate on themes of love for one another in the epistles of Paul and James and the expressions of love in the early formations of the church in Acts.

Unit I, "Struggles with Love," has four sessions from the book of Genesis revealing aspects of love. Session one reveals how a lack of familial love devolves into jealousy and destruction. Session two portrays Joseph's commitment to love that refuses to hold on to past wrongs but rather seeks God's path to future success. Sessions three and four show Joseph's brothers coming to Egypt and reveal how love and reconciliation can prevail in spite of harsh and negative circumstances.

Unit II, "Inclusive Love," has four sessions that center on love for the stranger, the poor, and enemies as well as divine love reflected in human life. First Samuel shows David's love for others. Luke explores the teachings of Jesus regarding love for one's enemies and Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. First Corinthians explores the sermon on love from Paul's writing, which depicts the height of human love coming from divine love.

Unit III, "Godly Love among Believers," contains five sessions. John elaborates on how believers love by serving and portrays Jesus' explanation of the intertwining love of God for Jesus and for those who abide in Christ. First John clarifies the abiding

love of God through the Holy Spirit, which makes it possible for us to love one another. Acts reveals the expression of the love of God in the formation of the early Christian community by the workings of the Holy Spirit. James tells of the love of neighbor as the fulfillment of the law of God.





