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St. James of Jerusalem

Acts 15:12-22a

### LEARN FROM THE WISDOM OF ST. JAMES

We've just heard the Word of God in James' epistle: "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.*" In difficult times we might dearly wish for the gift of wisdom from God. So the epistle of James goes on: *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*" James, the brother of our Lord, knew this from experience. In the portion of God's Word we are considering today, James was presiding over a very difficult matter. But the Lord endowed him with remarkable wisdom for a God-pleasing outcome. So today, let's learn from the wisdom of St. James. Let's consider that he was guided by Scripture, and secondly, he was guided by love.

The Christian Church was holding its first church-wide convention. The future of the Gospel and the Church hung on two prickly issues.

- First, did God intend for Gentiles, or non-Jews, to go to heaven?
- Secondly, in addition to faith in Christ, should believers be required to be circumcised in order to be saved?

The pressures on the church leaders were immense. The perspectives, personal agendas, and individual circumstances wove a dizzying maze through which to navigate.

- Jerusalem itself was governed by Roman politicians who knew nothing of Christianity except that some poor people followed the teachings a criminal they crucified named Jesus of Nazareth.

- The undercurrent in Jerusalem was governed by the Jewish Sanhedrin, a religious body powerful as the mafia. They had officially rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah, and to get in their way meant serious trouble.

Within the Church were:

- Christians who were raised Jewish. They trusted Jesus as their Savior but also thought it would be wrong to discontinue all the Jewish religious rules and customs.
- Others felt they could forego all the religious rules, except one: to be saved, any self-respecting Christian should be circumcised. After all, that had been the oldest identifying mark for God's chosen people since the time of Abraham some 2000 years earlier.
- Then there were some like Peter and Paul who were Jewish by blood, and though they personally followed Jewish customs they did not think such customs should be foisted upon Gentile believers—especially not as a requirement to be saved. Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Jewish laws so the purpose of these laws in pointing Old Testament believers ahead to Jesus was no longer necessary.
- Some wondered whether God intended to save Gentiles at all.
- Then there were also Gentile believers in the group who had a personal interest in the outcome of this meeting.
- And as you can imagine, there were all sorts of people somewhere in between.

Each one thought they were right. Each one was ready to accuse the others of not being true to the faith. Tempers were hot.

This was the minefield James was presiding over.

- Peter, as leader of the Twelve and as Jewish as Jewish can be, stood up and recounted how God revealed to him in a spectacular way that He intended to save Gentiles through faith in Christ without any laws and rules. Peter pinpointed the entire issue with precision. He said, "*We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just*

*as they are.*” So the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised to be saved.

- Paul and Barnabas then stood up and testified about their extensive missionary work among Gentiles and the evidence of God’s salvation at work among them.

All eyes were now on James.

- Would he exercise political savvy, or reflect marketing instincts?
- Would he be culturally sensitive?
- Would strive to appease the church’s constituency or negotiate to settle differences?
- Would he feel obligated to make the paying customers happy?

No. Scripture made the final decision. Learn from the wisdom of James because he was guided by Scripture. James quoted the Old Testament, particularly the book of Amos to demonstrate that God has chosen to save also the Gentiles and to save them by grace. We are told, *“When they finished, James spoke up: ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God a first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages.’”*

It was a verdict with profound ramifications. If James had not been guided by Scripture almost 2000 years ago, you and I would not be here this morning. But because God powerfully guided James and the early Church by His Word, you and I are included in God’s plan of salvation through faith in Christ by sheer grace.

Do not underestimate God’s profound guidance to you through His Word to help bring you to salvation. It may help in matters like:

- how to deal with your teen,
- sorting out your marriage issues,
- sifting through the dilemmas of your advancing age,

- clarifying in your mind what the saving truth is over against trends of the time or
- settling a disagreement in church matters.
- Very often we want an immediate answer when a specific problem arises, but the better you know Scripture in general, through worship and Bible study, the better you will be guided by Scripture in life.
- And through Scripture God will always guide you to Christ and to your salvation in Him.

James’ Scriptural guidance was not an iron fist either. He was faithful and did not compromise even the dot of an “I”, but in presenting Scripture’s truth He was also guided by love. Let’s learn from the wisdom of St. James in that He was guided by love.

It may sound as though James was making concessions. But this is not true. By God’s plan wherever Christianity was being preached, Judaism had been preached there first, in some places for centuries already. So in sensitivity and love to the Jewish people who would have a hard time letting go of their customs, James said, *“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”*

Maybe a way to understand James’ suggestion is to use a modern day example.

- Someone grew up being taught to cross himself in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That person joins Peace congregation.
- Perhaps you were taught from youth that crossing yourself is wrong and superstitious.
- If you saw that person crossing Himself as you worshiped you would be scandalized by that.
- So even though crossing one’s self is something God has neither commanded nor forbidden, out of love that person

defers to you and refrains from crossing himself so as not to upset you.

In a similar way James was saying to the Gentiles, “Even though you are completely free from all these rules and regulations, don’t completely ignore everything that the Jews find offensive.

Otherwise, it will only make it harder for them to accept you as brothers in the faith.” St. James was guided by love.

Nowadays some might have the impression that it’s loving not to

- call a sin a sin, or
- demand repentance or
- get too picky or
- judge the teachings of other churches.

But that is not love. We would only be helping a person toward their destruction. And that’s not what James did. He instructed the Gentiles to abstain from fornication and to be on the lookout even for the impression of idolatry.

But sometimes it is possible for us parents, older brothers and sisters, Christian instructors, classmates, fellow church members to want to

- use Scripture as a baseball bat and smack the other person in the head,
- or to use Scripture vindictively –when we care more about being right than being concerned whether the other person understands what God’s will is for them.
- Or we use Scripture to prove our own righteousness rather than to serve others to their salvation.
- Or we don’t bother with Scripture at all for our family unless a crisis comes up, and then we want a quick passage to bail us out.

Scripture is a tool for salvation, but we use even that holy thing as a tool for our unholy self-serving purposes.

Thankfully, our Lord Christ modeled the perfect love for us. He treats us ever so patiently that He endured all the suffering and even the death that our sinfulness brought on Him. But in this way He has forgiven and saved us. This is what Scripture is all about

and why Christ wants us to use it in love so that many can be saved. We not only speak the truth, but we speak it in love.

May God give us each such wisdom as He gave to St. James of Jerusalem, so that as

fathers and mothers,  
as husbands and wives,  
as children, students and employees,  
as officers and servants of a congregation,  
as neighbors and co-workers,  
as buyers, sellers, taxpayers and teammates

we are guided by Scripture and guided by love.