

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 3 Wisdom? James 1:5-8 Date: July 13, 2014

I. The Lack of Wisdom & Its Source James 1:5

It is obvious by the opening 4 verses of James that the recipients of this letter were undergoing some severe trials, perhaps related to persecution and according to some verses later on in the letter, perhaps economic poverty as well. As we move into vv. 5-8, the connection to the first 4 verses seems tenuous as to context, with the exception of the last phrase of v. 4 and the first of v. 5.

The believers of the diaspora were not yet perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. Instead, like all believers in all ages, they were living out lives that came up against temptations, trials, bad medical news, times of grief, sorrowful moments of failure, and the fluctuations of economic limitations. “Lacking in nothing” is not related to physical needs here – cf. Phil. 4:10-13 – notice how Paul pushes aside the relative unimportance of physical completion as a committed believer in Jesus Christ. It’s OK if he has plenty, and it’s OK if he has very little. Earlier, in Phil. 4:6-7, Paul shows clearly the same sort of thing James is aiming at – contentment and peace in all the circumstances God brings into your life.

What James focuses on is a lack of wisdom. This is not surprising as these people were facing all sorts of trials and had to learn to “count it all joy”. Christopher Morgan points out; “...James links “lacking in nothing” in v. 4 with “if any of you lacks wisdom” in v. 5. We need wisdom because we experience trials, and also because we are still lacking. We are not yet “lacking in nothing”, so we need wisdom to help us become increasingly mature.”¹ Wisdom is a valuable commodity for those in the church community facing trials and being brought to maturity through that means. Certainly, there is much in the Bible regarding the value of wisdom, the books of Proverbs & Ecclesiastes being the places that leap to mind for that topic, and James leans heavily on Proverbs for many of his statements in this letter. Note Prov. 1:1-7; 2:6-8; 9:10.

To an extent, every one of us lacks wisdom. When things occur in our lives that would be considered trials, our initial reaction is a strong indicator of our lack of wisdom – rage or thoughts of & even schemes of revenge when we are wronged; despair, bitterness and lashing out at others when we face an uncertain future due to health or economic concerns, and so on. We claim to trust our Sovereign Saviour, but too often, we try to work it all out in our minds and avoid prayer before we come to the realization that God is in control, even at, or especially at those times, so we need to go to Him first.

James shows his readers how to acquire the wisdom we recognise we do not have – “*let him ask God*”. God is the source of wisdom, so who else could you ask? “Wisdom at its core is theological. It is rightly understanding our place in the cosmos and relating to God accordingly. He is

supreme and we are not. We must fear Him and “acknowledge our creaturely dependence on Him. This is basic to James’s understanding of wisdom.”ⁱⁱ

Christ, in the Gospels often taught us to ask God for what we needed – to pray to Him – cf. Matt. 7:7-11; and even the OT invited believers to pray to God for their needs – Jer. 29:12-14. There are so many things for us to pray for and about in our daily lives – forgiveness, restoration of health, our own faithfulness, salvation for loved ones, our children’s safety, our Pastor & his family, our workplace - the list is almost endless because we are so needy and God is so giving, loving and generous. Ralph Martin says, “Prayer that is confident...receives what it asks because of who God is.”ⁱⁱⁱ

James says that *“God gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”* Three things stand out for James when we pray to God. **First**, He gives generously. He enjoys, or better yet, delights to answer our prayers and to give us what we need, as we saw in Matt. 7:1-7 above. Later on, in James 1:17, he reminds us that every gift He gives us is both good and perfect. **Secondly**, God gives generously to all who ask. He is delighted to give us wisdom. In I Kings 3:3-14, we are told of Solomon’s request for wisdom above any other gift from God, and v. 10 tells us that *“it pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.”* God gives Solomon more than he had asked, which reminds us of what Ephesians 3:20 says – *“...He is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work in us.”* **Thirdly**, God gives without reproach – He has no reservations when He gives, He holds no grudges. Scot McKnight comments, “Humans may give grudgingly, either wishing they had not or only because they feel obliged, but God’s grace flows in one direction. There is no back tracking or second-guessing in God, nor is there any criticism or backstabbing after giving.”^{iv}

The verse ending phrase, *“and it will be given him”* means of course, the one who asks, because God delights to answer our prayers and give us what is best, and what is best is always that which puts us into a position of depending on Him in humility.^v Is the exact answer to our prayer always exactly what we need? We want it the way we are praying for it, or thinking about it as we pray, but the answer “no” is still an answer, and in God’s wisdom, is the better answer. No Christian should ever say, “God never answered my prayer” simply because He answered differently from how you dreamed He would answer it, unless you are certain that it has not yet been answered, but how can you be sure of that?

Discussion question: How do you know God answers prayer? How would you respond to an unbeliever who asked you that question?

II. The Importance of Faith

James 1:6

Hebrews 11:6 defines the only way we can please God, expressed in the negative, *“Without faith, it is impossible to please Him.”* Certainly one of the motives for our prayer life is to please God, in fact, our prayers should take into account how what we are asking for will glorify Him, how it will reveal His will for us, and that is one

reason we must learn to accept negative answers to our prayers, because we realise that "no" is what is best for us.

So, we must "*ask in faith...with no doubting*". Doubt is a display of a lack of faith, or is at least an expose of a 'faith' that has one foot "all in" to trusting God, with the other foot firmly planted in what can be seen, touched or felt. Note what Paul says in these verses we are all familiar with – Phil. 4:6-7 – or Jesus's words in Matt. 6:25-34.

According to James 1:6, faith is a pre-requisite for receiving this gift of wisdom from God. Since the purpose of wisdom is to enable believers to follow God as a way of life [Gal. 3:11; Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38 – "the righteous shall live by faith"], God grants it only to those who are committed to following Him. Why give wisdom to people who will not use it? Those who are interested only in dabbling will be disappointed.^{vi}

Peter Davids notes:

"The author, then, concludes his description of this doubter with a strong condemnation: his divided mind, when it comes to trusting God, indicates a basic disloyalty toward God. Rather than being a single-minded lover of God, he is one whose character and conduct is unstable, even hypocritical. No wonder he should expect nothing from God! He is not in the posture of a trusting child. For James there is no middle ground between faith and no faith; such a one, he will later argue (4:8) needs to repent."^{vii}

But is James describing perfect faith here? Is he saying that we must never waver? If our faith had to be perfect, few would have anything from God, for "we are all doubters".^{viii} What do we do with Mark 9:23-24? "*And Jesus said...all things are possible for one who believes. Immediately, the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"*" This is an expression of honesty – a realisation that if the healing of his son requires full belief, he does not possess enough of it and he appeals to the only source of such faith he knows, the man standing right before him; Jesus of Nazareth.

The one described as praying here in James 1:5-8 is a believer, however – not one who is unsaved. Asking in faith for a believer means confidence (in some measure) in God's ability to answer and a realization of His past fulfilled promises and answers to prayer. Believers can be weak too – especially those going through trials [and who may be young Christians], and brought to their knees in weakness – perhaps not able to even articulate the need for wisdom. In those cases, perhaps Romans 8:26-27 offers a gracious & incredible divine solution as a comforting remedy. God cares so much for us that, when we are too weak, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us and what He prays to God on our behalf is perfectly within God's will and the answer to that prayer will be answered in the way that best glorifies God, and according to the next verse, v. 28, for our good if we love God.

Bryan Chapell wisely points out;

"The basic problem with all definitions of believing prayer that make God the servant of our will is that the object of belief is misplaced. Proper belief is not unwavering confidence that something we want will happen, nor is it doubtless trust that we know what is best. Our trust is not in the thing we want or in our sufficient faith. The success of our prayers does not lie in exceptional confidence that we have

pumped enough of our own faith into our prayer (and extracted enough doubt) so that now God must respond. Our belief must be in God. He, not our desire, is the object of our faith.

We pray believing that God is all-powerful, all-wise, and infinitely loving – and that we are not. We tell God our desires for matters large and small, but always our greatest desire is that His will be done. We yield to God's will because we believe that the Good Shepherd will provide only the absolute best."^{ix}

But James expresses an analogy to illustrate what a doubting man is like – *“like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind”*. This is obviously not a reference to honest intellectual doubts which the most mature of us as believers have from time to time in our walks of faith. This is more like the doubts which compel the one praying, even as they pray, “God won’t give me what I ask for. He never does – my prayers always seem to go unheeded. I’m in trouble and God won’t get me out of it.” If you’ve ever been on a boat during a storm, you understand James’s illustration – waves whipping back and forth, the spray at the top of the waves being blown off as mist, the waves rolling and breaking as white caps rise, fall and break in foamy splashes of white, dark blue and gray.

Paul offers a related illustration in Eph. 4:14 – as he speaks about how God matures His church so they won’t become those who are tossed about by “every wind of doctrine”, IOW, stable, convinced by God’s truth and living out a life of faith in God’s faithful provision. Although not necessarily referring to this particular verse, I found what Robert Wall says very helpful here; “What a person thinks and knows about God and self-determines the decisions made during trials...” Yet for James, every deception, as well as every test, is theological in nature (cf. 1:16,22). In this case, the theological crisis is theodicy: the fool miscalculates God’s sense of justice... the fool supposes that an offering of pious slogans rather than of merciful work satisfies God, whose primary concern is that justice is executed...”^x

If we have real faith in God when we pray, we will (we must) trust that He will respond in a just and righteous, loving way. Otherwise, why pray at all?

III. The Instability of Being Double-Minded

James 1:7-8

These two verses almost seem to us to be overkill. Our doubts when we pray for wisdom will result in receiving nothing from God and it exposes us as double-minded or literally, “two-souled” and “unstable in all our ways”. Most would say to this, “Really?”

The double-minded person has instability as their condition because they do not simply trust God to supply them with wisdom, do not love God with their whole heart, and something is working in the background of their lives – perhaps sin or self-righteousness or pride. Of course, the opposite of being double-minded is seen in God’s single-minded, generous response to a simple, heartfelt and faithful prayer.

“Although the term, “double-minded” is unusual, the concept is not...the Psalms, for example, bless those who follow God with their “whole heart” (Ps. 119:2) and condemn those who speak with a “double heart” (Ps. 12:2; cf. Hosea 10:2).”^{xi} And Chris Morgan also adds, “Double-minded living is spiritual wavering,

trying to live a double life, seeking to follow a double standard, wanting to please 2 masters, seeking to walk along 2 paths, or claiming to be religious without covenant faithfulness. In contrast, consistency for James embraces purity, single-minded devotion, integrity, sincerity, and wholeness – covenant faithfulness.”^{xii}

Discussion question: What causes people to be double-minded?

The double-minded person wavers in faith and is pressed in by the stress created by the trials and due to a lack of God-given wisdom does not deal with it well. This could refer to a testimony issue or a Christian maturity issue. We must keep in mind that one way we mature through trials is that there is not just one trial per lifetime. There are many, and sometimes they come in waves. Our decisions during these trials have a cumulative effect and we mature as we see how to and how not to respond in trials, God is working in us to perfect us, to make us more like Christ – that is part of the wisdom we are getting from God – not as lump sum dumped on us from one trial and one prayer, but through consistent trust in God over the long haul.

Young believers would be hard pressed to trust completely in God’s care when they encountered difficult trials in their lives and in the lives of those around them, whereas mature believers, who had lived as believers for awhile and had observed God’s faithfulness over time, would be less tempted to be double-minded. The double-minded person is unstable because what he is wavering towards is his own ability to solve his problems, or looking for an easy way out and that is not the way of faith.

ⁱ Christopher W. Morgan, *A Theology of James – Wisdom for God’s People*, P & R Publishing, 2010; p. 48

ⁱⁱ IBID, p. 49

ⁱⁱⁱ Ralph Martin, cited in Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans (NICNT); 2011, p. 87

^{iv} McKnight, p. 89

^v Morgan, p. 50

^{vi} IBID, p. 51

^{vii} Morgan, p. 51

^{viii} R. Kent Hughes, *James – Faith That Works*, Crossway, 1991, p. 30

^{ix} Bryan Chapell, *Praying Backwards*, Baker Books, 2005, p. 52

^x Robert W. Wall, as cited in Christopher Morgan, p. 174 - ellipses in quotation are in the source

^{xi} Douglas Moo, *James*, TNTC, IVP, 1988, pp. 62-63

^{xii} Morgan, p. 58