

Sermon 3: James 1:5-8: Praying in Hard Times

OUTLINE

Praying to a generous God
Praying with a single-minded faith

INTRODUCTION

‘But I don’t know how?’ This is the response that James expects to his opening statements about true religion in testing times. ‘I don’t know how to count it all joy’; ‘I don’t know how to let steadfastness have its full effect.’ James in 1:2-4 has reminded us of our duty and purpose, to be holy; therefore when difficult times come we should count them as joy because of the fruit they yield; and we should persevere and endure not giving into sin or giving up, because the difficulties temper us as in a fire. Those are strong imperatives, clear black and white instructions with no wiggle room and no compromise, this is something that characterizes the whole of the letter of James. But James also has a pastoral heart, we have seen in this in the fact that he begins where we are at, in testing times and in pain; and in 5-8 he now goes on to point these struggling Christians to the resources they have in God to enable them to count it all joy; and let steadfastness have its full effect. James points us to prayer. James’ instruction is basic yet profound, he reminds us of the character of God, because in our trials we doubt God’s goodness, and nearness and willingness to hear and help; but not only that in order to pray effectively he reminds us that we must pray with a single minded faith. Because we need wisdom in our testing times we must pray to a generous God with a single-minded faith. We have two points, praying to a generous God; praying with a single-minded faith.

Praying to a generous God

V5, ‘If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.’ What is biblical wisdom? Knowledge has to do with the assimilation of truth and facts; wisdom usually has to do with living out that truth well to the glory of God. James true to form directs us to the practical outworking of what we believe in steering us to ask for wisdom. It is true that there are facts that we need to know, for example, that God is good; that God is in control; that hard times are discipline and not judgement, knowing these things does help with giving us perspective. But at the end of it all we then have to go on living our lives, putting that truth into practice. We have to wake up in the morning, in a life filled with pain and we need to know how to live well, pursue holiness, negotiate the many landmines of sin, and temptations to sin that come with hard times.

When you woke up this morning in the middle of your refining fire, what was it that you told yourself you needed? A holiday; a million bucks; a better doctor; a hip replacement; a more obedient child...? No doubt some of these external changes could alleviate some of the pressure, but James directs us to what we need in order to know how to honour God in every situation. We need wisdom. Wisdom is also known as discernment, that skill we gain through experience, where we know how to negotiate trickier and harder situations with more faithfulness. Today wisdom is thought to be a time management technique; or how to win friends and influence people; or a way to be tech savvy to take the work out of work. No doubt there is good sense in gaining some of these life

skills, but biblical wisdom is not the art of living efficiently, but being holy. Biblical wisdom is defined as a fear of the Lord, Job 28:28, 'And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.' Life hacks might make your life easier, but biblical wisdom can make your life harder as you commit to being holy and not compromising and as a result bring about persecution and suffering. Wisdom is what we need to know how to be holy. James is not asking you if you want to be holy but telling you how. A read through the book of proverbs shows how a life of holiness is the good life that we should pursue, that the shiny things that promise happiness are lies that harm in the end. Sin does create a difficult world for us to live in where we are constantly faced with new and pressing opportunities to sin. We must not be naïve but discerning and prepared.

What form would an answer to prayer for wisdom take? It could be the conviction of the Spirit in the conscience; the wise advice from a Christian friend; a word in season from the pulpit; the Spirit illuminating your daily reading of the Bible; or God by His Spirit making certain relevant truths come alive while you are quiet and listening in prayer. I can imagine a scenario where you are struggling with a decision at work. The boss is not a believer and wants to do something that violates your conscience, it is here on your knees before the all seeing God, where your sins are exposed and you are newly surrendered to His will that His holy law becomes the wisdom you need to know what to do. Or if you are in a strained relationship, someone you know said some things to you that have upset you; and they are lies; and now you are before God examining yourself; owning your sins; imitating Christ's example of praying for those who say false things about you; suddenly those paths of revenge, of seeking justice, of slander to others are all shut to you, and God's wise paths of peace and reconciliation are before you. This is how wisdom comes to us in prayer.

Wisdom is what we need, and prayer is how we get it. I love what John Blanchard said, and I paraphrase, 'the secret to prayer is..., praying!' We must stop and acknowledge that we as Christians are terrible at prayer. Even though we are needy, we don't go to the God who has all power; even though He has made the way open, we do not enter; even though we have been given Christ's name to take with us to ensure our reception we do not use it; even though we have been given a new status who can approach God as our Father, we are far off. We must not miss the point that we must pray, and we so often don't.

Wisdom is what we need; prayer is how we get it; and it is God that we get it from. James in the style of Jesus builds up our faith, in order to stimulate us to prayer, by dwelling on the character of God. God gives generously. This word is discussed by the commentators as also meaning genuinely/sincerely. Does God give until our cups are overflowing; or does God give in truth, both are true. James words remind us of Jesus teaching in Luke 11:11-13, 'What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' God gives universally, to all. All are sinners, all are welcome, in Christ we are all children who have access and will be answered by God. Powerful and rich people may have the ear of the Prime minister, but all of God's children have His ear. He gives unrepentantly. He does not scold as He gives; He does not make you feel stupid when you ask; He does not say, I gave to you last week why are you asking again. He gives certainly/definitely, it will be given to him. He is reliable; sympathetic; able and

willing. Knowing who God is, knowing His grace and goodness and willingness to condescend and be gracious to the humble and needy. Where earthly kings might lose patience with needy beggars, the broken and contrite He does not despise.

Praying with a single-minded faith

But we must pray in faith. V6-8, 'But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.' The bible is filled with promises about prayer and faith. Matt. 21:21-22, 'And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.'" Now we know that there has been a lot of abuse around the teaching of faith and prayer. The word of faith movement has taught that we are made by God to be little gods who will things into being by our faith like God willed the universe into being. This is a shocking and blasphemous teaching where God is portrayed as impotent because we have all authority; and who is proud of us for being willful like an over indulgent parent because we get bossy and demanding and flex our faith. The reason why prayer and faith are linked is not because our wills somehow control the universe; or because God is impressed with our conviction. No our faith is our confidence in God as He has revealed Himself. God seeks to manifest His glory and He will not confirm a lie by making a norm of answering faithless prayer. God may sometimes answer an unbeliever or a faithless prayer because it is His will, but this will be despite the sin in the prayer not because of it.

God does not hear prayer from the impenitent because this is a denial of His purity and holiness; He does not hear prayers that are accusatory and doubting or misrepresenting Him as a monster; He does not answer prayers that are entitled and lacking humility. The question we must ask ourselves is what does a lack of faith look like for James' audience? I think we can see two ways in which there could be doubt or a lack of faith evident in chapter 1. When we go through hard times we can doubt whether God is good or wise or willing to help. It is clear that James recognizes that people are denying that God is good forgetting that He gives all of the good things we have in life to enjoy as a sign of His goodness, and more importantly that God even saved us, look at v16-18, 'Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.' How can you think God has it out for you to destroy you when every good gift is from Him, more after He has gone through all the work of saving you? He has not saved you to do you in. God is for you not against you, these difficulties you are experiencing do not negate that He is your Father. Paul seeks to encourage the Romans with a similar idea, Rom. 8:31-32, 'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' Paul too is aware that this fallen world with a groaning creation, and we who groan ourselves seem to paint a dark picture where we might imagine

due to all the pain, and war, and calamity, and sin that we might not make it to heaven, that we might slip through His fingers. But Paul assures us that due to Christ taking all our condemnation, due to the fact that Judge has ruled for us and vindicated us, there is no more wrath out for our blood, no vengeance that will have the last word. No God who gave His best in His Son will also ensure that those He has justified will be glorified. The harder work of giving Christ as a your sin bearer is done, what then is the lesser work of steering children through this life to heaven. So bring this back to praying in faith. When you are suffering and go to God in prayer, do you believe that He is your Father; that your sins are paid for; that He is for you; that He is working all things together for good? Think about what a terrible thing it is to go to God in prayer after He has demonstrated His love and willingness to aid sinners in the costly sacrifice of His Son and consumed with the importance of your own pain refuse to see His love and goodness and only play the victim and holler and bawl and get angry. Faith is not shutting your eyes as hard as you can and imagining through visualization techniques that the tooth fairy is real. No faith is in a person, it is your confidence in God. And God has given us every possible assurance that we would come to Him knowing His willingness to hear and give to us in our need. Come with that confidence, come recognizing the love He has displayed in His Son. The truth is God is greater than your expectations of Him; He answers above and beyond what we expected. We have grounds for a confident faith in God. Not a magic ticket that treats God like a slot machine, but an absolute confidence that the most holy, most powerful God is our Father and is for us. Don't let your trials diminish your faith, exercise your confidence in God in prayer.

But there seems to be another way in which James anticipates the faith of these sufferers failing. You will notice that he uses that description, 'double-minded.' This is the first known use of this word in Greek, it literally means, 'two-souled'. Not to be confused with 'two-spirited', a native American gender designation. The other use in James is found in 4:8, 'Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.' It seems that double-minded not only refers to vacillating between faith in God and doubting God; but also being in two minds about holiness and sin, having two masters, as Jesus put it. It seems to me that James recognizes that praying in faith is not only praying confident in God's goodness and willingness, but also praying committed to holiness and wanting the wisdom that enables us to be holy in hard times. There you are in the middle of your ordeal, your self-pity arises to tell you that you deserve a well earned sin-break, go and indulge yourself you have been working hard. James comes along and says, count it joy; let steadfastness have its full effect, pray to God for the wisdom you need to negotiate this tough time with all its temptations. But do you want to do the right thing? Do you want to add the difficulty of being holy to the difficulty of your lot. There are two common responses to suffering; firstly we doubt God; secondly, we doubt whether holiness is worth it. Psalm 73 where Asaph felt that it had been futile to keep his hand pure when God allows the righteous to suffer and the evil to prosper is a common human reaction.

It seems to me that James is aware that not everyone is seeking the wisdom to be holy but is rather making excuses to sin. Look at 1:13-15, 'Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.' It appears as if

they are blaming God not only for the difficulty but for the sin that results in their lives from it. I remember a young woman saying to me when I was a young Christian, 'If God didn't want me to do these things, He shouldn't have given me these desires.' Do you want to be holy? You can't be double-minded. If you pray to God asking for help to be holy during your difficult times but you don't really desire that holiness in your hearts, then you are not praying in a way that will be answered. If you are harbouring doubts about whether you want to do the hard thing and be holy, then no, God will not answer your prayer for wisdom.

James ends this section with a warning, if you are double-minded, that is caught between faith and doubt; or caught between wanting sin and asking for wisdom not to sin, you will be like a little wave that gets blown about in every cross wind. You will be unstable in all your ways. There will be no maturity, no consistency, no reliability. You will be the opposite of what God is trying to make of you through trials, and you will be everything the devil wants you to be.

Hard times will come; we should respond with single-minded and faith filled prayer. we must pray; we must ask for the wisdom we need to be holy; we must come with faith in a willing God who is for us; and with the single-minded desire to be holy and not harbor sin. If we do, we can be confident that God will equip us, and enable us to stand during difficult times.