

Passage: James 1:5-8

Please turn in your Bibles to James 1:5-8 (ESV p. 1011 in the pew bibles)

As you turn there, hear this reminder from our Father:

- 1 *My son, keep my words
and treasure up my commandments with you;*
- 2 *keep my commandments and live;
keep my teaching as the apple of your eye;*
- 3 *bind them on your fingers;
write them on the tablet of your heart.*
- 4 *Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and call insight your intimate friend". (Prov. 7:1-4)*

Having heard this reminder from God, please give attention now to the reading of his Holy Word.

James 1:5-8

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Praise be to God.

Let's pray.

Holy Father, as we study your word this morning, we ask that you would give us wisdom. Help us not to lean on our own understanding, or to be wise in our own eyes. Help us to receive your word and treasure up your commandments. Make our ears attentive to wisdom and incline our hearts to your understanding. Help us to seek for it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures. Lord, speak through your servant this morning, for we are listening. For we know that you alone give wisdom and that is why we ask you for it in Jesus name, Amen.

Illustration: When I was a young child, it was the practice of many missionary organizations to send out binding policies for all of their missionaries of what they could and could not do. Where they had to focus their efforts and how they should do their respective ministries. This drove many missionaries crazy, because they were the ones suffering on the front lines. They were the ones who knew the culture and the context. What was needed and appropriate.

At least with MTW, the PCA's mission sending agency, things have changed since those days. Now a missionary leads at the highest level. Missionaries are involved in the working and tweaking of policies. They are involved and the policies make more sense for the missionaries on the ground.

When people who are giving out guidance are out of touch with the people they are caring for, it can seem like top-down management. It can feel distant and irrelevant.

This was not James' approach. He was in the trenches with the people. Not only was he writing to people who were suffering, he was writing from experience of suffering. He wasn't calling on people to do something he himself was not already practicing.

And even though it has only been one week since we last studied James, we cannot forget who James was writing to. Remember, people were literally escaping from their home towns. They were dispersed all over, hiding from the likes of the zealous religious men like Saul, who later became Paul. Who would go from town to town trying to imprison all the Christians possible.

Imagine how it would feel if you heard that last week one of our beloved elders and his family were imprisoned for their faith along with one of our most faithful deacons. How would you react? How would it feel if we learned that one of the most passionate evangelists of our church had been murdered in a heinous way, just for preaching the good news of the gospel?

You would be terrified, would you not? I know I would. If we had lived during the days that James wrote this letter, no doubt Haggasippius, the man who wrote of James' knees being as large as that of a camel's due to his constant prayer, would have written something like this about my knees: "Nathaniel's knees were like the knees of a camel, but only because they were shaking and hitting together so rapidly out of immense fear that they became inflamed and enlarged."

In this sort of persecution, we would be shaking uncontrollably, we would be hiding ourselves and our families.

James knew this, and to think that he is merely an arm-chair theologian just sitting in his nice leather chair, writing articles for Christians, would be to completely misunderstand what James is doing here.

He was not writing in a theological treatise. He was not talking about the pros and cons of good theology in an abstract manner. He was writing to answer a specific need. A particular situation.

That of a church living in the world where everything was caving in on them. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. The Jesus they loved, had died and resurrected, and had gone on to heaven. The life that they once lived had been torn from their hands. And naturally, they were doubting. They were confused.

Where was God? What was God doing?

Last week we reviewed the first section of James' letter. There he was encouraging the people of God to know that in their various difficult trials, the answer to these questions of "where is God?", is that He was present with them.

He was at work. He had not only *not* abandoned them, but he was making them pure and holy by his sovereign plan. He was working purposefully to perfect them to be like him.

No doubt, understanding God's purpose behind the suffering would provide *some* comfort and joy or peace, and relieve *some* of the sting of the trial, but in another real sense, there must have still been some real confusion and anxiety.

Don't you think they (and probably we) would be asking, "Does God really need to do it *this* way? Aren't there other methods to making us holy and perfect?"

The pain of suffering can lead to confusion and resentment when we don't understand what is going on.

Given the confusion that must have been present, James says, "**If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously.**"

Remember, James isn't a theologian who is simply writing on **the topic of wisdom**, as if it were one among many theological topics that he has been reading about and feels like he should share.

He doesn't have that luxury. The church is in turmoil. The church is suffering. He is suffering. None of it makes sense. They didn't understand God's plan.

So, James responds: **we must ask for wisdom**. Wisdom will get us through this. It will help us find joy in the suffering. Wisdom will help us *see God's plan* in the valley of the shadow of death. It will open our eyes to things that man cannot understand apart from God.

John Calvin says, "if this doctrine is higher than what your minds can reach to, ask the Lord to illuminate you by his Spirit." (Calvin, 281). He knew that this would be an issue for us!

How do we get Wisdom?

If wisdom is what we need, how can we get it? James says we have to **ask in faith, without hesitation** or doubting. Without wavering. Otherwise we are like the waves of the sea that are blown around by any wind that hits them.

We can obtain wisdom by having a genuine faith. **A faith that is undivided.**

James says that we cannot be double-minded when coming before God: trusting in God only when things work out to our advantage or for our benefit. James describes this as a wavering faith. This is no faith at all.

Jesus said that even the faith the size of a mustard seed is enough. And yet, we must realize that that mustard sized faith ***must still be a genuine faith.***

Maybe you are thinking to yourself, “Well, there goes my chance at gaining wisdom. My faith is weak, I would certainly consider it as lacking in something! If there is one verse in the bible that I can resonate with perfectly it is ‘***Lord I believe, help my unbelief!***”

If we are honest with ourselves, we probably all feel this way. And when we read passages like this saying that we must “ask in faith” we immediately get discouraged because it seems like some sort of trick. Hey, “***It is a great promise, but we will never attain it!***”

But I would caution us not to misunderstand what James is meaning here. James isn’t requiring a faith that is unattainable. He is requiring a *genuine faith*.

So, what does a genuine faith look like? A genuine faith is *a faith that practices what it says*. It “walks the talk”. For if faith is to be real and genuine, it must be a living and active faith. Later in his letter we will read that James goes on to say “faith without works is dead.”

This is why he brings up the double-minded issue. You must be single-minded when you approach God. He demands our *full faith and our full love* – remember the greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.

You can’t have one foot in the desires of this world and one foot in heaven. You can’t serve God and your own desires. You cannot have two masters.

Again, James isn’t just *trying to get you to be theologically astute*. **He longs for our faith to be real faith, genuine faith.**

Illustration: Discrediting actions

Last week I read an article about a young teenager whose mother yelled at him whenever he got a bad grade in regular school, but he says, “when I brought home a bad grade from religious school, she didn’t care.Grades in regular school determined futures and salaries. For her, the world was more important, and the authorities at my religious school seemed to agree. They rarely fussed about my grades and seemed content that I was moral enough by the world’s standards....” (Dworkin, 21)

His mother’s faith didn’t show forth in her actions. Her actions discredited her. Her actions spoke louder than her words.

How often do we show to our children, our fellow workers, our family and friends that our faith really doesn’t mean all that much to us in this same way? Our faith is discredited in this way.

When you make a move to a new home, as you search for housing, what spiritual factors come into play? Do you ask yourself these questions? Do you consider whether or not there is a good church in that city by which you and your family can be fed? Do you consider how the distance from the church might impact your involvement there?

These are some of the first questions we should be asking ourselves. This is a demonstration that *our faith comes first. **That our faith is alive.***

If our lives are driven by the **priorities** of financial stability and success, the best education money can buy or comfortable living (though all of these can have a place in life), then we should question whether or not our prayers are heard.

We cannot simply live as the world does while calling ourselves Christians. This is **not** genuine faith. James says that it does not accomplish anything. **Our lives and our faith must coincide.** Lest we prove ourselves to be double-minded in all our ways - our lives, our emotions, our well-being, being pushed around by any wind or wave that comes our way.

God desires to see us unified in mind and purpose. One love. One God.

But the reality we face is that we are often dominated not by the strange and ugly sins that are so repugnant to us (though sometimes by those as well) but by the decent and supposedly little sins that creep in undetected.

It is in those things that *don't seem so bad*. A stable income, a healthy family, a good education...all good things...until they soon **take over**. And when God threatens the wellbeing of what have quickly become our precious treasures, we get angry. We get frustrated. We hear the little child in us come out and say, "not fair!"

When this becomes our reaction in trials and hardships, it is evident that we have replaced our faith in the unseen with faith in that which we can see and feel. When God threatens these things, we are shaken. For God is shaking what we have placed our worth and trust in.

Paul Tripp, in his excellent devotional book called *New Morning Mercies* writes in the entry for August 3rd the following:

"The first four words of the Bible [In the beginning God] confront us with the inescapable reality that it is not all about us. They confront us with the truth that life comes from, is controlled by, and exists for another. We will never be at the center because God is. It will never be about us because it's about him. ...Life will not submit to us because ultimately all things will submit to him. He is at center state.Jesus came to decimate our misplaced loyalty so that we would find freedom from our bondage to ourselves and know the peace that passes understanding." Paul Tripp, August 3.

For us to have genuine faith, we must be single-minded in all things. We exist not for ourselves, *but for God*. We are not the “the center of his focus”, but he *must be the center of our focus*.

Remembering this reality helps us face life in genuine faith. This is what wisdom teaches. Wisdom reminds us that ***everything is about God, and not us***.

When God grants his wisdom, we are able to respond as Job did in the midst of unspeakable tragedy:

“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (Job 1:21).

Can you imagine the impact this sort of faith has on people?

Ronald Dworkin, a teacher from George Washington University did a study on the reasons why people of all ages are leaving the church. His basic conclusion that ties all his findings together is that the reason people are leaving is *not* due to a lack of belief in God, but rather because the church does not appear that different from the world – and offers no advantage to joining it over some other social club. He writes,

Religion for the most part lets young people be. Even when they do join a religion, the young people often discover they can pretty much live as they did before. Without an attitude toward morality differing significantly from the world's attitude, religion seems altogether unnecessary. (Dworkin, 21).

The gist of his findings is that the church doesn't stand out to people as something different than what they are already getting elsewhere.

We could chalk up that perspective up to just a few bad apples souring the bunch, which would be the easy way out. Or we could take ***this insight to heart*** and ask *where these people observe this perspective*.

Is it what the church is teaching, ***or*** is it how the church is living? Perhaps it is both.

In either case, it is a rebuke to Christians everywhere. One that we should take seriously and we should prayerfully seek ways in which we can repent from these tendencies in our own lives.

The article goes on to say that people aren't looking for social clubs in churches. They aren't looking for politics or morals. They go to the church because they want to gain some sort of ***philosophy of life***. They want to know why they are here on this earth and what purpose life has. But they aren't finding it.

If they look at the church and find that *we say one thing* and then in hardships we bunker down and live out another reality entirely, what does that communicate?

“That school grades are more important than Sunday school grades.”

That our faith is convenient, but not real. Or at the least, very frail and weak.

What would happen if we, as a church, in the midst of one of the most horrible tragedies of our lives, would respond to a listening world:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (Job 1:21).

It would transform the areas we live in. It would transform our families and our church in ways we couldn’t even begin to imagine. Our workplaces, schools and neighborhoods would certainly notice.

People are listening. People are watching. The gospel is presented best when it is accompanied by a genuine living and active faith.

Wisdom through Prayer

Growing up in the Andes of Peru, we would occasionally take a Saturday to hike a new mountain. Often we would get to the peak of said mountain, only to find that it was an initial ridge of a much larger mountain.

In the same way, a key part of a genuine and living faith gets even harder still.

James really makes us work for it. Remember how his knees were compared to that of a camel’s due to his constant prayer life? Wisdom is a gift, and a gift that God gives out generously and without hesitation, but *we must ask for it* in prayer.

This is part of genuine faith. Asking through prayer. Dependence on God the Father.

Calvin says that when we ask God, we demonstrate that we believe that *HE ALONE* can heal our diseases and meet our needs.

Wisdom is needed in all areas of life. When we pray for wisdom, we should not just think of it as a download that once we ask for it, we are through with it- though God gives wisdom generously. As finite and sinful beings, we will consistently need wisdom from God at every turn.

For “He who has made the greatest progress [in wisdom] is yet far off from the goal.” (Calvin, 285)

If you have wrestled with me through this passage, you might be weary. You may understand what James is saying here – at least a little better – but you are still very aware of your own shortcomings.

Praise the Lord! We all fall short. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We fall short every day in every way.

Nevertheless, we are still called to this impossible task. We are called to get down on our knees and pray with perfect unwavering faith. Pretty impossible!

And yet this is not the only place we are called to the impossible. Let me mention just a few:

God commands us: “Be holy as I am holy.”

God commanded Ezekiel to: Preach to dead bones and to give them life.

We are commanded to Love our enemies.

We are commanded to Love God with *all our heart, soul, strength and mind*.

We are commanded to Love our neighbor as ourselves.

These are impossible commands! We simply cannot obey them. We will fail every time. And yet God still commands us to obey them, and obey them we must.

Henry Krabbendam explains this tension with great insight when he says:

...both faith and prayer are never the human *cause* for the divine distribution of grace. By the same token ***without them the divine distribution simply does not take place! This once and for all cuts out both self-reliant pride and indifferent laziness!*** In its stead we will feast upon the regrettably rare treat of both humble and unmistakable dependence and electrifying operational involvement! (Krabbendam, 261).

What he is saying here is, God’s hand is in the impossible. Our faith and our prayer are never the *cause* for God giving us his grace – that is a gift won for us by Jesus Christ. ***And yet***, without our faith and without our prayer, God will not impart his wisdom to us.

This gives us the great privilege of being involved in God’s glorious endeavors, while understanding fully well, that we are utterly dependent on him for all things!

Krabbendam illustrates God answering our prayers for wisdom with a lawnmower example. Let me explain.

If as fathers we were to ask our sons to mow the lawn, and they came knocking on our doors asking for gas for the mower, would we not first of all be happy that they are obeying, and then wouldn’t we jump to give them the gas, a hat, some cool water and whatever else they asked for? We would jump at the opportunity to enable them to accomplish what we requested of them. We would equip them with every good thing.

God calls us to prayer and calls us to ask for wisdom, and when we come to him, he jumps to his feet so to speak, and generously gives us above and beyond what we are asking for. He gives of his wisdom generously.

God calls us to the impossible, and he equips us for it.

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, **but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans**. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, *because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God*” (Romans 8:26-27 NIV).

Brothers and sisters, in Jesus Christ, God has made for us that which is impossible, possible. He has given us the comforter who intercedes on our behalf. He equips us with all good things.

Without God's perfect provision, where would we be? I will conclude with these words from the Apostle Paul – reminding us that all provisions are from God alone so that the man who boasts, boasts in the Lord.

1Cor. 1:26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, **who became to us wisdom from God**, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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