

Sunday July 2, 2023

Lesson 5: Testing. Testing. One. Two. Three.

Scripture: James 1: 2-8

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this first lesson of our second unit, “Wisdom,” we look at the prominence of wisdom as a theme throughout the Bible. Each week we will look at how wisdom is woven throughout the text and how God gives wisdom as a gift to humanity. Today we will look at the book of James to explain the Bible’s need for wisdom and the motivation to seek it.

The book of James in the New Testament is known as a letter written to Christians to help them address matters of ecclesiology and how they were called to live with one another. James starts of this part of the letter alluding to how Christians are to rejoice in various trials as these ordeals produce endurance.¹ This endurance leads the Christians to be better formed and prepared for the world. The trials Christians endure remind them they depend on God.² As they face such things, they are reminded salvation comes from nowhere except from the Lord.

James goes on to explain how Christians are to receive something in these trials; the gift of wisdom. According to James though, there are obstacles which can stand in the way of this gift. The first is a suspicion of God’s nature and the second is the flaw of those who ask for wisdom and if they truly want to receive it.³ In his counsel, James reassures the audience God does not exhibit the same flaws humans do in gift-giving and God is more than ready to grant the request for wisdom.⁴ This very fact has been shown in God’s past interactions including the time with Solomon, and for the numerous passages in the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. God has always been willing to bestow humanity with the gift of wisdom if they will receive it.

Yet human nature is not always as apt to receive what God offers. Using the image of a storm-tossed sea, James focuses on how Christians can function. The particular graphic of a storm-tossed sea was popular in moral exhortation for the inner turmoil of a person without virtue.⁵ For wavering, uncertain Christians, wisdom cannot be a gift because it will conflict with the other forces at work within them. The section presents a paradox as on one hand those without wisdom are to ask God for it while on the other hand, God only responds to the prayer of those whose hearts are committed to God’s way.⁶ However, paradoxes are often part of the life

¹ Perkins, Pheme. “First and Second Peter, James, and Jude.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 96.

² Ibid., 97.

³ Ibid., 98.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 98-99.

⁶ Ibid., 99.

of faith and make it richer for those who are in relationship with God.

Application

There's an old saying: "Be careful what you ask for because you might just get it." The saying originates from the fact we ask or wish for things and then when we receive it, we are surprised or perhaps not content with what is given to us. When you receive a gift, it can come with both good and bad things not obvious to the eye. There is a twist when it comes to wisdom though. Even as the bad comes, one is given a gift from God to be sustained and nourished through the trials placed in front of them.

Given a choice, most humans will avoid pain whether it is physical or emotional. And for good reason as pain can cause disruptions and make us uncomfortable. Beyond a few individuals with a proclivity for distress and tension, most people will try to do the least painful thing as there is the hope and belief it will lead to better days ahead.

As we sit with this chapter in James though, we see how trials and tests are not times where we shy away from pain or the complexities of life. If anything, these are the times where we become more mature and we bloom. The pain produces a grit to help us understand our identity a little better and to be able to face the days ahead.

For Christians, this becomes the time where we realize the little control we have in this life, and we are utterly dependent on God. Thus, we ask God for wisdom to help us know what to do and for us to be filled during a storm. There is to be no hesitation in asking for God for help as there is no other place to turn.

This passage tells us so much about God and God's character more than it does about humanity. Here we learn of the nature of God which is so humbling for us. God doesn't keep a tally of how much we ask for help, or how much we ask for. God just gives because of the powerful love God has for us. God wants us to move through life with the faith we need to move forward each day.

A few years ago, I will never forget having a colleague deeply listen to me and some of the dilemmas and challenges I felt I had in front of me. They were very attentive and very compassionate. Towards the close of the conversation, without giving a to-do list of counsel or some fix-it-all answer, they said, "Sounds like a serenity prayer moment going on for you. I will be praying for you in this season."

This colleague was wise as we both knew the connections to the serenity prayer. Reinhold Niebuhr was a very influential American theologian (1892-1971) who wrote the serenity prayer for a sermon, and eventually placed it in a longer-form poem. The most shortened version goes: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." The prayer puts into perspective how much we cannot change and yet there are a few things we can do, all covered with the plea to discern which ones belong in which camp.

Since my colleague gently nudged me in that direction to pray the serenity prayer, it is one I have repeated over and over. For all of us, there are so many things we cannot control. We cannot control what other people do. We cannot change things like the weather or time. As much as we might hate it, we cannot control institutions or how people make decisions.

Yet every day, we are given the gift from God to use wisdom to help us live with honor and conviction. God will give to us and even when we fail or mess up, God will keep hearing our prayers and filling us with what we need. God will not abandon us as this is not in God's nature; God does not forsake us even when we forsake God.

Throughout the Bible, there are admonitions for the people of God to ask for wisdom. This occurs because God knows how often we are tempted to rely on ourselves or on our own thoughts. God wants us to keep returning to the Lord and asking for the gift of wisdom.

Why do you think wisdom is so prominent in the Bible? Who are wise people who help you see the bigger picture in life? What are the ways we can ask God for wisdom? How does this passage help us understand the character of God better? How do you think trials help us grow in wisdom?

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