

LIVING TO GAIN GOD'S APPROVAL:
THE CROWN THAT COUNTS
James 1 v 5-12
September 22nd, 2013

There's an old Gospel-oriented song with the chorus which says:

"you've gotta serve somebody;
you've gotta serve somebody;
it might be the devil, it might be the Lord
but you've gotta serve somebody!"

Sooner or later, that's true, isn't it? We 'serve' that is we give our ultimate loyalty to whomever because we've been influenced by them and then we naturally aim to please them as well.

So whom do we set out to ultimately 'serve' to please, whom do we take our cues from?

It could be our parents and the heritage they've left us?
Could be our spouse and the example they set us?
Could be our friends and the direction their behaviour or attitudes kind of drag us in?
Could be that media columnist or personality whose views seem to make sense to us, somehow?
Could be a mixture of the above?
All those people will influence us and there's nothing unusual about that at all, of course.

Last week, I spoke about the reality that trials/tests of various kinds would confront Christians in this world, simply because they are Christians.

Perhaps you thought some of the examples I chose a little ... remote from your life?

Well, such 'tests can be as simple as how we handle it when relatives blaspheme or visit and don't accompany us to worship.

James now gets quite specific as he focuses on the Christian's need for clarity when facing tests. He gives counsel to us about the confidence which comes from knowing where true Wisdom can be found and reinforces the value of a distinctive testimony which a true respect for self and others brings for the Gospel.

(1) The Confidence To Face Tests Which A Knowledge Of The Source Of Wisdom Gives v5-8.

This may seem like a strange way of explaining these words, but is it?

"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." So says verse five.

Remember the context, it's all about tests/trials —character-building stuff. That's why Jesus' Words were read about His followers not being anxious when in tight corners, put on-the-spot, required to appear before magistrates or hostile religious officials and answer for their faith in Christ [Luke 21 v5-19]. They would be given words to use in reply/defense: we've all experienced such situations now haven't we? Now remember, in James' day, Christians neither had a complete New Testament nor access to the entire Old Testament.

Now perhaps you may have thought, verse five, refers mainly to such dramatic examples as I've mentioned both then and now—maybe in Syria or Pakistan places of extreme tension like those? Well yes.

Indeed, in addition, some Christians teach that verse five refers to requests for God's Guidance

concerning unusual decisions requiring long-term commitment such as a land-purchase or marriage or similar unusually demanding decisions. Clearly it would.

No doubt, James has in mind any and every test. In the context, persecution of various kinds: victimisation at work, eviction from home, trial for one's faith, interrogation by synagogue officials about Jesus etc.

Question is, where would they find "Wisdom" to know how to cope? The short answer is to ask God in prayer and He would Reveal it by means of His Spirit.

But does verse five only refer to such dramatic incidents or to more ordinary issues? I think to questions of "wisdom" i.e. applied knowledge generally.

So how about us? How do we find answers so as to reply faithfully and loyally? In God's Word, that's right. Why do I say that? Because we do now have access to His full and final Revelation of Himself in New and Old Testament. Yes we can and should pray that the Holy Spirit personally Apply the truths of Scripture to our hearts but we should go to the Scripture for our Wisdom.

So when we read, regularly, we should be praying that we remember its content so we can bring it to mind in our answers.

But this is where verse six to eight come in:

"But when he asks,

(as he opens the Word to read) he must believe and not doubt (doubt the Word's relevance, Wisdom and authority), because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

That man should not think he will receive anything (any sense of direction or clarity) from the Lord; He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

'in James' day, there were those who remained loyal to the Lord and there were those who were compromised Christians—whom James calls double-minded; has anything changed?

As you attend services and hear these messages, what condition is your mind in? Like soil, aiming to absorb the message like thirsty ground, keen to suck the nutrients from it; or like baked soil where the moisture at best will lie for a while before being dried up?

I imagine it's harder to remain fresh and enthusiastic as a mature-aged person and yet God's Word says it is possible:

"they will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming,

"The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him." [Psalm 92 v14-15]

When you open God's Word to read, is it something you treasure to do regularly, because you recognise it as your source of Spiritual Wisdom, refreshment and encouragement for life, or something you do because you feel you must for some reason?

God says to us we are to primarily ask Him for Wisdom on any given topic of life: not any of the sources I mentioned at the beginning of the message. Our aim should be to please and serve Him above all.

If we approach the Word, to only get devotional-emotional feelings from it, we will become stunted, sickly, unhealthy Christians.

God's Word itself tells us that Jesus is Himself Wisdom, He embodies it.

"in (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Colossians 2 v3)

So hesitation as to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture as the source of Wisdom will effect our growth.

However, whilst wanting Christians to be confident, James also wanted them to live lives of distinct testimony to the Gospel's power to transform and so we move to verses nine to eleven.

(2) The True Respect For Self And Others Promotes The Distinct Testimony Of The Gospel v9-11.

"The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business."

These exhortations were given at a time when class-division was firmly fixed; when masters were masters and slaves slaves.

In our day there is, again, the fragmenting of society into ethnic groups, generational-groups class is becoming an issue again even in some churches.

Into these realities comes James who says:

[A] Accept your current social circumstances whether "humble" or "rich". How wonderful that people from both backgrounds can coexist in the Church as genuine followers of Jesus! Remember that the poor will always exist and that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. No wonder Solomon's prayer is dripping with that Wisdom I spoke of earlier:

"give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown You, and say "who is the Lord?" Or may become poor and steal and so dishonour the name of my God." [Proverbs 30 v8-9]

Perhaps you find it difficult to accept your background for whatever reason? Well, James would say acknowledge it and then

[B] appreciate your Spiritual standing in Christ i.e. the poor can "boast in their high position" the rich "in their low position". This is where the Gospel distinctive kicks in! This is not to remove the existing distinctions but put them in their real Spiritual context. In the world, rich and poor are divided but in the Church they are one! The world divides but Jesus unites.

James spends more time with the rich because this world and its appeal seems so attractive and achievable so he quotes Isaiah's famous description of the decay of grass to remind all of the frailty of human riches. Yes, they are attractive but they will fade and fall away.

All must experience humiliation before they can experience the glories of exaltation.

He ends with these encouraging words at verse twelve:

"Blessed (truly happy) is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

So are you serving the Lord cheerfully? There'll be a "crown of life" He'll award you on that day you know, how splendid will that be, eh?