
Prayers

To God

Praise God as the source of all goodness, who defeats all evil in the world, and who works through people. All this is much to embrace, but it is the truth which sets us free.

For myself

Dear Lord Jesus, bless me I pray as I seek to be Your witness in this world. Help me to learn more about my faith, help me to be loving towards all people, and help me to work hard for what is right. In this way, may I grow into someone who is useful in Your Kingdom. Praise You. **AMEN**

For others

Weekly theme: the environment

Pray for the world and its vegetation, in particular, its trees. Trees are a major part of God's provision on earth, and they both control the purity of our atmosphere and provide rich resources of wood products, and ultimately, oil. Thank God for this provision.

Meditation

(developed from 1 Chronicles 4:10)

I ask for Your blessing,
Creator God of universal majesty.
 Draw near to me, examine my life and remake my soul;
 Place within me the blessed assurance of faith.

I ask for Your provision,
Almighty Lord of ultimate authority.
 Help me, and from the storehouse of Your precious gifts;
 Grant me whatever I need to do Your will.

I ask for Your presence,
Loving Jesus Christ of Calvary and Easter.
 Touch me and purify me with Your precious salvation;
 And lead me always by your love and peace.

I ask for Your protection

All powerful Holy Spirit of wind and fire.

Gather me in Your protective arms and restore my zeal;
To do, to be, and to live, forever renewed.

Bible Passage

James 1:5-11

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, then ask God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given you. ⁶ But ask in faith, without criticism, for the critic is like the waves of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed around. ⁷ That person should certainly not imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being in two minds and unstable in action.

⁹ The downtrodden believer should boast about having a high position, ¹⁰ and the successful believer should boast about being brought low, for he will perish like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and shrivels the plant; its flower falls and its beauty is destroyed. The well-heeled will fade away just like this in the midst of a busy life.

Review

Yesterday, we read the opening verses of James' letter. After a brief introduction, James immediately launches into encouraging his readers in the midst of persecution (1:3,4). Then, in the two paragraphs that follow, which are our passage today (1:5-8, 9-11), his theme moves on rapidly. He continues to show concern for those who are suffering (see the '*downtrodden believer*' in verse 9), but as a whole, our passage offers more general advice about the life of faith. James speaks of seeking wisdom (1:5), the folly of criticism (1:6) and its consequences (1:7,8), success and failure in matters of faith (1:9,10), and the judgement of God on the things people do (1:11).

At first reading, James's advice sounds forthright, if not rather brusque. As we study it more closely, we will find that his teaching touches on a number of significant Scriptural themes, but there is one feature that is particularly significant. Every sentence of James's advice links closely with something within the teaching of Jesus. As we go through the verses of this passage, we will of course study what James says. However, we will find that each point is so strongly connected with the words of Jesus, we can hardly read James' words without bringing to mind the power of Jesus's own teaching, and we will find the same throughout most of this letter. In this, James is perhaps a model of Christian teaching and encouragement.

The first piece of advice in this passage is given to those who are seeking faith. But why should James ask in this way, '*if any of you lacks wisdom*'? We might think this a simple request for religious knowledge and enlightenment, but it was far more than that. In James' day, it was generally believed that the gods could only be reached by acquiring special knowledge and wisdom, often through secret religious societies who jealously guarded their own form of 'wisdom'. The Roman world was awash with such religions, and today, they go by the name of 'Gnosticism'. Understanding this, we may realise that when James says '*if any of you lacks wisdom*', he means those who are indeed searching for God. Moreover, his

point is this, and in its day this was revolutionary. In Christ, those who look for God can find Him easily, all they have to do is ask, they do not have to embark on a mystery tour of philosophy or learning! James only speaks here of asking God, and does not mention Jesus, as we might reckon best. However for James, it did not matter whether one asked Jesus or God, for as we see in the opening of his letter, he certainly believed that to speak of one was to speak of the other (1:1).

Now we can hardly read verse 5 without immediately spotting the obvious connection with Jesus' teaching; he says, *'ask ... and it will be given you'* (1:5)! This is one of Jesus' most famous teaching themes, occurring in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:7, Luke 11:9), and also in John's famous report of Jesus' teaching about the pruning of the vine, *'if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you'* (John 15:7). This is perhaps one of the most famous teachings of Jesus, but it does not encourage people to think they can just get what they want from God. At its most clear in the report within John's gospel, this great saying of Jesus is about being so close to God, our wants and needs are the same as His.

James knew this, for although not one of the disciples, he was not far away when Jesus taught this radical and new teaching about God, and he had seen his brother die for what he taught. So, using another famous picture from the events of Jesus' life, the stilling of the storm (Matt 8:24), James encouraged his readers to draw close to their Lord, and make their requests *'in faith'* but without *'criticism'*, which he parodies as a form of doubt and uncertainty (1:6f.). James paints a picture here in which the Christian is tossed in the storms of life like the disciples on Lake Galilee. His point is this, the one who earnestly seeks God may find Him by faith (1:5), but the one who will not settle on this faith and persists in *'criticism'* still lives in the midst of life's storms and has not yet discovered a Saviour (1:7,8)

As we read on, James seeks again to encourage believers, especially those who are *'downtrodden'*. He does this by reminding them of Jesus' famous words, spoken to the disciples in the days before his death, in which he describes the reversal of fortunes found in the Kingdom of God; he said, *'the last will be first and the first last'*. Jesus first said this when Peter asked what he would gain in God's Kingdom (Matt 19:30). He said something very similar when He placed a child in the midst of the disciples (Matt 18:1-4), and He repeated the teaching when the disciples squabbled about their places in the Kingdom next to Jesus (Matt 20:26)! Jesus wanted the disciples to understand the need for humility, because all authority and power in the Kingdom belonged to God, and His call for humility is amply demonstrated in His own powerful, tragic and yet victorious life. The message is irresistible, and it establishes a fundamental principle of the church, which is that before God, there can be no human hierarchy. The most *'downtrodden'* Christians can know they have a *'high position'* in God's Kingdom, and prominent believers must remember their low estate (1:9,10).

To illustrate this basic Christian teaching, James calls to mind yet more of Jesus' words, this time, His comments about *'worrying'* from the Sermon on the Mount; I quote:

27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? 28 ... See how the lilies of the field grow; they do not labour or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (Mat 6:27-30)

James uses this picture of decay and mortality to illustrate the fading value of earthly riches and success (1:10-11). As we read on in James' letter, he will have much more to say, especially to the rich people of the church who have not, it seems understood some of the church fundamentals. But then, few have done since, and this is what makes the letter of James such an important and pertinent letter of the New Testament.

Discipleship

Application

Faith, and questioning God

James is forceful in his attack on 'criticism' (1:6). This is a difficult subject, because critical judgement is a fundamental activity of the human mind, and one that underpins most modern academia. Does James, and therefore Scripture, deny the importance of critical thinking and judgement? I do not think so. What James picks up here is the problem of people who cannot make their mind up about religious matters, preferring to ask questions rather than to stand firmly on the rock of faith in Christ. He acknowledges at the very beginning the needs of those who are enquiring about faith, and this is an essential quest without which people will not find a Saviour. But he expects people to find Him, and not spend the whole of life wandering around reflecting on Him or having opinions without expressing commitment.

The very beginning of James' letter can therefore be read as an appeal to faith, pure and simple. It does not come in the same language as the letters of Paul, but it is direct enough. This is worth remembering when, later on, we come to read James' call to Christian people to make sure they demonstrate 'deeds' to complement and prove 'faith'.

Being brought low for Christ

All too often, Christians put others on pedestals; it seems that we cannot help doing this. Some ministers or pastors suffer this despite their protestations, and other church leaders, evangelists or helpers can find themselves honoured because of their work for the Lord. Some write books and make money from their name for their ministries, some revel in the acceptance they have achieved within a fellowship, and then presume to be unquestioned in what they say and do. Moreover, they know that it is improper for them to be seen to have status, so they pronounce themselves humble, and say so frequently.

All of this is a flat contradiction of the nature of God's Kingdom, and God's people do well to rid themselves of all semblance of such dubious piety. Simple reference to the Scriptures quoted in this study will draw people's attention to the truths of the Gospel.

Ideas for what to do

- Ask a friend you can trust about how you come across to others, and ask this friend about the positive and negative aspects of your character, as seen by others. Expect honesty and nothing else, and discuss your feelings about this with your friend.
- Spend a day of prayer and fasting asking God to give you wisdom and faith, and ask the Lord to change you for the better.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does faith help us in times of trial? Think of practical situations in which this is the case.
2. Is it possible to be 'critical' of faith or of God in any way, but without compromising faith?
3. Have a further read of verses 9-11 and work out who, in your culture and society, are the 'successful' and 'well-heeled'. Of what should they be afraid?

Final Prayer

We thank You, Almighty God, for the gift of faith. You have accepted us on the basis of our faith, and yet it is You who have placed faith within us! Give us the grace to continue living in faith, demonstrating faith and witnessing to faith throughout our lives. AMEN