

Sunday School Lesson for August 2, 2020

Good morning, I hope you are well and blessed.

Lesson for August 2, 2020, "Faith and Wisdom" Background Scripture from James 1:1-11.

For the remainder of the quarter, we will look at the book of James to see what this early leader of the church has to teach us about wisdom and faith. While there are at least a couple of people named James identified in the gospels, most scholars agree that the writer of this letter was James, the brother of Jesus, not James the apostle. He is listed as one of the brothers of Jesus by both Mark (6:3) and Matthew (13:55). All four gospels relate the story of Jesus' mother and his brothers showing up where he is teaching in an attempt to dissuade him from continuing his public ministry and urge him to return home with them (Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, Luke 8:19-21, and John 7:3-5).

Following Jesus' death and resurrection, James has a change of heart and becomes a leader of the congregation of new converts in Jerusalem. Peter instructs the believers he finds at John Mark's mother's house to go tell James and the others about his miraculous escape from prison (Acts 12:12-17). When the first church council meets to consider the matter of the conversion of Gentiles, it is James who issues the ruling statement on how they will proceed (Acts 15:1-21). When he introduces himself at the opening of his letter, he refers to himself as a "servant" – or more literally, a "slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

He addresses this letter, "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." The 12 tribes of Israel had been scattered outside the original boundaries of Israel for centuries, going back at least to the Babylonian exile. Some had already begun to interpret Jesus' calling of the 12 to be his disciples as the restoration of the covenant people. In the first few years, that community of believers in Jerusalem dispersed, particularly following the execution of Stephen (Acts 8:1). There were thriving Jewish-Christian communities, but the early believers did not have the support of established, Christian churches. James wrote to them as concerned leader, to encourage them in their faith during those difficult times. In addition, Peter, Phillip, Barnabas, and later Paul were all fanning out across the countryside proclaiming the good news and establishing communities of faith throughout the Roman Empire.

The first issue is how to deal with the opposition, challenges, difficulties, and trials facing believers. James says "when" you face trials, not "if." He

assumes that we will have trials and that it is possible to profit from them. The point is not to pretend to be happy when we face pain, but to have a positive outlook (consider it pure joy) because of what trials can produce in our lives. James tells us to turn our hardships into times of learning.

James' advice: "Consider it an opportunity for great joy. While it may sound surprising, his guidance aligns with that of his brother: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

This is an indication that James took seriously, Jesus's invitation to "Be perfect; therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). John Wesley believed we could become perfect in love in this life. He didn't mean we would be free from mistakes, temptation, or failure.

James turns to "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God" (1:5). Wisdom is the recognition that there is more to this life than satisfying our physical appetites. Wisdom leads one to "walk blamelessly." When a person is walking blamelessly, in a way that honors God's will and purpose, that path leads to righteousness, justice, and equity.

As we learned in the book of Proverbs, God's wisdom is offered as guidance for our daily lives. It is a gift meant to enrich the quality of our relationships and the strength of our communities. The enduring value of wisdom is that it carries with it the understanding that my relationship with God and my neighbor are more important than any pleasures that might tempt me to do any less than love God with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love my neighbor as myself (see Luke 10:27).

James affirms God's generosity in giving wisdom to those who ask, even as Woman Wisdom promised free access to this good gift of God. But as Woman Wisdom warned about the temptation of attending to the call of Folly, James warns his readers about being double-minded. "Ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (1:6). God is willing to give us wisdom, but we will be unable to receive it if our goals are self-centered, instead of God-centered.

James wants his readers to know that the way through difficult times is to place their trust in God. "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." When James turns his attention to the "rich," he makes the same connection to being double-minded as his brother. Those who acquire wealth are tempted to believe that they are able to care for themselves,

insulate themselves from the difficulties that plague others. But as Isaiah attests, "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8).

There are also echoes of the parable of the rich fool in these verses. Recall Jesus introduces that parable with this warning: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). When we have all we need and more, there is a real temptation to become more focused on keeping what we have than in ways we can use what we have to bless others. We can begin to see others as competitors rather than as fellow citizens of the kingdom God sent his son to establish. We fail to accept the way of wisdom and begin to follow the way of the world.

The poor should be glad that riches mean nothing to God; otherwise these people would be considered unworthy. The rich should be glad that money means nothing to God, because money is easily lost. We find true wealth by developing our spiritual life, not by developing our financial assets.

More than any other book in the New Testament, James places the spotlight on the necessity for believers to act in accordance with our faith. How well do our actions mirror the faith that we proclaim? Trials are exercises for developing muscles and strength. This is true for relationships to church life, to personal spiritual growth. Trials are "tests of faith." Trials confirm our faith, trials purify our faith in fire, and trials grow our trust in God because we see the trustworthiness of his Word and character when we lean on it over and over again and again. Trials "produce endurance." Trials make us bitter or better.

James describes the man lacking faith as double-minded and unstable. No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Although this passage from Luke's gospel is talking about money, the principle of double-mindedness is well expressed. Jesus says you can't have it both ways. One who is double-minded is a person who believes they can have it both ways in spite of the Truth that they cannot.

Double-minded. The Greek transliteration is dipsuchos. This Greek word is used only twice and both times by James. It literally means double-minded, uncertain, doubting, wavering, unstable, and divided interest. A mind that wavers is not completely convinced that God's way is the best.

From the section, "Stepping into the World" – When we read the final verses of this week's passage, we might remember the early days of the Christian community in Jerusalem as described in Acts 2, where the believers, "held all things in common", making sure that they met the needs of the least advantaged. We hear echoes of Jesus and his formula of the first being last and the last being first in Jesus' imagery for believers who are poor and those who are rich. Those will be raised up and those with it all will wilt like flowers.

The text final verse says; "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 as he goes about his business." Still describing the unsaved rich man, James uses the picture of the effect that the sun and its heat has on the grass and the flower. Just as the sun and its heat kills the grass and the grace of the flower (meaning the beauty of the flowers), in the same way "so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways." This means that the unsaved rich man, while he is still in his ways or still making plans for getting richer will eventually die.

As Jesus Christ of Nazareth was teaching in His last discourse before He was kidnapped, He spoke to the Eleven about part of the work of the Holy Spirit. "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost (Spirit), whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." John 14:26. This promise can touch all of our lives. Trials, temptations, afflictions, and more are part of life here on earth. Amid all of these shine the promises of God. Nehemiah wrote, "*For the joy of the LORD is your strength*" (Nehemiah 8:10), and the psalmist said, "*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning*" (Psalms 30:5). Our faith must be put into practice. God will help us find and develop the qualities we need to mature in spirit.

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.

Next week's lesson August 9, 2020, "Hearing and Doing the Word"
Background Scripture James 1:19-27.

Sources for this lesson: The Bible, Sermons from Dr. Bob Utey, retired professor of Bible Interpretation and Pastor, Rev. James Temples, Lesson on Wisdom and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.