

Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 1:5-11

Topic

James calls us double-minded if we ask God for wisdom then doubt that He will give it to us

Title

"A Double-Mind is a Terrible Thing to Embrace"

Introduction

If you're going to move from Hanford to San Diego, plan on it being 66% more expensive overall. Your house will cost 282% more in San Diego.

Economists provide these kinds of statistics so you will know how much salary you will need to maintain or increase your current standard of living after a move.

What if you are suddenly forced away from your home, and become a refugee? Standard of living goes out the window when you are just trying to survive.

The audience James was addressing were "the twelve tribes... scattered abroad." They were ethnic Jews who had received Jesus as their Messiah and were suddenly forced to flee Jerusalem due to religious persecution against them.

Some may have had family to flee to; others became refugees, seeking any city where they might resettle.

Their standard of living was sure to take a huge hit:

- Their belongings would either have already been plundered, or mostly left behind.
- Wherever they ended-up, there would be few employment opportunities (if any).

Those who had monetary wealth they could carry would, at best, be humiliated. At worst, they'd be in constant danger of being robbed.

James has something to say to them. Two things, actually:

1. In verses nine, ten, and eleven, James will put their new standard of living into its true spiritual perspective.
2. In verses five through eight, James will remind them of their old standard **for** living, and encourage them to stick to it.

We are *not* refugees, but, spiritually speaking, we *are* pilgrims on the earth, looking forward to our heavenly home in the city whose builder and maker is God. Thus it's probably a good idea for us to put our standard of living into its true spiritual perspective.

It's also a good idea to determine what standard we have adopted **for** living. Is it worldly? Or is it godly?

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Wisdom Ought To Be Your Standard For Living, and #2 Wealth Ought Not To Be Your Standard Of Living.

#1 Wisdom Ought To Be
Your Standard For Living
(v5-8)

2017 isn't all that far away. Some of you might be in the habit of making New Year's resolutions.

Before you do, I should tell you that Millennials have put their own spin on New Year's resolutions. It is now popular to choose **one word** instead of a list of resolutions.

myoneword.org is just one of many sites to encourages you along these lines. To make it easier for you, there is a list of suggested words, and testimonials from people who have picked their one word.

Some of the suggested words seem insightful: Hope, achieve, and flourish, for example.

One person, very seriously, chose the word Ramano. At first I thought they were referring to the Italian cheese, but the spelling was different. They were referring to the comedian. Their explanation was, "You should always be like Ray Ramano, because *Everybody Loves Raymond*."

Before you completely dismiss this one word stuff with one word by saying it's all a bunch of "hooey," I submit to you that James gives us a single word of resolution. It is **wisdom**.

Wisdom ought to be the Christian's standard *for* living. It's the one-word that guides you in every decision.

Jas 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

Ask what "wisdom" means, and you'll hear something like this: "Knowledge is knowing the facts, but wisdom is the proper application of knowledge."

That understanding of wisdom is OK, so far as it goes. But notice something. James says the wisdom he is talking about is a gift from God, Who will give it upon asking Him for it in prayer.

As a Jew, James viewed wisdom as it related to the practice of righteousness in daily life. It is the spiritual discernment that enables the believer to make decisions and choose actions consistent with God's will.

One commentator defines it as "that... regulative discretion which sees and selects worthy ends, and the best means of attaining them."

We can think of wisdom, then, as a **regulator**. It is a **divine regulator**.

In the world of mechanical engineering, a regulator is a device which has the function of maintaining a designated characteristic. It performs the activity of managing or maintaining a range of values in a machine.

A thermostat is one example; you set it to regulate the temperature you desire.

Wisdom is a righteousness-regulator. It is a divine enablement that regulates your decisions and actions so that they are consistent with what pleases God.

Having been suddenly scattered out into a larger world, these Messianic Jews had decisions to make, about how to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Some of those decisions were not going to be so black-and-white, no matter how well they knew their Scriptures.

The best way to explain what James means by wisdom in their situation is to see it lived-out in the lives of a few famous Jewish heroes of the faith. To see wisdom in action, so to speak, in those who had been in similar scattered situations.

In the Old Testament, Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, was hated by his brothers and sold into slavery by them. Far from home, with no hope of ever returning, and (so far as we know) the only Jew in Egypt, Joseph had a lot of decisions to make about being in the world, but not of the world.

He maintained God's righteous standard of holiness by refusing the advances of Potiphar's wife - even though it sent him to prison. But later in the story we see Joseph adopt some of the culture and customs of Egypt - like marrying a non-Jew, and eating and dressing like one.

Wasn't that a compromise with the world? Apparently not.

How did Joseph know what was consistent with righteousness in his stressful situation, and what was inconsistent? James would say he must have asked for, and received, divine wisdom.

Daniel and his three friends are the second example. Taken captive, they were forced to become assimilated in the surrounding Babylonian culture. They accepted new names; they dressed like Babylonians; they studied subjects that we would consider the occult.

Weren't they compromising with the world? Apparently not. Like Joseph, they knew *when* and *where* to draw the line. James would say they were regulated by wisdom asked for, and given to them, by God.

We are out in the world, being pressured by cultures and customs that are non-Christian at best, and ungodly at worst. We read the Bible; but we don't always know where to draw the line. Things aren't always black-and-white.

Wisdom is what we need - wisdom that is a gift from God, to regulate our decisions and actions when things aren't so clear, so that they are consistent with righteousness.

Wisdom is something we are to "ask" for. If it's a gift, I can't *learn* it, or *earn* it. We are therefore dependent upon God to give it.

God gives it "to all liberally." God is a liberal when it comes to dispensing wisdom. You can have it all the time, in abundance, by just asking for it.

He gives it "without reproach," meaning He does not reprove you for needing His help. He wants you to ask - admitting your dependence upon Him, rather than declaring your independence.

Here is something super-encouraging: No matter how much of God's Word you know, or don't know, *you can be given wisdom to live righteously*. It doesn't depend on your knowledge, but on God's promise.

Knowledge is not unimportant to wisdom, if you mean biblical knowledge. We are told,

2Ti 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

2Ti 3:17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

We have the Bible; we have knowledge, and we can grow in it as we study.

Some things are clearly spelled-out in God's Word. If something is a sin, I don't need to ask for wisdom about whether I should do it or not. The Word of God **is** the regulator in those situations.

If something is clearly commanded, or demanded, in Scripture - again, I simply do it. I don't need to ask about it.

There are some things you'll encounter that aren't so clear. Let me give you an example of something that was not covered in the Scriptures. If you ask people what the greatest single example of wisdom is, most likely they will say it was Solomon's decision when asked to determine which of two women were the birth mother of a baby. He ordered the baby cut in two, giving half to each lady.

One woman thought that was a great idea; the other begged Solomon to repeal his order, and instead give the baby to her rival. It showed that she was the child's mother.

The conclusion was, "Everyone in Israel was amazed when they heard how Solomon had made his decision. They realized that **God had given him wisdom to judge fairly**" (First Kings 3:28).

Solomon, the ultimate wiseguy, was "given" wisdom, as a gift, to regulate a situation that wasn't addressed by God in His Word.

[Jas 1:6](#) But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.

The "doubting" here has to do with the nature and character of God. James just said God gives liberally, and without reproach. I should never think otherwise of God. I should not doubt His generosity. I should think of Him as the One Who wants to help me, and not as One Who has somehow left me to fend for myself.

Is it not an all too human reaction in those kinds of circumstances to think that God has abandoned you? That He has turned His back on you?

In the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye attempts to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as outside influences encroach upon the family's lives - not the least of which is them being expelled from Russia.

At one point Tevye says to God, "Sometimes I wonder, when it gets too quiet up there, if You are thinking, "What kind of mischief can I play on My friend Tevye?"

It is an all too human reaction that we are to overcome by "faith," and believe God is immediately available to help us.

James pictured them as waves, being driven and tossed by the wind. "Faith" in God's generosity would calm them.

Jas 1:7 For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;

In the recent Christian film, *God's Not Dead*, the characters had a saying they'd repeat to one another when things looked bad: "God is good, All the time; and All the time, God is good."

If you doubt God's goodness, it's going to be impossible for you to "receive" His good gift of wisdom. He wants to give it, generously; but you won't be able to receive it unless you first see Him as the giver of good things; as the One Who is working in you, and Who causes all things to work together for the good.

Jas 1:8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

There is no use of the word "double-minded" in Greek literature before its use here by James. He uses the word twice in this letter, and it is used nowhere else in the New Testament.

James coined this special word to get his point across.

It is literally translated, *two-souled*. We do not have two souls. James was suggesting that, after we are born-again, we can *act* as if we have two souls - one facing the Lord, and the other facing the world.

For the Messianic Jews James was writing to, scattered as they were out in the world, compromising with the world was a constant pressure.

And not just the way we normally think, by partaking of ungodly things. As the Book of Hebrews will make clear, there was intense pressure for them to return to Judaism. Many Jews would, in fact, return, in order to end the persecution against them.

Such a two-souled solution only made things worse. Such a person is "unstable in all his ways." "Unstable" means *to lack a sure foundation*.

To vacillate between the Lord and the world leaves you on shaky ground. The Lord is your only sure foundation.

There is always pressure to be double-minded. It is especially difficult when God's wisdom tells you to go against the world.

I mentioned Joseph and Daniel and his three friends. When God's wisdom meant defying the world, their very lives were at stake.

For us, it may not be our lives, per se. But it can mean our jobs, or our family.

Let me give you a quick summary of James' encouragement:

You are scattered out in the world, away from your future home in the New Jerusalem. It is likely that often you will find yourself in circumstances that leave you questioning God's goodness, feeling tossed too and fro as a wave of the sea.

But God is good, All the time; and All the time, God is good. He stands ready to help, by giving you His wisdom on how you are to live righteously in your circumstances. The world will try to get you to compromise, but you should avoid being two-souled, and instead take your stand for the Lord, regardless the pressure to conform, and the consequences of living for Christ.

Wisdom is your standard for living the Christian life. It's foundation is the Word of God, and your knowledge of it is critical. But, in the end, wisdom is a generous gift received by faith, available to all believers, anytime we ask.

One more thing, before moving on. A little later in this letter, James will return to talking about wisdom. He will tell us how we can recognize when it is from God, and not from our own thinking.

Jas 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.

Jas 3:14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

Jas 3:15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.

Jas 3:16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

Jas 3:17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.

Jas 3:18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

If your decision or behavior doesn't look like that, it's not wisdom.

#2 Wealth Ought Not To Be Your Standard Of Living

(v9-11)

Thinking again of Tevye, he also says this to God: "It may sound like I'm complaining, but I'm not. After all, with Your help, I'm starving to death. Oh, dear Lord. You made many many poor people. I realize, of course, it's no shame to be poor... but it's no great honor either. So what would be so terrible... if I had a small fortune?"

Persecution left these scattered Jews impoverished. Those who had been wealthy were humiliated. Their situation was not likely to get any better.

If James was writing around 50AD, in less than two decades any hopes of returning home, to Jerusalem, would be dashed when Titus and his Roman legions destroyed the city and its Temple.

We know the history of ethnic Jews after that. Through the centuries they would settle as immigrants and find ways to be successful - until some new threat of persecution again came against them, plundering their goods, and taking their lives.

James gave them a heavenly perspective on their standard of living as a persecuted people.

Jas 1:9 Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation,

By "lowly" James meant social status and wealth. These believers were barely getting by, and it was getting worse for them throughout the Gentile countries.

Yet all of the lowly could and therefore should "glory in... exaltation."

How were they exalted? In a passage in the Book of Romans, the apostle Paul lists the following spiritual blessings that belong to **all** Israelites - *even nonbelieving ones*.

Rom 9:4 ... [to] Israelites... pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises;

Rom 9:5 of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God.

Believing Jews, and Gentile Christians like ourselves, are even *more* spiritually rich:

2Co 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

In Christ we have been blessed with "every spiritual blessing" (Ephesians 1:3). His riches are described as "unfathomable" (Ephesians 3:8).

In the animated film, *Megamind*, after endowing Hal with super powers, Megamind tells him, "You've been blessed with unfathomable powers!" Hal doesn't understand what unfathomable means, so Megamind tries to explain, saying, "It's like, uh, without fathom."

I always feel that way trying to describe our riches in Jesus. I can't really fathom them.

We are "accepted in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6), "forgiven for Christ's sake" (Ephesians 4:32), "justified by His grace" (Titus 3:7), and "kept by the power of God" (First Peter 1:5).

Later on James will say,

Jas 2:5 Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be **rich** in faith and **heirs** of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

Your earthly standard of living can change dramatically, in an instant. That's why you are to glory in your spiritual riches in Jesus - both now and to come.

Jas 1:10 but the rich [should glory] in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.

Jas 1:11 For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

The persecution against Messianic Jews did not discriminate. Wealthy Messianic Jews were forced to flee. This is a word for them - to encourage them about what they'd lost.

Those who trust in riches, and pursue them above spiritual things, are no more permanent than the flower of the field that withers under the hot, desert sun.

These scattered Jewish believers may have lost their wealth on earth, but what does it profit to gain the whole world if you lose your soul?

They, too, enjoyed all the spiritual blessings in Christ, and now, perhaps, they could appreciate them all the more.

The Bible does not mandate a single standard of living for believers. It doesn't suggest we live communally, sharing all things in common.

You can be wealthy; many Bible characters were wealthy. Just be aware that there are many warnings about money, and about pursuing wealth.

It's easy to think God is blessing me if I have more when, in fact, the more I have might be getting in the way of my relationship with the Lord.

James' point here seems to be that, if you are devastated by persecution, and lose your wealth, it is something to glory in - because you are suffering for your testimony as a believer in Jesus Christ.

Those who remain wealthy, who are safe from persecution because they don't know the Lord, are the ones to be pitied.

When Solomon succeeded David as king over Israel, the Lord appeared to him, and told him he could ask for anything he wanted. Solomon asked for "a wise and discerning heart." He asked for wisdom. God gave it to him.

Ask God and he will generously give you wisdom. Make "wisdom" your one word resolution.