

In Bed with the World

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[0 : 0 0] For several years, my grandfather would say when I visited him, why is God not answering my prayers?

In particular, his prayer was to die. And two years ago, next week, my grandfather died at the age of 98 and a half. But ever since my grandmother died when she was 93 or 4, he had wanted to die.

And complained to me that God was not answering his prayers. Of course, we can say that in the end, God did. He's dead. And one hopes and prays, well, one hopes, and I'm sure really, that he with my grandmother now united together back in the presence of God.

But why is it that sometimes our prayers are not answered? Why is it that we can pray good prayers even, and yet we don't seem to get the answer that we think God would want, let alone ourselves?

Early in this letter of James, James urges prayer for wisdom. That comes in the very opening section of the book, or the letter. Chapter 1, verse 5.

[1 : 1 7] If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. Just as happened for Solomon back in Old Testament times, 960 BC, when he was king of Israel, praying to God for wisdom.

And God answered that prayer and gave him wisdom. And James is saying, so be it for us. Pray, pray for wisdom, and God will answer that prayer, as he did for Solomon.

But there's a caution in those opening verses of James as well. The caution comes in the chapter 1, verse 6, to the end of that paragraph. James' whole letter is written to address double-minded people.

Double-minded Christians. People who want to live with a foot in each camp. People who want to love God, but at the same time love the world. People who want to be devout and godly, but at the same time enjoy the pleasures of the world.

And James is writing this letter to change double-mindedness to single-mindedness. And that's what it's about. But his warnings through this letter are clear.

[2 : 5 5] That in the end, double-mindedness, or in this passage tonight, friendship with the world, doesn't also, on the other hand, mean friendship with God. But rather, if in the double-mindedness we're wanting to be friends with the world, then that places us at enmity with Almighty God.

James, in asking people to pray for wisdom at the beginning, is saying that if you do doubt, it may well be the reason for prayers not being answered.

Of course, God in his mercy is sovereign, and he can still answer and give answers to prayers even of doubters. But we ought not to expect, we ought not to complain to God if we're double-minded in our praying, and in our lives, and our prayers are not answered.

That issue comes back to us at the end of chapter 3 and through chapter 4. In particular, he's writing to these double-minded Christians, and through their double-mindedness, he's writing therefore to a church that is rather a dispute with itself, in conflict with itself.

And so he's showing us, firstly, what true wisdom is. We often think of wisdom as being academic, intellectual head knowledge, or about thinking.

[4 : 25] But actually, wisdom in Scripture is very practical. In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is about skill in living. It's very practical, down to earth.

In fact, the person who built the tabernacle back in Exodus was wise for that task. And it gave a sort of practical skill. So James, rather, is saying in verse 13, Who is wise and understanding among you?

Not the academic or the thinker, necessarily. Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness, born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.

Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, in fact devilish. For where there is envy, selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

But then the wisdom from above is first pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield full of mercy and good fruits without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

[5 : 42] The rhetorical question that begins that, Who is wise and understanding among you? Implies that that's what the church thought. That they were wise and that they were understanding. But the response of James in this paragraph shows that in fact they were not.

They were not wise and understanding. And it's seen not by their lack of academic rigor, but by their practical living. And they're living together as a church.

The fruit of false wisdom in verse 14 is bitter envy, selfish ambition. That's the sort of thing that gives rise in the beginning of chapter 4 to the conflicts and disputes among you within the church life.

That is, they claim to be wise, but it is evident that they are not. They're not practicing it. So they're double-minded or double-hearted or double-souled.

That is, they've got a foot in each camp. They're trying to be in with God, but in with the world. But their behavior is worldly and not heavenly. Therefore, they're denying actually the truth.

[6 : 51] They're hypocrites in effect. The description of such people in verse 15 is indeed severe. Such people are not at friends with God. They're not got a foot in each camp, really, even though that's how they're trying to live.

Because the wisdom that they're practicing in their life, seen in their ambition and envy, and therefore the disputes, is firstly, verse 15 says, earthly.

That is, it's not from God. But then James escalates in the three descriptions at the end of this verse. Not only is it simply earthly, which at one level could almost be neutral.

It's unspiritual, which is a slightly more negative description. But then to put the icing on the cake, so to speak, it's actually devilish. See, there's actually only two camps and you can't be in both.

Friendship with the world is devilish. Friendship with God is in conflict. And you can't, in the end, be in both camps.

[7 : 55] And if you're trying to be that, which is what James is addressing, people who are trying to be that, then actually you're in the camp with the world, a devilish camp, a natural, unspiritual camp.

You're pretending that you're wise and you're pretending that you're friends with God. But actually the reality is different. It's a bleak assessment. James doesn't pull any punches here.

He's not sort of bending over backwards with polite tactfulness. He's saying you're devilish in your behavior. Where there is envy and selfish ambition, where there are conflicts and disputes among you, that is among the church, chapter 4, verse 1, then that's devilish behavior.

It's not godly behavior. It's not the fruit of godly wisdom at all, is what he's saying. And the justification for such harsh language in verse 15 comes in verse 16.

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there'll also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. And that's what he's castigating them about. We've seen that in recent weeks.

[9 : 01] They say that they're people of faith. Where are your good works? You say that you are wise. Where is the fruit of your wisdom? Is the angle that James is approaching it here at the end of chapter 3.

But in contrast, the wisdom from above, from God, is what? Cleverness? An ability to understand or think? No, the list of things that follows is about fruitful living, practical living.

This is James' equivalent of what Paul calls in Galatians the fruit of the spirit. The fruit of God's wisdom. Pure. Pure. Not double-minded, which is impure.

Where contrasts are battling with each other for ascendancy. It's peaceable. That is, it's not full of divisions that are caused by envy and ambition, which creates competition.

I'm better than they are. I want this power. You've got that power. We divide. That's what's happening in the church to which James is writing. Rather, it's peaceable. It's gentle or humble.

[10 : 06] It's willing to yield. Even perhaps when you even think that you're right. It's a very striking contrast from envy and selfish ambition in this list of the fruit of wisdom.

It's about people who are humble and submissive. People who build peace in relationships. It's got a corporate setting about it. It's not just about somebody in their own little private world or cupboard being peaceable or humble.

Those sorts of characters that are in these verses make no sense in isolation from other people. It's about relationships between Christians. And devilish behavior divides.

But godly behavior unites. The list goes on. Full of mercy. Because others do wrong, as we do.

Mercy is part of God's character and is a fruit of the wisdom that comes from God as well. A forgiveness. And then good fruits. Full of mercy and good fruits.

[11 : 15] Probably a general sort of expression. But showing that true wisdom is practical. It's seen in the way that life is lived. It may even be the person who's the giver of mercy and good fruits being giver of mercy and arms for those who are worse off or poor.

Without partiality. Something that James has touched on also back in chapter 2. Again, the sense of being undivided. Not double crossing.

And then finally without hypocrisy at the end of verse 17. Being sincere. Again, he's tackling people who are double-minded. And they are hypocrites. They are partial.

They're trying to do a bit of both. Which are in competition. James is trying to build Christians who are single-minded in their devotion to God. Who are not flirting with the world.

But are deeply in love with God. And these Christians are not. And it's evident from their divisions and their poor behavior. And the culmination of that little argument in verse 18.

[12 : 19] Is that a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. The glaring omission in the life of the church to which James writes. Their lack of peace.

And these conflicts and disputes among you, he says in the beginning of chapter 4. Well, where do they come from? Because that's the issue. James has actually answered that question more or less.

Back in the verses we've just looked at. It's devilish. It's not from above. It's from below. There's only two possibilities. Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

Yes, there is an internal dispute going on. In the church to which James is writing here. But it's devilish in its origin. Well, James then goes on to come back to the issue of prayer.

He leads into that by saying, You want something and do not have it. So you commit murder.

[13 : 23] That's a pretty drastic action. I'm not sure that he's necessarily accusing each of them of murder. Maybe not even each of them of murderous hearts. But in effect, that's where such behavior leads to.

Their greedy desires. Their competition with others who have things that they want. Murder is the outcome in the end. The devilish outcome. As of course we see so many times in the Bible.

Not least way at the beginning with two brothers. Cain and Abel. And then he says, You covet something and cannot obtain it.

So you engage in disputes and conflicts. Again, it's the background of immoral, divided church life. And then comes the issue of prayer.

You do not have because you do not ask. How often actually that's the reason why our prayers are not answered. Because we haven't actually prayed.

[14 : 26] It's worth thinking about that. Simply, we don't pray. There are things that we want. They may be good things.

But do we actually get down on our knees, or metaphorically at least, and actually ask God for what is on our heart? Sometimes we simply think that the desire of our heart will come.

That that is prayer. But James is saying, Have you actually prayed for this to Almighty God? You see, prayer is not a hope, a dream, a desire, that just sits within our heart.

Prayer is addressing Almighty God, and asking Him. We might wish for something, but have not actually prayed for it. It's a bit like a computer problem.

I hate it when computers break down. A bit like tonight. And often someone might say to you, Well, have you switched it on? And actually, it's surprising how often we don't actually do that.

[15 : 33] And that's what James is in effect saying here. You don't have these things. What's going wrong with your prayer life? Have you actually switched it on? Have you actually prayed? The first thing to think about, if there are desires of our hearts that are not being met, have we actually prayed about them?

Because actually, the action of actually praying those things sometimes challenges us about the legitimacy of our desires. Oh, I can't actually ask God for that.

I realize that that is a selfish thing or a wrong thing. That is, when we're confronted by addressing God Himself, it actually clarifies sometimes the nature of what it is that we want or desire.

I often find Christians who are reticent to pray. Surprisingly, perhaps. I often find Christians who want others to pray for them.

And I try and say, Well, unless you're praying, I'm not going to... Why should I pray for you? When they ask me to pray for them. Perhaps it's an inadequacy. If so, it's a misunderstanding of the gospel.

[16 : 40] Sometimes it's an insecurity, a nervousness to approach God. Again, that's a basic misunderstanding of the gospel. Because the gospel enables us to approach the throne of grace with confidence.

I remember a few years ago reading a book about the monarchy in Laos, a country between Thailand and Vietnam. Sort of book you read, of course.

You know, it's hardly a bestseller. But I remember reading that the monarchy, which was overthrown by the communists in 1975, as I'm sure you all know, the monarch expected if anyone would approach him, they would be basically prostrate on the ground, lower than him.

If he was sitting there, they had to be virtually flat on the ground. We don't approach God in that way. We approach God with confidence to his throne of grace. And we are urged, encouraged, and invited time and again to pray.

And a sign of double-mindedness is that we are full of desires and greeds and covetous desires. We find that they're not being met. And sometimes that leads to a complaint back to God, he's not answering my prayers.

[17 : 52] First question is, have I prayed? And when we actually think about confronting almighty God, very often it clarifies for us the nature of our greedy desires.

But there's more. James says, you ask sometimes. Okay, you don't ask. That's one reason why you don't get answers to prayer. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

And here again is double-mindedness at work. People who are greedy for the world's delights and actually at the same time try and link that with praying to God for such things.

And then they get bitter, grumbling against God because the prayers may not be answered. And James is saying here, well, that's because your motives are wrong.

Surely. Wrong motives is, and asking selfishly, but asking to God is a very common sign of such double-mindedness. And James says that God will sometimes say no to such prayers.

[19 : 00] And when our prayers aren't answered, it's worth our while reflecting what is God saying? Why is he saying no? Is he teaching me something? Are my prayers selfish or indulgent?

Certainly that seems to be the implication here. Am I expressing covetousness rather than a desire for God's glory? God hears those prayers, but his answer may well be no.

We can certainly pray even for good things with wrong motives. We may pray for the conversion of somebody who is not a believer, not because we want them to love God, but because of our own selfish desires, maybe for a relationship with that person.

We may pray for healing, but with a motivation of our own personal comfort. Rather than for God's glory. So even sometimes praying for good things is coupled with wrong motives.

Again, a sign of double-mindedness to an extent. Therefore, the challenge is to be pure-minded, to seek above all and always the honor and glory of God himself.

[20 : 13] Just as the Lord's Prayer, of course, teaches us so clearly. James says in verse 4, Adulterers, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Now, he's not necessarily saying that each of these people is physically an adulterer sleeping with somebody else's spouse or whatever. But in their relationship with God, that's what they're practicing.

We have to bear in mind that behind this language of adultery is a strong Old Testament tradition. God views, in some way, his people as like his bride.

And we're to have an exclusive relationship with God, just like a husband and a wife physically. It's not to be shared with somebody else. That's what we could say double-mindedness.

It's to be an exclusive devotion between a husband and a wife, and so too between God and God's people. And God is always faithful. He's never adulterous spiritually with us.

[21 : 13] But time and again, the people of God committed spiritual adultery. And time and again, the prophets use the image of a marriage and show how Israel is faithless to God.

They're betrothed, in effect. The prophet Hosea and Ezekiel in particular, but Jeremiah and others as well. And so it's out of that tradition and background that James is saying adulterous.

That is, you're meant to be in an exclusive relationship with God, but at the same time, you're flirting with the world. You're in love with the world. That's basic double-mindedness at work.

Rather, we're to be faithful, exclusively devoted to Almighty God. And not the world. And not its delights and pleasures. So adulterous, he says.

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? You see, so often we pretend that we can be friends with the world and we love the world's things, and at the same time, we're friends with God.

[22 : 14] We're all okay together. Not so, says James. Just as Jesus said similar sorts of things. If you're friends with God, then we cannot be friends with the world.

It doesn't mean that we hate people in the world. Not at all. But that our love is for God above all. And that we're not enticed and seduced and tempted, or at least give in to temptation, to the world's delights and desires and idols.

Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, God yearns jealously for the spirit that he's made to dwell in us.

But he gives all the more grace. And therefore it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. James is indicating here that sometimes our unanswered prayers may be God teaching us, educating us, or disciplining us.

Certainly it's clear that sin is a blockage between people and God. And even for people who want to have a foot in God's camp and a foot in the world, they're committing a basic sin of spiritual adultery and idolatry and so on.

[23 : 38] It's a blockage with God. And the unanswered prayers may be, or ought to be, revealing our double-mindedness when they're not answered. And certainly, the New Testament teaches in many places that relational conflict is a basic hindrance to our prayers with God.

And James, at least, I think, is implying that. As those last verses of chapter 3 said, as we saw at the beginning, and the very beginning of chapter 4 say, these conflicts and disputes and ambitions between you, that's worldly behavior.

That's being friends with the world. And all those disputes and relational breakdowns, they come between you and God. You've put yourself in the world's camp with devilish behavior, unspiritual behavior, natural behavior, and therefore at enmity with God.

Why should God answer any of your prayers? Occasionally, in God's extraordinary mercy, he does. We should never take such things for granted when our lives are so worldly.

Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. Be single-minded, that is. Submit yourself to God. Not just in part, a bit of life, but a bit of the rest of our life is submitted to the world.

[24 : 55] No. Submit yourselves to God. Humble yourselves before God. Put Him first over and above you in all things, is what James is saying.

Or, to go back to the adultery analogy of verse 4, return to your first love of God and shun love of the world. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God.

Resist the devil, that is, the devilish behavior, the worldly behavior, as we saw at the end of chapter 3, and he'll flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. That is, be single-minded with God. Submitting yourselves to Him, shunning love of the world, being faithful to God, cleaning your hearts and minds, because these people are sinners.

They've got a foot in each cab. They're living a hypocrisy, a pretense in their Christian life. And when you try to have a foot in each cab, you're complaining because God's not delivering you what you want.

[26 : 09] Because, of course, what you want is conditioned by the world and not God. Lament, mourn, and weep. How strong repentance is.

It's not simply saying, oh God, I'm a bit sorry that I did this. Usually followed by a but, somebody else made me do it. But lament and mourn and weep. That's what repentance is meant to be like.

Turning back to God, submitting that to God, mourning and weeping for the way in which we've lived our life. Turning away from God and trying to be friends with the world. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to dejection.

Not that we go and live our lives with long faces and tears running down our face. But rather that our laughter and delight from the world should lead us now to rejection of that and sadness that that's the way we've lived.

As we come back to God who is a greater joy and a greater delight. So humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

[27 : 15] The world and its behaviours, the divisions and envies and ambitions that were described in chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 are all about self-exaltation.

That you're putting yourself over and above somebody else. Hence the divisions, the disputes, the ambitions and envies. But rather as the fruit of wisdom included things like gentleness, mercy and patience and willingness to yield so we could summarise be humble.

Humble yourself under God and he will exalt you. Not for our indulgence, not over and against an enemy or a competitor but that God will exalt us ultimately to his glorious kingdom.

An exaltation so far surpassing what our world offers us. That it makes us realise how foolish we are to seek the world's exaltation and delights.

James is urging Christians to be single-minded in their pursuit of God. to be single-hearted in their love of God.

[28 : 36] Living at the same time in a world that is always wanting to entice us, to attract us and seduce us. But friendship with the world places us at enmity with God.

As I say, it doesn't mean that we hate our world, that we hate pagans, that we live in some little religious ghetto or enclave, but rather that we love God and we serve him in this world.

And on the issue of prayer, James, I think, is using prayer as a vehicle for exposing their double-mindedness.

You pray for things, you ask for things and you don't get them. Why is that? I'll tell you why. Because you're double-minded. You're doing it out of selfish ambition or envy, indulgence, your personal comfort or pleasure rather than the glory of God, the honour of God, rather than out of love of God.

It's quite a challenging passage. James is pretty blunt, really, and it's very practical. It's not about a sort of esoteric wisdom up here. It's about living godly lives as the community of God's people.

[29 : 59] Peaceable, gentle. That's the fruit of godly wisdom as we saw at the end of chapter 3. That will be evident when we are deeply in love with God and not the world.

But when we're in love with the world, when we're not peaceable people, we're not actually humble people or gentle. So James is directing us to think about our hearts, to cleanse them, to allow God's mercy to forgive us, to return to God in submission and love and live and pray for his glory alone.

So let us pray. Amen. O Lord, our God, we ask your forgiveness for trying to live with friendship to the world and yet friendship with you.

and we thank you, Lord God, for this very clear and blunt analysis that shows us that the two are not compatible, that friendship with the world is ultimately devilish and therefore far from you.

Lord, our God, purify and cleanse our hearts, we pray, that we may be single-minded Christians, faithfully loving you and not flirting with idols of our world.

[31 : 34] We pray that the powerful blood of Jesus shed for us will not only forgive us but cleanse us so that we may love you with all our heart, soul and strength, that we may obey you and that we may bring you glory and honour.

Amen.