

The Letter of James and Double-Minded Doubt

James 1:1, 4:7-10

Introduction

Count it all joy when you fall into various trials. Desire gives birth to sin, which grows and brings death. God's word is a mirror. True religion is caring for widows and orphans. Faith without works is dead. The tongue is a spark that ignites a forest fire. Friendship with the world is enmity with God. These are just some of the well-known sayings and metaphors that litter the letter of James. James is an eminently practical book and has been likened to the book of Proverbs for its wisdom and variety of subjects it addresses. James draws heavily from the teachings of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. The general consensus for most of church history has been that the author is James the Just, who presided over the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and was the brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19). The other primary contender is James the Son of Zebedee, brother of John. Most commentators argue that, because of his early martyrdom (AD 44 – Acts 12:2), it is unlikely that he would have authored the letter. In either case, the author would have been highly respected by the early church as an apostle. He writes to "the twelve tribes," alluding to his audience as Jews and identifying them as the new Israel. These have been scattered beyond Jerusalem, likely due to the persecution of the Jewish authorities. Like all of Scripture, while James was not written to us, it is full of wisdom and exhortations very applicable for us in our time.

Double-Minded Doubt

Early in the letter, James says that he who doubts God is double-minded (1:6,8). This becomes a major theme through the letter. James argues that believers should seek wisdom from God when we are beset by trials, wisdom to understand that God uses trials to make us mature and complete. In the midst of various trials, we often are drawn to ask, "Why, God?" James warns that asking for wisdom, wisdom to be able to understand the answer to the question, must be done in faith, with no doubting. In other words, we should seek wisdom from God about our circumstances without questioning His goodness. We should be steadfast, trusting the Lord, establishing our hearts, and persevering like Job until we see the compassion and mercy of God (5:8-11). But to be double-minded is to be unstable in everything (1:8). To be double-minded is to want what God wants with one part of us but also to reject what He desires with another. Put negatively, to be double-minded is to not love and submit to God with everything (Matt. 22:37), to not seek Him with the whole heart (Ps. 119:2). As Jesus noted, you cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). Yet, even believers, bought with the blood of Christ, given new hearts, are still tempted to this double-mindedness often. So, James hits it from other angles as well.

Unstable Ways

Believers must not only *hear* the Word preached, but also must *do* the Word (1:21-25). We must not only believe the gospel in our hearts, but we must live it out. We must not only hear God's commands and nod in agreement, but we must then go and obey His commands. We are double-minded if we know what God says to do and then go off and neglect to apply it. And ultimately, it is because we do not take seriously the words of God. We doubt Him.

Similarly, we are double-minded if we “hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ...with partiality” (2:1). If we show preference and special attention to some, especially in the worship service, because they are wealthy, we are forgetting the grace of God and the gospel of Christ. It is easy here to see the double-mind. Believers ought not come to church to worship God while elevating some over others based on the kind of social divisions that the gospel has taken down (e.g., Gal. 3:28). This partiality is doubting the power of the gospel and instead seeking to curry favor with those who have earthly power.

James addresses a misunderstanding about justification by faith related to this theme (2:14-26). Some claim to be saved by their profession of faith, but they do not do the works that spring from true faith. James boldly states that faith without works is dead. A man who claims to have faith but does not have works demonstrating it is double-minded. He is inclined to believe the truths of the gospel but is does not seek the Lord with everything he has. And this shows the danger of the double-mind. This kind of faith is dead like a corpse without a spirit. It is not faith that rests in the true grace of God.

James also identifies the temptation to be double-tongued (3:1-12). The tongue is wild and unruly and dangerous. James says we use the gift of our speech both to bless our God and Father and to curse men made in God’s image. Beyond the circumstances that might provoke such cursing, if we truly loved and rested in God, how could we curse His image bearers? Because we are double-minded. This is unnatural, as unnatural as a spring sending both bitter and sweet water or a fig tree producing both figs and olives. Christians, however, should do everything, in word and deed, in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17).

This theme reaches a climax when James asks, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (4:4). James seems to address Christians beset by envy and covetousness, warring with one another (4:1-2). He identifies this as friendship with the world. These Christians’ desire to be like and liked by the world, conforming to its standards, is at odds with their profession. This double-mindedness unchecked will make them enemies of God. So James urges repentance, humility, and submission to God (4:6-10).

Conclusion

Double-mindedness comes from doubt of God (1:6, 8). The serpent stirred up this doubt of God—His purpose, His goodness, His trustworthy word—in Eve (Gen. 3:1). The serpent sought to stir up this doubt of the Father in Jesus (Matt. 4:3). And it is this doubt of God that he seeks to stir up in you. “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will 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...Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” The Lord God is good. All His plans for you, all His commands to you, all His desires for you are perfect. The greatest evidence for this is that He sent His Son to die for you. If Jesus died for you, then you can know that all things work together for good for you. If Jesus shed His blood for you, then you can trust Him and the Father who sent Him with everything. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. He gives more grace (4:6).