

The Need for Wisdom and Humility – Part 3

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the trials of faith need wisdom and humility, both of which are gifts of God during such times
2. aim – to cause us to seek wisdom and humility as we face the trials of our faith in all of life
3. passage – James 1:5-11

b. outline

1. The Need for Wisdom (James 1:5-8)
2. The Need for Humility (James 1:9-11)

c. opening

1. the **post-conference** sermons I will preach next week at Bethlehem
 - a. a letter written by the half-brother of Jesus, the bishop of Jerusalem, to *dispersed* Jewish believers
 - b. to *command* them to “*count it all joy*,” to see the long-term value of these “*testings of faith*”
 - c. that they are designed by God to produce a *steadfastness* that leads (ultimately) to perfection
 - d. (**now**) however, if one lacks wisdom, a *proper application of this knowledge*, he should ask God
 - e. and, he should ask without doubting, believing that God *can* and *will* give him insight
 - f. and, he should ask *accepting the answer received*, even if that answer is “less” than what was hoped for, or something other than what had been expected ...
2. the **completion** of the topic in this series
 - a. **note: vv. 9-11** are *absolutely* a part of the thought that begins in **v. 2** and ends in **v. 18**
 1. not some strange excursus away to a discussion of *social justice matters* (**i.e.** that the poor should be raised up by humiliating the rich; as many will “see” in these verses)
 2. that is one of the *dangers* of having verse numbers in our Bibles – it might lead us to think that the Bible is just a “listing” of interesting statements to be used *however we please* with no concern for the *underlying context in which they are found*
 - b. **IMO:** these verses *utterly* continue the thought of **vv. 2-8** (particularly **vv. 5-8**) because:
 1. **v. 12** (**i.e.** the next verse) *repeats* the thesis of the entire section (note the repeated words “*trial*” and “*steadfastness*” and “*test*,” all used above) – thus, these verses are “within” the thought
 2. there’s no reason to believe that James would be writing along about the trials of life, and the need for wisdom in facing them, and then suddenly turn and start theorizing about rich vs. poor
 3. plus, the wording of the pericope (if read closely!) doesn’t directly speak of poor vs. rich – a cursory reading might lead to that conclusion, but a close reading does not (**see below**)
 4. and yet ... there *might* be one sense in which James is speaking about wealth here, but it is certainly **not** a commentary on debasing the rich in order to elevate the poor
 - c. **thesis: in vv. 9-11, James is commenting on and illustrating the point he was making in vv. 6-8 – that those who come to God seeking wisdom in the face their “tests of faith” need to do so without being “tossed about” or “double minded” – they need to do so with humility**
 1. **i.e.** the title of the section: The Need for Wisdom *and* Humility

II. The Need for Humility (James 1:9-11)

Content

a. the pericope as an illustration of a great test of faith

1. **note (per a conversation):** if this letter was written by the half-brother of Jesus, it is reasonable that much of its wisdom would be similar in worldview to that of Jesus’ teachings
 - a. both being taught by the same earthly parents, they would share a common view of many things
 1. **i.e.** growing up together in a poor, backwoods, agrarian, manual-labor context
 - a. both men would have a view of life from that perspective – they would both be able appreciate the worldview of the majority of those around them, the *common man*
 - b. **e.g.** both understood farming metaphors (plants withering under the hot sun)
 2. **i.e.** growing up under Joseph’s and Mary’s instruction, and under the same religious training
 - a. a strong, conservative religious training, with a deep sense of learning Torah and the wisdom and logic of the law of God
 - b. **e.g.** that the *goal* of the law was to form *faith* in the people of Israel, not self-righteousness in a system that could not (inherently) create goodness in the eyes of God

- b. both men would *apply* the experiences of their formative years in similar ways
 - 1. **e.g.** Jesus often spoke of the reality of money and status (and encountered it in specific individuals) within the context of being a part of the kingdom of God (**Luke 1:53; 6:24; etc.**)
 - 2. specifically, the difficulty of trusting *in him* as the *means* of righteousness before God
 - 3. **i.e.** how tempting it is for the rich to trust in their own resources instead of what is provided in Christ – the belief that one can “earn” his own righteousness just as one can “earn” a position of status before others by virtue of possessing wealth
 - 4. **i.e.** the difficulty (not impossibility!) of the rich entering the kingdom as compared to the difficulty of a camel passing through the eye of a needle (**Matthew 19:24**)
- c. so, what if James’ point here is related to the issue of “*tests of faith*” (as in above) in regards to those who are “*rich*”? what if the issue is the test of faith that comes in being a person of wealth?
- 2. so, in this interpretation, James is simply reminding the dispersed Jewish believers that *one* of the great tests of faith they may encounter is their own **materialism**
 - a. the “*lowly*” brother (**i.e.** the brother of lower status, the poor) can “*boast*” in the fact that he does not have this worry (it is his “*exaltation*”) – he is “free” to trust in Christ, for God has put him a place where he doesn’t have this temptation (*per se*)
 - b. the “*rich*” brother (however) is being warned (as Jesus did in his teaching) about falling prey to the temptation to trust in wealth, because such wealth is *fleeting* and cannot ultimately save
 - 1. thus the **simile**: the wealthy man is “*like*” the “*flower of the field*” that fades away
 - c. thus, the point is simple: one of the greatest tests of faith will be how the believer responds to the temptations of the material world – in this scenario, the great “*test of faith*” is wealth itself
- 3. now, this is a **perfectly reasonable interpretation** – and one we should heed:
 - a. not just the warning to the wealthy (because most of us would not qualify!), rather ...
 - b. the warning that one of the greatest tests of our faith will be navigating our very materialistic world
 - 1. **i.e.** John Calvin: “the human heart is a perpetual idol factory” = everything around us can be used by our fallen nature to suppress the knowledge of God unto worship of the self
 - 2. **principle: “things” are not neutral – they vie in our hearts and minds for attention and adoration – we must replace all our scrawings with a complete satisfaction in Christ**
- 4. however, there is another interpretation of what James is saying in these verses ...
- b. the pericope as an illustration of the need for humility**
 - 1. **note**: in a careful reading of **v. 9**, you will note that James *doesn’t* use the word “poor”
 - a. “*lowly*” = downcast; gentle; lowly; more likely: *humble* – not a person who is financially poor or in a lower status, but one who is *humble*, particularly **humble before God**
 - b. **i.e.** the “*lowly*” brother is told to boast “*in his exaltation*” – “*exaltation*” = high rank; height
 - 1. the implication being that the lowly brother *has something in which to boast* related to the issue of seeking wisdom from God (**i.e.** the previous verses)
 - c. **i.e.** the words “*lowly*” and “*rich*” are contrasting each other *in this context*, specifically, in regards to the two **similes** James used in **vv. 6-8**:
 - 1. the “*tossed*” man = the man who *wavers* between sources, always seeking answers from wherever he can find them (rather than *singularly* from God)
 - 2. the “*double-minded*” man = the man who tries to hold *competing* ideas in his head, those things that he believes must be true vs. what God has revealed to be true (**e.g. transgenderism**)
 - d. **i.e.** “*rich*” (in this context) is the man who thinks he has all the answers – he is “rich” in knowledge, and thinks either 1) he knows exactly why he is struggling, or 2) is convinced that such suffering is *unnecessary* because his view of the Christian life is one of “comfort” or “happiness”
 - e. **i.e.** “*lowly*” (in this context) is the man who knows he doesn’t have all the answers – he is “lowly” in knowledge and seeks from the Lord the answers to his deepest longings
 - 2. so, a *better* interpretation here is James using a strong contrast between the man who comes *humbly* before God seeking answers to his “why?” vs. **the man who thinks he already has all the answers**
 - a. thus the **simile**: the “*rich*” man is like a wildflower that wilts under the hot sun – when the *real problems* of life show up, he discovers he *doesn’t* have all the answers, and his faith “*fades away*”
 - b. **note**: this verse is very similar to **Isaiah 40:7-8**
“The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”
 - c. the “wind” that blows upon the grass is the “*breath of the Lord*” – as God speaks, as the *eternal word* of God “blows” across puny humans, it is the power of his words that either gives life or causes men to vanish like a wind-blown grass
 - d. **LOW**: the “*rich*” man is the one who has all the answers *in himself* – he cannot “tolerate” truth coming from God – only “his” truth is what matters (to him), but he is grossly mistaken

3. **principle: in the midst of our struggles of faith, we must come humbly before the Lord and accept the wisdom that he gives us (inasmuch as he wills) – we must not be “proud” in thinking that we have all the answers, but much rest in what he reveals to us**
 - a. the fact is, we often want to tell God how he ought to act – **e.g.** take these sufferings away so I can enjoy my life vs. Lord, what would you have me to learn from them?