

James 1.2–18

Your Life: mature or double-minded?

Amington St Editha

Sunday 15 April 2018

Wholehearted Devotion to Jesus (2)

Maturity

When I was growing up we went on holiday a couple of times with my grandparents to France. One memory in particular sticks out – and it's all to do with cheese. My Grandad enjoyed his cheese, especially blue cheese – which he used to keep on the window-sill in his bedroom, to stop the entire cottage stinking of... whatever it is that blue cheese stinks of.

All was well, until we went out for the day and Grandad forgot to shut the door to his bedroom – somehow the smell managed to get into the food in the fridge, it was so awful.

Blue cheese – according to James, that's what Christians are supposed to aim to be like. Not smelly, but *mature*. The word James uses means 'finished', 'complete', 'whole'. It isn't something that happens overnight; it takes time – like a good cheese.

Those of you who were here last week may remember the picture of the horse and cart. The horse represented 'faith' and the cart 'holiness', or – to use the language of our passage this week – 'maturity'. You don't put the cart before the horse – and neither do we put holiness or maturity before faith.

Faith, like the horse, comes *first* – but holiness and maturity, like the cart, *must* come second; to James, what we do, the way we act, how we behave, either proves or disproves our faith.

Meet trials... with perseverance

And one of the times this is most obvious is when we face trials.

Steve has given us some examples of how he has persevered in his faith, despite various trials and setbacks and difficulties. You may have faced similar situations to Steve, or completely different ones – James talks about **trials of many kinds** (2) – friends this is the reality for Christians. We are not exempt from hardship. Trials *will* come, so the question is, how will we face them? What effect will they have on us, on our faith?

Will they destroy it, or help it grow?

What sort of trials are you facing today? Maybe it is a sense of loneliness and longing for companionship. Maybe it is the feeling of uselessness that comes when we struggle to find work – or are unable to work any more due to age or ill health. Maybe you are facing physical, mental or emotional illness, in yourself or in a loved one. Maybe your marriage, your family, your life, isn't what you hoped it would be, and instead of feeling fulfilled you feel frustrated and disappointed. Maybe, like James' readers, you are facing real financial hardship, or rejection because of your faith. Maybe it is a combination of the above, or something else entirely.

In fact, the examples I've given were not plucked from mid-air. They are real trials being faced by people in our church family, right now. This is life, this is how it is. Trials will come – to all of us – the question is, how will we face them?

There are two things we need to do when we face the difficulties of life. The first thing we need to do is understand what they are *not*. When these things happen to us, they are *not*, they are *never* God punishing us, *ever*. God is not like a schoolboy hovering over an ant with a magnifying glass on a sunny day. If you are struggling right now, God has not singled you out for punishment.

The second thing we need to do when we face the difficulties of life, is to meet those trials with perseverance.

Perseverance isn't a sort of passive submission, it is an active staying power, endurance. Like Paul, James uses the language of athletics to describe this:

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James 1.12 (NIV)

The **crown** there isn't a royal crown, but the *victor's* crown, the laurel wreath given to the victorious athlete, the one who has won the race. *This* is what perseverance means: not giving up but keeping going, *even when the going gets tough*.

It's so easy to slip when things are hard. It's so easy to stop coming to church, to stop praying, to stop reading our Bibles – I know because I've been there, many times. We are all a work in progress: but we must **let perseverance finish its work**, James says (4), **so we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything**.

The athletes who win are the ones who don't give up, but keep going, in their training as much as in the race.

It's so easy to give up – but when we stop meeting our Christian brothers and sisters, when we stop praying and reading our Bibles, *we stop doing the very things we need to do to keep going.*

It is normal to experience hardship – if you told me you weren't, I probably wouldn't believe you. What matters is how we face it.

We need to see trials as an opportunity to persevere in faith, to *prove* our faith, to grow in maturity. That is how James can call on us to face trials with **pure joy**: not because he is crazy, but because he knows that trials and hardship *are not the last word* where God is concerned.

God only allows these things to happen, because by his power he can transform death into new life – and he can transform people facing trials into mature and whole-hearted Christians.

Meet doubt... with wisdom

But what about doubt, what do we do about that?

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no body. In the defence's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick.

‘Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all,’ the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. ‘Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom.’ He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, looked as well. A minute passed. Nothing happened.

Finally the lawyer said, ‘Actually, I made that up. But, you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that you have reasonable doubt about whether this person was actually killed, and I insist that you return a verdict of “not guilty”.’

The jury retired to deliberate. But only a few minutes later, they returned and pronounced a verdict of ‘guilty’.

‘But how?’ inquired the lawyer. ‘You must have had *some* doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door.’

The foreman replied, ‘Oh, *we* looked, but your client didn’t.’

What do we do about doubt? Sometimes I think Anglicans value doubt more than faith – as if somehow it shows a deeper maturity than ‘simplistic’ faith.

But here in James – and elsewhere in the Bible – doubt is not held up as a virtue: **the one who doubts**, James says, **is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind**. Have you ever been on a ship or a ferry during a storm? This is not a *good* image. James is not holding up doubt as something we should prize or value. If we doubt, we need to deal with it – not simply accept it.

In fact, Ray and I were having a conversation about this the other day. We agreed that there is a difference between ‘doubt’ and ‘asking questions’. We *should* ask questions, we *should* try to grow in our understanding of our faith. We *should* be open to correction – even, perhaps especially, those of us who lead churches.

What James is talking about here is far more intellectual doubt or questioning – it goes much deeper than that. The word he used literally means ‘double-souled’ – doubt is less about questioning and more about divided loyalties.

Last week I suggested that if you wanted some homework, you could read Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, because it had such an influence on James. If you did read it, you’ll know that Jesus says this:

‘No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.’

Matthew 6.24 (NIV)

I believe this is at the heart of what James is saying about doubt.

Doubt is not intellectual, doubt is being ‘double-souled’, having divided loyalties, tossed about like a boat in a storm, unable to stay the course because we are being pulled in different directions – like the pushmi-pullyu in Dr Doolittle. This battle with divided loyalties, mixed motives and uncertain direction is something every Christian struggles with.

But that doesn’t mean it’s ok to stay in that place of doubt.

James doesn’t want us to stay in our doubt, but to do something about it – remember, James is all about what we must *do*. James says we must meet doubt... with *wisdom*:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

James 1.5 (NIV)

God's generosity is single-minded, over-the-top, abundant. And what does he want to give? Wisdom.

And, just as doubt is much more than intellectual questioning, so 'wisdom' is much more than simply 'knowledge'. Wisdom is *practical* knowledge. Wisdom is learning how to listen to and apply what God says through the Bible, to our daily lives. Wisdom is keeping our focus on God, not on ourselves, so instead of being double-souled, we begin to serve God with *all* our heart. Wisdom is not simply listening to the word, but doing what it says (22).

That means two things: first, it means we need to pray – asking God to give us the gift of wisdom he longs to give – and second, we need to read the Scriptures. Only through both of those things, together, may we learn how to listen to God's voice, and learn his wisdom. Friends, are you doing those two things, every day? If not you cannot hope to grow in wisdom or maturity as a Christian.

In a few minutes we will be moving into a time of prayer, during which members of our prayer team will be available to pray with and for you. If anything you've heard this morning, from Steve or from me, has resonated with you, made you ponder – please come forward and ask someone from the team to pray for you.

If you are going through a time of particular trial at the moment, or are feeling split, divided, please come and ask them to pray God would help you with perseverance, and wisdom, to make you whole again.

And if you feel you don't really know God but would like to meet him, please come and ask the team to pray with you about that too.