

Sermon Discussion Questions & Follow-up Notes
May 26, 2024
Rev. Dr. Andrew Keuer

Sermon Text: James 1:1-8

Title: “How to Ask God” / Series: “Words that Heal”

Core Observations of the Text

1. The Mental Attitude for Prayer (v2-4): Typically, we think of “joy” as an emotion, but James commands it as a mindset (“consider it joy”). A frustrated pattern of thought is poor soil for lively prayers. With the word “testing”, James is saying that our earthly journey is like the Israelites moving through the wilderness (see Deuteronomy 8:2 as a summary of the Book of Numbers). They knew lack and hardship, and they needed wisdom to reach the Promised Land. But, in the end, their 40 day journey (from Egypt to the Promised Land) took 40 years – why? For one reason: their wrong mental attitude kept them from praying their needs to God – instead, they grumbled against Him (see Numbers 14:26-29). A mindset that gives rise to prayer shifts from “why me” to, “How will You work a miracle in this situation, God?”.

2. The Value of Prayer (v1): Scholars think the book of James was written very early in the history of the church, maybe even as early as 40 AD (only 7 years after Jesus died and rose again!). Verse 1 is evidence for that. In these early days, most Christians were Jews residing in Jerusalem. Yet, v1, they were forced out of their homes and livelihood (likely, due to their faith in Jesus Christ) and entered a spiritual wilderness. When you lose everything, what do you have left? Words – to God and others. That is what James knew about his half-brother – Jesus’ wilderness lasted only 40 days (see Matthew 4:1-11), because he prayed (see Hebrews 5:7)! If you pray, you will move through your wilderness faster than you can imagine. That speaks to the power of prayer.

3. The Faith that Fuels Prayer (v5-8): But James warns that certain kinds of prayer accomplish nothing, like a wave slapping the shore but leaving it unchanged. The true faith that fuels effective prayer consists in two elements: First, belief that God gives “generously” (a Greek word that occurs only here in the Bible, but that translates the word “pure” or “perfect” or “complete” from the Old Testament). The idea is that when God gives a gift, it is assembled and complete, ready for use. Second, belief that God “finds no fault” as we pray. Perhaps this belief was special to James, because we learn from the Gospels that James did not follow Jesus (see Mark 3:20-21 as a little hint) until Jesus made a special resurrection appearance to him (see 1 Corinthians 15:7). James knew that Jesus never held his earlier disbelief against him. God never holds up our past faults when we beg help from Him!

Questions to Ponder & Discuss

1. Who has exemplified deep, true prayer to you? James was this for his peers (“camel-knees!”).
2. A mindset of joy believes there is a Promised Land up ahead and that God has made a way to get there. How can you cultivate this mindset in the midst of a trial you face right now?
3. What is something you assess as more valuable than prayer, & how can you rely on it less this week?

Books cited: *Words that Hurt*, *Words that Heal* by Joseph Telushkin