

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 14, June, 2001

“Testing Your Faith - Part 2”

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James 1:2-4 (NIV) - *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

In the last spiritual growth lesson, “Testing Your Faith, Part 1”, we talked about the kind of trials prison inmates are often faced with as Christians behind bars. If you will recall, a prison inmate, whom I referred to as Mac, was persecuted by other inmates for reading his Bible. Even though the Holy Spirit (speaking through James), teaches us in scripture to consider it pure joy whenever we are faced with such trials - Mac was not joyful. He had other thoughts going through his mind. Evil thoughts of retaliation consumed his thinking, dangerously leading him into a trap, in enemy territory and away from God.

The only righteous way for Mac to escape the temptation of his taunters was to put a stop to his own wrongful thinking. In the end, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, he stood up to the test he was facing. He stopped his evil thoughts by replacing them with righteous thoughts. He got into agreement with the Holy Spirit by telling himself, “Mac, wake up! It’s not worth it for me, a child of God, to get into a fight with another inmate, because God expects better things of me.”

When our faith is put to the test, no matter how ugly things may look in the natural world, we must persevere and do the will of God. It is a given, Christians who persevere during a trial will experience pure joy! They will come away from that experience mature and complete, not lacking anything!

Psalms 28:7 (NIV) - *The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.*

In this lesson, “Testing Your Faith - Part 2” we will be talking about another kind of test. This test takes place outside the prison walls, when an inmate is released from prison. Whether an inmate has served

their sentence or are being released on parole, it makes no difference. The moment an ex-convict hits the streets, their faith in Christ will be tested. Will their profession of faith in Jesus last beyond the prison walls? Will they go on with Jesus to experience pure joy in the trials they will be facing, or will they fall into the traps and temptations of the world, only to experience bitterness and defeat?

The answers to these questions are dependent upon what their mind is **fixed** on when they walk through the prison gates. It depends on what *thoughts* are dominating their thinking - faith or fear, love or hate, forgiveness or retaliation. A man’s actions, good or bad, will follow what he *thinks* the most about. Thoughts are the beginning of everything! An ex-convict’s whole future is riding on the thoughts he is thinking.

Proverbs 23:7 (KJV) - *“For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he...”*

Merle Haggard, who once spent time behind bars, sings about the hopeless “thoughts” that too often haunt those who have been incarcerated:

I’d like to hold my head up and be proud of who I am, but they won’t let my secret go untold. I paid the debt I owed them, but they’re still not satisfied, now I’m a branded man out in the cold.

When they let me out of prison, I held my head up high, determined I would rise above the shame. But no matter where I’m living, the black mark follows me, I’m branded with a number on my name.

If I live to be a hundred, I guess I’ll never clear my name. ‘Cause everybody knows I’ve been in Jail. No matter where I’m living, I’ve got to tell them where I’ve been. Or they’ll send me back to prison if I fail.

Those who say they would like to hold their head up high and follow Jesus, but whose mind is consumed with thoughts of failure, are those whose minds are more fixed on **self**, then on Jesus Christ! These individuals have not made the quality decision to single-mindedly follow Jesus Christ - come hell or high water! Instead they have what James describes as a double-mind (**James 1:5-8 KJV**). What are the characteristics of someone who is double-minded?

A double-minded man tries to live by faith, but at the same time is protecting his fear. He is uncertain about the decisions he is faced with, so his decisions are split. **"I'd like to hold my head up and be proud of who I am, but they won't let my secret go untold."** This whole thought process comes down to, "I'd like to...but..." This man is hesitating - he is wavering. James tells us that a double-minded man is one who wavers, like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. The end result of this type of thinking, is the same as a house that is divided against itself. It will fall. A mind that is divided against itself is not in a position to receive anything from the Lord.

By studying the following scripture in James, we learn an important spiritual principal. God expects nothing short of complete (total) faith in Him, when we seek his wisdom for our daily life.

James 1:5-8 (KJV) - *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.*

How do we gain stability in our lives? We must put into practice *unwavering* faith. We must stop being double-minded! We must have a whole mind. We must have a sound mind. We must have the mind of Christ! Once you make up your mind to center your thoughts on Jesus Christ, there is no room in your mind for any other kind of thinking. God is calling us to be single-minded. A single-minded man, whose thoughts are **fixed** on JESUS CHRIST, is a man whose actions will follow his thoughts of faith. This man will not hesitate and "wimp out" in the face of trials. He will live, move, and have his being in Christ Jesus, because he is being led by the Spirit of God.

The bottom line? As a prisoner, what are your thoughts **fixed** on as you prepare to walk through the prison gates? Are you feeling sorry for yourself and how rough you have had it? Are your thoughts **fixed** on what the world thinks of you, with all of its injustices? Or, are your thoughts **fixed** on what Jesus thinks of you? If you are waiting for the world to treat you good, to set an example of compassion for prisoners, before you will make changes in your

life - you'll be waiting a long time. Godly change is an internal change. It comes from a new spirit. Godly change doesn't come because of what the world thinks of you, it comes in spite of it! Remember, Jesus came to save the world from its old sorry SELF!

1 John 2:15-17 (NIV) - *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world -- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does -- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*

The world has never been a suitable role model. If you want to be a Christian and live forever in God's Kingdom, you must pass the test of faith. Will you overcome the world or will the world overcome you? You can't have it both ways. Who are you going to put your faith in? Will you put your faith in Christ? On Christ's behalf, I implore you to repent, take the stand of faith, and let Christ live in you.

Galatians 2:20 (NIV) - *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*



Questions for personal or group study:

1. *What is the basic truth of double-mindedness? (See: Luke 11:17)*
2. *What is the basic truth of single-mindedness? (See: James 1:17)*
3. *If our future is riding on the thoughts we are thinking, what must we set (fix) our minds on if we want to follow Jesus? (See: Colossians 3:1-3)*
4. *How can we obtain life and peace while living in this world? (See: Romans 8:5-6)*