



TEST NO.9: THE PRIORITY TEST

As an introduction, today we're going to conduct a little psychology experiment. I'd like you to imagine a scenario where the following 5 things happen, suddenly and simultaneously. In what order do you tackle them?

- The bath is running.
- The phone is ringing.
- The baby is crying.
- The doorbell is chiming.
- The rain is falling – and the laundry's out!

OK, here's what those challenges are supposed to represent:

- The bath is running (money or wealth).
- The phone is ringing (job or career).
- The baby is crying (children or family).
- The doorbell is chiming (friends or neighbours).
- The rain is falling – and the laundry's out (romance or love-life)!

I'll leave it up to you to work out whether that's an accurate appraisal of things (or just a load of tosh!). But what the experiment illustrates is that priorities are an everyday fact of life, for all of us.

But they are also, according to James, a test of true faith:

Jacob / James 4:13-5:12

In a nutshell, James is saying, "If you're serious about this Christianity stuff, you've got to get your priorities right." And he addresses 3 groups in particular:

1) The Busy (4:13-17). In James' day the Roman Empire had seen an incredible growth in trade, and even amongst some Christians, there were merchants who were reaping the benefits of it. Which generates this potentially life-changing question: "What is your life?"

What is it? Raising the kids? Paying the bills? Getting those grades? Finding that Black Friday deal? For James it's this:

- **Your life is short.** Like a mist (which is what the word 'meaningless' means in Ecclesiastes 1:2).
- **Your life is His.** Hence expressions such as 'God willing', *Insha'Allah* in Arabic, or *Deo Volente* in Latin.
- **Your life is an opportunity** – to worship God, serve others, and share your faith. Don't waste it!

Now I want to make it clear: James is not saying it's wrong to plan. What he's saying is it's wrong to leave God out of it; to be so busy our Creator doesn't get a look-in; to behave as though *we* are God – when we're not.

2) The Wealthy (5:1-6). Next up, James addresses those Christians – again, a minority – who had either been born into wealth, or had somehow managed to attain it. And to them he gives these, spiritually uplifting, words: "Weep and wail, you capitalists!" (OK, bit of a paraphrase there, but still ...)

Why does James write these things? Well, again he elaborates, with 3 points:

- **Wealth doesn't satisfy.** The assumption is that wealth = happiness. James says, "think again."
- **Wealth doesn't last.** Just think Law of Entropy / 2nd Law of Thermodynamics (or simply google the pyramids!).
- **Wealth doesn't come cheap** – it's almost always at the expense of the poor. And God is listening.

As I've said before, this isn't a condemnation of wealth so much as our love of it (which is why Paul warned his readers against just that, in 1 Timothy 6:10). But it's also a challenge to make a difference with what we have. While we still can.

3) The Poor (5:7-12). This last group made up the majority 2000 years ago – and if you're talking global Church, it still does. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world are living in poorer conditions than we are, and some of them are being persecuted – even killed – for their faith.

To these brothers and sisters, James says, "Jesus is coming!" And in light of that, he gives these 3 commands:

- **Be patient.** Or literally, 'endure under' (like clay pots being fired in a kiln). It'll be worth it in the end!
- **Be obedient.** Even when, like Job, you've got questions or doubts. Even when it hurts.
- **Be true.** When asked, "Are you a Christian?", be honest, faithful, and proud of Jesus – don't deny Him.

James is saying that the eventual winners in this world will be those who, for the moment, appear to be the losers – which is exactly what Jesus Himself said (5:1-12). And it's a reminder to us all, to keep our eyes on the prize.

The Score

So how can we pass the priority test? By truly following Jesus! Not just saying, "I believe", but "I will follow." And we need to make *that* the priority. Above all else.

With that in mind, here's a story you may have heard before: a philosophy professor stood before his class with a large, empty mayonnaise jar. As he began his lecture, he filled the jar with a selection of rocks, right to the brim, and asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed it was. He then picked up a box of pebbles, emptied them into the jar, and gave it a shake, so that the pebbles could work their way between the rocks. He asked, "Is the jar full now?" The students laughed and agreed that, yes, the jar was definitely full now. Then, the professor picked up a box of sand and poured that in. And, of course, the sand filled everything else. "What about now?" he asked (at which point several students probably rolled their eyes).

The professor said, "I want you to understand that *this* is your life. The rocks are the most *important* things – your faith, your family, your health. The pebbles are the *secondary* things – your home, your job, your hobbies. The sand represents the *incidentals* – the material things in life. If you put the sand or the pebbles in first, there'll be no room for the rocks. The same is true of your life. If you overemphasise the incidentals or even the things of secondary importance, you won't have time for the things that are critical to happiness – yours, and other people's. So, take care of the rocks first – the things that really matter. Everything else is just pebbles and sand."

Which brings us to the following questions:

- Which of James' groups best describes *your* situation?
- In what order would you put your top 5 priorities?
- What should making Jesus your no.1 priority look like?