

## **Introductory Thoughts on James**

**2009 April 29<sup>th</sup> for May 8<sup>th</sup>**

My training about James has been that this is one book of the New Testament that puts some emphasis on good works as opposed to faith alone. Most of the rest, the writings of Paul, the teachings of Jesus, emphasize justification and salvation by faith alone. This tends to make people believe that if they just believe right, that is, have the right faith, they don't have to do anything else. I guess the way I think of it is that you don't *have* to do anything else, but Paul and James both say that you *will* do things that demonstrate your faith, as evidence of that faith. Jesus himself chastised some people to *do* right instead of wrong.

Of course, believing "right" has been the subject of endless debate, conflict, and horror throughout the ages. Those actions don't seem congruent with faith in Christ. Maybe that's what this is all about.

James could have been a brother ("on his mother's side," as we say) of Jesus but there are other early Christian leaders by that name so there is controversy about this. The book was written as encouragement to the church in general but lacks the personal greetings of Pauline letters.

## **James 1**

**2009 April 29<sup>th</sup> for May 11<sup>th</sup>**

James writes "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations."

"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."

Ask God for anything you lack, like wisdom. When receiving, hang on to it and don't doubt, "because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

High or low social position is unimportant. All ultimately perish in their time.

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

We are tempted, but God does not do the tempting. God cannot be tempted and does not tempt. Don't be tempted. "... after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

That is a well known teaching on temptation.

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

Listen quickly, speak slowly anger slowly. Anger does not bring righteousness. Rid yourself of moral filth and evil, planted in you by the world.

Don't just listen to the word [of God] but do what it says. That is where the blessings are.

“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

These are the acts by which true faith is proven. These are the signs by which true faith is discerned.

## **James 2**

**2009 April 30<sup>th</sup> for May 12<sup>th</sup>**

This chapter deals with two issues: equality and faith versus works. Quoting verbatim:

“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

Discrimination equals evil, at least “among yourselves.” All are equal under Christ.

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Mercy is a higher value than justice.

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to

him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

"But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.'

"Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder."

Even demons have faith.

"You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

"In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

Even a prostitute was considered righteous.....

### **James 3**

**2009 April 30<sup>th</sup> for May 13<sup>th</sup>**

Not many are teachers but teachers are held to a higher standard because they teach and set an example. Though there are many ways to stumble, speech is one of the easiest. Can praise to God and curses on men come out of the same mouth? Not anymore than a plant can bear two kinds of fruit or salt and fresh water both come out of a spring. All animals have been tamed but no one can tame the tongue. "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." A ship is steered by a small rudder and a horse by a small bit. The tongue steers the man.

There are two kinds of wisdom, wisdom from God exemplified in a good life and good deeds and humility, and wisdom from the devil which is "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition." Peacemakers sow a crop that yields a "harvest of righteousness."

### **James 4**

**2009 April 30<sup>th</sup> for May 14<sup>th</sup>**

Where do fights and quarrels come from? From contention over scarce resources, James says. Don't covet what you can't have. Ask God and he will give you what you need.

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think

Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”

We are to understand that God put a spirit in us that causes us to “envy intensely” then gives grace to overcome it.

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.” Purify yourselves; change your sadness to happiness.

Don’t slander or speak against each other. Don’t sit in judgment. There is only one Judge and Lawgiver.

And don’t predict what you are going to do tomorrow or next year. You don’t know what is going to happen. When you try to make plans, say “Lord willing, I will do thus and so.” Anything else is boasting.

## **James 5**

**2009 May 2<sup>nd</sup> for 15<sup>th</sup>**

The final exhortations from James come in three parts. The first is warnings against the rich.

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.”

Some of this sound illegal though presumably in the first century, detection and enforcement were more difficult than today, accepted class divisions would have made such enforcement or laws less likely, and politics and corruption were the same as they are now. Be warned: God is the final justice.

Some of it sounds like modern land owners taking advantage of migrant agricultural workers.

“Be patient, then, brothers until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

“Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have

heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

"Above all, my brothers, do not swear -- not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned.

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

I remember praying over my friend Dennis Hammer in evening church at Hubbard once, per this prescription. The prayers may have been effective but his physical blindness was not healed.

"Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

### **Concluding Thoughts on James**

**2009 May 2<sup>nd</sup> for 18<sup>th</sup>**

In the book of James I have not seen the emphasis on works versus faith that I was expecting. In terms of works versus faith, all I see is the claim that *saying* you have faith and *demonstrating* the power of faith through results are two different things. Church can be all about faith (though I don't think our church is), but I know that at work we much prefer to work with a person who produces rather than one who only talks or dreams big. And in music there is the saying, "I don't care where you went to school, can you play?"

Sure you have faith. Let's hear you play.

What I do see in James is a style of preaching and instruction that clarifies where a lot of our Protestant preaching tradition comes from. First you say that a certain behavior is evil and damnable, one that maybe some of the audience has been practicing, like swearing or withholding wages or slander or holding to the bad kind of wisdom, then you throw out an instruction about how not to be like that. This leads to a lot of "don't this" and "don't that" that would be considered pretty negative today for inspirational writing.

Maybe life is all about restraint. Hard to say.

James has been very compact, not lending himself to easy paraphrasing. That's why I've just quoted it extensively. If I'm thinking about how to re-word a sentence or paragraph and my wording is going to be longer than the original, it's clearly better to just quote it. Some would say it's always better to just quote it because the Word of God is powerful unto itself and anything that adds to or takes from it just diminishes it. In fact, there is a James-like teaching somewhere on this very topic. I don't recall right now whether we've already seen it in this series or not.

In any case, however, if this is true, what then is modern preaching? Why don't we just read the ancient, sacred texts and leave it at that? Church of Christ Scientist does that, except for the "ancient" part.

Like we said at the outset, I'm not trained for this interpretation, but have been taught that the Word of God is sufficient for me for its purpose. If I'm superstitious, it's in the direction of believing that God can reach me and us through this exercise, not in a belief that rewording is bad. The exercise is the way it is because I learn more from writing than from reading. If you're led astray, you are welcome to read for yourself. Or write, or draw, or dance, or whatever suits you.

Some of the Bible is easily paraphrased and condensed. Much of the poetic value appears to have been lost in translation and much of the repetitive value to an audience of people with little other outlet is largely lost on us. I paraphrase to make notes for myself and so that *all* of it is not lost to we who have so many outlets for entertainment.

Some writers however, like James, are not easily condensed and I have found a lot of his usage compelling. And convicting.

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