

Through the Bible Book by Book

New Testament

by Myer Pearlman

Copyright @ 1935

JAMES

Theme: The Epistle of James is the practical book of the New Testament, as Proverbs is of the Old Testament. Indeed it bears a remarkable resemblance to the last-named book because of its terse, pithy statements of moral truths.

It contains little direct doctrinal teaching; its chief purpose is to emphasize the practical aspect of religious truth. James was writing to a certain class of Jewish Christians in whom there was appearing a tendency to divorce faith from works. They were claiming to have faith, yet there existed among them impatience under trial, strife, respect of persons, evil speaking and worldliness.

James points out that a faith which does not produce holiness of life is a dead thing, a mere assent to a doctrine, which goes no farther than the intellect. He emphasizes the need of a living, effectual faith for the attainment of Christian perfection, and goes back to the simple Sermon on the Mount in demanding real deeds of Christian life.

“There are those who talk holiness and are hypocrites; there are those who make profession of perfect love and yet cannot live peaceably with the brethren; those who are full of pious phraseology but fail in practical philanthropy. This Epistle was written for them. It may not give them much comfort but it ought to give them much profit. The mysticism that contents itself with pious frames and phrases and comes short in actual sacrifice and devoted service will find its antidote here. The antinomianism that professes great confidence in free grace, but does not recognize the necessity for corresponding purity of life, needs to ponder the practical wisdom of the Epistle. The quietists who are satisfied to sit and sing themselves away to everlasting bliss ought to read this Epistle until they catch its bugle note of inspiration to present activity and continuous good deeds. All who are long on theory and short on practice ought to steep themselves in the spirit of James; and since there are such people in every community and in every age, the message of the Epistle will never grow old.” - D. A. Hayes.

We shall sum up the theme as follows: Practical Christianity.

Authorship: There are three persons by the name of James mentioned in the New Testament:

- James the brother of John (Matthew 10:2);
- James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3);
- James the brother of the Lord (Galatians 1:19).

General church tradition has identified the writer of the Epistle with the last-named person. This James was the head of the church at Jerusalem, and it was he who presided at the first church council (Acts 12:17; 15:13-29).

The authoritative tone of the Epistle well comports with the author's high position in the church. From tradition we learn some facts concerning him. Because of his holiness of life and his rigid adherence to the practical morality of the Law, he was held in repute by the Jews of his community, by whom he was surnamed "the Just" and many of whom he led to Christ.

It is said that his knees were calloused like those of a camel in consequence of his constant intercession for the people. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that James was stoned to death by order of the high priest.

To Whom Written: To the twelve tribes scattered abroad (1:1); i.e., to the Christian Jews of the dispersion. The whole tone of the Epistle reveals the fact that it was written for Jews.

Why Written: For the following reasons:

1. To comfort Jewish Christians who were passing through severe trials.
2. To correct disorders in their assemblies.
3. To combat a tendency to divorce faith from works.

When Written: Probably about 60 A. D. It is believed to be the first Epistle written to the Christian church.

Where Written: Probably at Jerusalem.

Contents:

I. Temptation as the Trial of Faith. 1:1-21.

II. Works as the Evidence of True Faith. 1:22 to 2:26.

III. Words and Their Power. 3:1-12.

IV. Wisdom, the True and the False. 3:13 to 4:17.

V. Patience under Oppression: the Endurance of Faith. 5:1-12.

VI. Prayer. 5:13-20.

I. Temptation as the Trial of Faith. Ch. 1:1-21.

1. The purpose of temptations: to perfect Christian character (vv. 2-4). The word "temptation" is used here in its broadest sense, as including both outward persecutions and inward solicitations to evil. James shows his readers how to turn temptations into blessings by making them a source of patient endurance and so using them as the fire which tests the gold.
2. A quality to be exercised in the successful endurance of temptation - wisdom. This wisdom is a gift from God, but is granted only on the condition of unwavering faith (vv. 5-8).

3. A source of trial and a source of temptations - poverty and riches (vv. 9-11). The poor man is not to be depressed because of his poverty; neither is the rich man to be elated because of wealth. Both are to rejoice in their high calling.

4. The reward for endurance of trial and temptation - a crown of life (v. 12).

5. The source of inward temptation to evil (vv. 13-18).

Though God may send afflictions to try men, He does not send evil impulses to tempt them.

“When a man pleads, as men often do, that ‘God has made them so;’ that ‘the flesh is weak;’ or that ‘for a moment God deserted them;’ when they say that they have done wrong because they could not do otherwise; when they contend that each man is no better than an automaton and that his actions are the inevitable - and therefore the irresponsible result of conditions by which he is surrounded - they are transferring to God the blame of their misdoings. James gives the true sense of evil. It springs from lust – desire - which is to each soul the harlot temptress which draws him from the shelter of innocence, entices him, and bears the evil offspring of committed sin.” - Dean Farrar.

Far from God’s sending evil impulses, it is He that gives us that power by which we are raised to a new and higher life (1:16-18).

6. The attitude to be shown in the view of the foregoing facts-a control of speech and temper, a purity of conduct and a receptive attitude toward the Word of God (vv. 19-21).

II. Works as the Evidence of True Faith. Chs. 1:22 to 2:26.

1. True faith should be manifested in obeying as well as hearing the Word of God (vv. 22-25).

2. True faith should be manifested in practical religion, of which the characteristics are control of the tongue, brotherly love, and separation from the world (vs. 26-27).

3. True faith is shown by impartiality in dealing with the poor and the rich (2:1-13).

Courtesy to the rich combined with discourtesy to the poor is a partiality that indicates weakness of faith, and which constitutes a violation of the law.

4. Faith is proved by its works (2:14-26).

A superficial reading of these might indicate that James was contradicting Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. Martin Luther in his early days was strongly opposed to this Epistle, since he believed that it flatly contradicted the teachings of Paul. Later in life, however, he recognized his mistake.

Close study of their writings will convince us that James and Paul are in perfect agreement.

Paul believes in works of godliness as well as James (See II Corinthians 9:8; Ephesians 2:10; I Timothy 6:17-19; Titus 3:8).

James believes in saving faith as well as Paul (See James 1:3, 4, 6; 2:5).

The seeming contradiction just referred to is explained by the fact that both writers use the words **“faith,” “works”** and **“justification”** with different meanings for those terms in mind.

For example:

(a) The faith meant by James is the mere intellectual assent to truth that does not lead to practical righteousness - such a faith that demons have when they believe in God (2:19). **“What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?”** (James 2:14).

The faith meant by Paul is an intellectual, moral and spiritual power that brings a person into vital and conscious union with God.

(b) The works meant by Paul are the dead works of legalism, done simply from a sense of duty and compulsion, and not from pure love of God. The works meant by James are the fruits of the love of God spread abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit.

(c) The justification spoken of by Paul is the initial act by which God pronounces the sentence of acquittal on the sinner and imputes to him the righteousness of Christ. The justification spoken of by James is that continued holiness of life which proves the believer to be a true child of God.

(d) Paul has in mind the root of salvation; James the fruit.

- Paul is dealing with the beginning of Christian life; James, with its continuation.
- Paul is condemning dead works, James, dead faith.
- Paul overthrows the vain confidence of legalism; James, the vain confidence of the mere professor of Christianity.

III. Words and Their Power. Ch. 3:1-12.

1. A warning against the too hasty assuming of the office of teacher, in view of the great responsibility attached to that calling, and of the dangers of offending through the spoken word, which is the medium of the teacher's instruction (vv. 1, 2).

2. The power of the tongue (vv. 3-5). It is compared to a horse's bit, to a helm, and to a fire.

3. The evil of the tongue (vv. 6-12).

“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

“For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh”

IV. Wisdom, the True and the False. Chs. 3:13 to 4:17.

1. The manifestations of true wisdom. 3:13, 17, 18.
2. The manifestations of the false wisdom. 3:15.

V. Patience under Oppression: the Endurance of Faith. Ch. 5:1-12.

1. Concerning the oppressors and the oppressed (vv. 1-6).

James is speaking of a condition which will prevail in the last days (v. 4) - that of an oppression of the laboring class on the part of the wealthy, which oppression will cease at the coming of the Lord. The judgment of the wicked rich at the destruction of Jerusalem offers a faint picture of their fate in the last days.

Writes Dean Farrar:

“And if these words of James were addressed to Jews and Christians about the year 61 A. D., how speedily were his warnings fulfilled, how terribly and how soon did the retributive doom fall on these wealthy and luxurious tyrants! A few years later Vespasian invaded Judea. Truly there was need to howl and weep, when, amid the horrors caused by the rapid approach of the Roman armies, the gold and silver of the wealthy oppressors were useless to buy bread, and they had to lay up, for the moth to eat, those gorgeous robes which it would have been a peril and a mockery to wear. The worshipers at the last Passover became the victims. The rich only were marked out for the worst fury of the Zealots, and their wealth sank into the flames of the burning city. Useless were their treasures in those last days, when there was heard at their door the thundering summons of the Judge! In all their rich banquets and full-fed reveling they had hut fattened themselves as human offerings for the day of slaughter.”

2. Concerning the Avenger (vv. 7-12). In relation to the condition described in verses 1-6 the children of God are to possess their souls in patience awaiting the coming of the Avenger and Judge, and taking Job and the prophets as examples of patient endurance.

VI. Prayer. Ch. 5:13-20.

1. Prayer in affliction (v. 13).
2. Prayer for the sick (vv. 14-16).
3. The efficacy of prayer (vv. 17, 18).
4. Our duty toward an erring brother (vv. 18-20).

“So we conclude, both from the context and from the meaning of the word itself that James and Peter (I Peter 4:8) are speaking of a restoring ministry which turns an erring brother back to the ways of the Lord, and which, through bringing him to repentance and confession of his sins, procures the forgiveness of these even though they be a ‘multitude.’ For it is written that **‘If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’** Thus, by such a ministry as that to which we are called by the last verse of James, we may not only be the means of saving a precious life for further usefulness in the world, but may be also instrumental in the putting away of sins which would otherwise confront the wrongdoer at the judgment seat of Christ.”

~ end of James ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
