

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lessons 54 & 55

The Epistle of James – Parts One & Two

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Some like it; some don't.

This short letter of only 108 verses, bearing the name of its author, James or more properly, Jacob, has been treated in a wide variety of ways over the centuries. Some love it. Some don't like it at all. Even Martin Luther called it "an epistle of straw" and put it at the end of his New Testament in 1522. (We will discuss later why Luther did this.) It was not in the earliest list of canonical books of the New Testament, called the Muratorian Fragment (c. 170 A.D.), but by the first half of the third century, it was quoted as "scripture" by Origen and others.

B. Distinctions

Several distinctions are often ascribed to this writing. First, everyone has to agree that it is **one of the most practical parts of the entire Bible**. In this way, it resembles Proverbs in the Old Testament, demanding that one's "walk" prove one's "talk." A great title of one little book I have on James is "Will the Real Phony Please Stand Up?" James will not tolerate any version of Christian faith that is only verbalized and not verified.

Second, it has been called **one of the least doctrinal letters**, second only to Paul's letter to Philemon. It doesn't pretend to be theologically deep, like Romans, but there are numerous theological assumptions behind various words and phrases, e.g., 1:17-18.

Third, it is arguably **the very earliest writing of the entire New Testament**, with some placing it only 12-15 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. An early date seems to be gathering more and more advocates because of the background and context of the writing, e.g., the persecution of the recipients had not progressed to the stage of martyrdom.

Fourth, it also has the distinction of having **more imperatives in it proportionately, than perhaps any other part of the Bible**, 54 by one count, which is one for every 2 verses. The writer uses these commands in a way that is not dictatorial or sarcastic, but he uses them to encourage fellow Christians whom he loves and whom he calls to genuine faith and unity.

Fifth, **it depends more than any other New Testament letter on the teachings of Jesus**, despite very limited reference to Jesus by name (1:1, 2:1). Not that it quotes directly from Jesus (though 5:12 is virtually a quote of Matt. 5:33-37), but it does weave Jesus' teaching into the very fabric of its instruction. The author is soaked in the atmosphere and specifics of Jesus' teachings and reflects them almost unconsciously.

C. Who is the Author?

Perhaps we will never know which James is being referred to in 1:1, but the traditional view is that this is the brother or half-brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55, Mark 6:3, Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18, Gal. 1:19, 2:9, 2:12, Jude 1). Other options include two of the original apostles, James, the son of Zebedee of Jesus' inner circle with his brother John, and James, the son of Alphaeus. The first of these was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I in 44 A.D. and we know very little about the second. Other men named James in the NT are possibilities, but the best case can be made for the brother of Jesus. He was not a believer during the life and ministry of Jesus, but was converted, it seems, by one of Jesus' resurrection appearances (I Cor. 15:7) and became a leader in the Jerusalem church. Some even call him the "head" of the Jerusalem church after the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1, especially because of his speech at the council on what to require of Gentile converts, Acts 15:13-21. One more interesting note about this James is that he was dubbed, "Old Camel Knees," because of the calluses on his knees from much praying. He writes about such devotion to prayer and the power of prayer in 1:5 and 5:13-18.

D. Is it a Letter or Something Else?

James was regarded by most early Christians as the first of seven Catholic or General Epistles, meaning it was written to the church at large and not to a specific church or group of churches. Though this writing begins as a typical letter, with author and recipients named and greetings offered, there has been quite a discussion over the years about whether it is truly a letter. After the beginning, it has very few similarities to a letter. The recipients are a broad group, "the 12 tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1) Some take that to be a reference to Jewish Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Others think it refers to all Christians, Jew and Gentile, like Paul's reference to "the Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16. While it is more likely that James is writing to Jewish Christians outside Jerusalem because of the "Jewishness" of this writing, its truths are certainly applicable to all believers of every age.

If it is not a letter, what could it be? Some who emphasize what they think are Hellenistic features want to call it a diatribe, which typically used abbreviated debate with an assumed opponent, the question-and-answer method and frequent use of the imperative. Others want to call this writing "paraenesis" (from the Greek word meaning "exhortation or advice"). It is definitely full of exhortation and is devoted to ethical instruction, but it reflects more Hebrew than Hellenistic background. Others prefer to call it a sermon or a series of sermons tied together. In fact, a fairly good case can be made for this writing being a compilation of the key teachings of James after he was martyred in 62 A.D., to be distributed to all Jewish Christians. Some writers even want to fuss about whether to call it an epistle (more general) or a letter (more personal).

E. How Should it be Outlined?

Regardless of what you call it, this little book is full of nuggets of truth which still have the power to convict and transform lives, but it is very difficult to outline because of its disjointed structure. You can find a different outline in almost every different book about James, some with only 2 divisions, others with as many as 25. E. J. Goodspeed described it as "a handful of pearls, dropped one by one into the hearer's mind." A. M. Hunter asserted that "it is so

disconnected, as it stands, that it is the despair of the analyst.” But, just because there is diversity and disjointedness, we must not miss the wonderful message of this part of God’s Word. In fact, precisely because of its unique structure, it may actually have more appeal and power in this generation, than a well-reasoned treatise.

Simon J. Kistemaker follows the chapter divisions and suggests the following headings for an outline.

- Chapter 1 Perseverance
 - A. Greetings 1:1
 - B. Trials 1:2-11
 - C. Tests 1:12-18
 - D. Agreements 1:19-27
- Chapter 2 Faith
 - A. Faith and the Law 2:1-13
 - B. Faith and Deeds 2:14-26
- Chapter 3 Restraint
 - A. Use of the Tongue 3:1-12
 - B. Two Kinds of Wisdom 3:13-18
- Chapter 4 Submission
 - A. Submission in Life and Spirit 4:1-12
 - B. Submission to God’s Will 4:1-13
- Chapter 5 Patience
 - A. Impatience Toward the Rich 5:1-6
 - B. Necessity of Patience 5:7-11
 - C. Oaths 5:12
 - D. Persistence in Prayer 5:13-18
 - E. Rescuing the Wayward 5:19-20

Peter H. Davids offers this outline with more subdivisions than given here.

- I. Epistolary Introduction 1:1
- II. Opening Statement 1:2-27
 - 1. First segment: testing, wisdom, wealth 1:2-11
 - 2. Second segment: testing, speech, generosity 1:12-27
- III. The Excellence of Poverty and Generosity 2:1-26
 - 1. No partiality is allowable 2:1-13
 - 2. Generosity is necessary 2:14-26
- IV. The Demand for Pure Speech 3:1-4:12
 - 1. Pure speech has no anger 3:1-12
 - 2. Pure speech comes from wisdom 3:13-18
 - 3. Pure prayer is without anger/in trust 4:1-10
 - 4. Pure speech is uncondemning 4:11-12
- V. Testing through wealth 4:13-5:6
 - 1. The test of wealth 4:13-17
 - 2. The test by the wealthy 5:1-6
- VI. Closing Statement 5:7-20
 - 1. Endurance in the test 5:7-11

2. Rejection of oaths 5:12
3. Helping one another through prayer/forgiveness 5:13-18
4. Closing encouragement 5:19-20

II. TEXT

Following the divisions in the New International Version of the New Testament, we will attempt to summarize the message of this important writing.

A. Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)

James wants his readers/hearers to know how to respond, not react, to negative happenings. He calls for more than teeth-clenched endurance. He wants them to “count it joy,” to find the good that God can produce even through the bad circumstances. He states that testing of faith develops perseverance which in turn leads us to maturity. He knows we can’t do this without help and promises God’s wisdom to those who ask confidently, ready to receive His guidance. A parenthesis (1:9-11) challenges the rich man to see the transient nature of his power and wealth. Then James teaches about the power of temptation, the progression of evil desire, enticement, sin, addiction and death, in contrast to the Creator Father who gives every good gift and redeems us as His firstfruits.

B. Listening and Doing (1:19-27)

James calls for quick and careful listening and even more. He wants his audience to obey, to act on what they hear. He already begins here to teach about controlling the tongue (which he will develop in 3:1-12) and tells them to be slow to speak. If one can slow down his speech, he can also slow down his anger, which James says, “does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” The well-known summary at the end of chapter 1 defines pure religion with only two emphases: caring for orphans and widows and disciplining oneself to be pure of the world.

C. Favoritism Forbidden (2:1-13)

James imagines a situation in which two men enter the church assembly, one rich and one poor, obvious by their appearance. He challenges the church members to treat both with the same honor and warm welcome. He scolds them for catering to the rich who in fact were exploiting and slandering the poor. He reminds them of the second greatest command, which he calls “the royal law,” to love your neighbor as yourself, and he exhorts them to extend mercy to everyone.

D. Faith and Deeds (2:14-26)

James has often been misunderstood, in these verses, to be teaching the opposite of Paul in Paul’s emphasis on justification by faith, especially in Romans and Galatians. For example, James says in 2:24, “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” Paul wrote in Romans 3:28, “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law,” and in Galatians 2:16, “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.” It was this contrast that convinced Martin Luther to have such a low opinion of James, as mentioned earlier. It is important to see the difference in how James and Paul use the same two words, “faith” and “works.” Paul uses “faith” in a more inclusive way and he assumes that its genuineness will show in the way one lives and acts toward others.

When Paul uses “works,” which he affirms will not and cannot save anyone, he is referring to what one does in observance of the old law. James, on the other hand, uses “faith” to refer to the intellectual agreement that Jesus is the Son of God, which too often is verbalized by mouth, but not verified by life. When James calls for “works” or “deeds,” he is demanding that one’s confession of faith be accompanied by the proper changes in life which show that a person is turning away from sin and selfishness and towards Jesus Christ and whatever honors Him.

Thorough study of Paul’s writings shows that he says or at least implies the same thing as James. He begins Romans with a reference to “the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom. 1:5) and he ends Romans with the same combination of faith and obedience, “that all nations might believe and obey him” (Rom. 16:26). In one of Paul’s greatest passages about salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:1-10), he makes his message clear and it is in full agreement with James. Our salvation is a gift of God. It is not earned by works, but “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Here, “good works” flow naturally from genuine faith and the realization that salvation is a gift, never earned.

Perhaps Paul’s teachings were already being perverted by others when James is writing. James wants to make clear that faith that is only confessed is not valid, unless it is proven to be real by action. One writer stated it well when he said we all have two tongues, one in our mouths and one in our shoes, but it is only the one in our shoes which can be trusted. James says even the demons believe and shudder, but they don’t change. He cites both Abraham and Rahab as good examples of believing and acting, even taking a risk because of faith.

E. Taming the Tongue (3:1-12)

Some think this is the beginning of the second of two sermons in this letter, but James has already started his teaching on this subject in chapter 1. He states clearly with excellent illustrations that the tongue may be very small, but it is very, very powerful. The goal for James is the complete control of one’s tongue, but he implies that we can only move towards that goal, perhaps never achieving it perfectly. To be sure, everyone of us needs God’s supernatural help in this area. James especially disdains the inconsistency so obvious when with the same tongues, we praise God, but curse our fellow man.

F. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)

Here James contrasts earthly wisdom with heavenly wisdom. The former produces envy, selfish ambition, disorder and evil. It is of the devil! But, the wisdom from God produces humility, purity, peace, kindness and mercy.

G. Submit Yourselves to God (4:1-12)

James asks his readers where their allegiance is. Is it with God? Or, is it with the devil and the world? Allegiance to the world and the devil will show itself, like worldly wisdom above, with fights, quarrels, selfishness, pride, even murder, slander and self-righteous judgment against others. Allegiance with God, on the other hand, is evident when we look to God for whatever we need, when we humble ourselves, resist the devil, purify our hearts, hold our tongues and let Him do all the judging.

H. Boasting About Tomorrow (4:13-17)

This paragraph may be the most neglected passage in all of scripture for many of us. It demands that we put the Lord before our plans, over our plans and in the middle of our plans. Life is fragile, James affirms, and we have no right to plan our lives without consulting the Lord. Planning is good and even necessary, but never without allowing that the will of the Lord is better than all our plans. Learn to say “Lord willing” at the end of sentences in which we state plans and projects. Better, pray diligently to seek His will before laying the plans.

I. Warning to Rich Oppressors (5:1-6)

The wealthy get worked over in these verses and with good reason. They have put their confidence in their money. Worse, they have obtained their wealth by abusing others, by not paying workers, even by murdering innocent men. Our tendency is to take the side of the poor and cheer James on in his rebuke of the rich . . . until we realize that WE are the rich. Every American citizen is rich by comparison to other citizens of the world. If you have a change of clothes, if you have transportation, even a bicycle, if you have choices of different kinds of food, in some cases, if you have food at all, YOU ARE WEALTHY! Our challenge is to be sure our blessings are not ever ours because others were mistreated, and the greater challenge is to be sure that we see our blessings as belonging to God, ready to be used by Him for whatever good cause He chooses. What we have is held carefully in open hands. It must not be held tightly with a selfish grip.

J. Patience in Suffering (5:7-12)

The recipients of this letter were under persecution. It was not as bad as it would become later in the first century, but they still needed encouragement. The second coming of the Lord is mentioned as encouragement. It is implied that when He arrives, all the suffering will seem nothing. Job is also cited as a good example of perseverance. They are also told not to grumble against each other and not to judge. We often do both when circumstances are not good. Instead, we are to be patient, like the farmer dependent on the Lord to provide the rain and sunshine to produce the crop. At the end of this section, verse 12 addresses a totally different subject, oaths. James echoes Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:33-37 and clearly calls for an end to swearing.

K. The Prayer of Faith (5:13-20)

Whether one is sad or happy, sick or healthy, James says he should pray and ask others to pray for him. Prayer in chapter 1 asks confidently for wisdom and here in chapter 5 asks confidently for healing. He also calls for confession of sins and promises forgiveness, implying that sickness is often caused by guilt. Isn’t that true? He cites the example of Elijah and his effective prayers for drought and for rain. Finally, James appeals to believers to bring a sinning brother back to God, to care enough to call him to repentance and save him from death, that is, the second death or eternal separation from God.