

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 39

The Book of James

Have you ever seen pictures of a person holding a big, bright moon (which looks to be the size of a basketball) up on his pointer finger? Everyone knows the moon could never be lifted up on someone's finger, but the way the scene was photographed it made you think twice. This is called "forced perspective," where certain things are portrayed in such a way that it leads others to believe something that may not be at all true. These pictures are fun to see as long as you know the REAL truth behind them as opposed to the PERCEIVED truth.

I went to the mall the other day and as I walked through the halls, I passed those kiosks in the center aisle where people walk around to sell their wares. I was stopped by one of these people who spooned a blob of damp granules in my hand and told me to rub my hands together. It felt rough, but smelled like a bouquet of flowers; and when I washed it off, my hands felt smooth as silk. She then applied a dab of lotion as she explained that although my pores were clean, they were left open and I needed to "close" them up before germs found their way inside my hands. Well, that seemed to make sense.

The sales lady spoke with a French accent, which made her seem more knowledgeable. She explained that the granules were salt from Israel, to where thousands of people a week flock to receive these elements of beauty for the body! She went on to tell me that she had sold many of these, but for me, she had a special deal: a bottle of the salt exfoliation and a bottle of lotion for \$59.99 each and she would throw in another container of each. You know, the old buy one, get one free routine.

Well, it sounded good, it felt good, it smelled good; but I am not one to worry about smooth skin so I thanked her and went on my way. She stopped me and asked if I had daughters and a wife, which I do. With concern in her eyes she wanted me to understand that these ladies in my life would love this special skin treatment. "Here's what I am going to do," she explained, "If you buy a bottle of exfoliation for \$60, I will give you the lotion and a bar of organic soap for free." I pondered for another moment, but told her I still needed to think about it. She countered by offering me an additional gift because she liked me. She reached into

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drawer and came back with a decorative gift bag to hold the product. I thanked her, but said, “Not today.”

As I walked away, she said, “You’re killing me! Okay, if you do not tell any other customers, I will sell you the exfoliation for \$30.” I told her that then my pores would be left open without the lotion! The French beauty expert said, “Your wife has lotion. Any lotion will be fine. Everybody has lotion! I just really want you to have this special salt from Israel—THIS is what you really need.” Now this got me thinking; if I could use any lotion, maybe I could use any salt-scrub. All of a sudden, my perspective began to change.

What did I know to be true in this situation? I knew the scrub softened my skin and smelled great. I knew skin pores could be opened and closed. I knew what germs could do. I figured that she really had sold a lot of this product. I was NOT sure, however, that this scrub for this price was the best deal, but I did know where I could find out! I walked around the corner, sat on a mall bench, pulled out my smartphone and asked Siri, who sent me over to Bath and Body Works where I found several scrubs for \$16 and these were made of sugar...sweet!

I say all of this to point out that in this sales scenario, one party was trying to force my perspective so that I would see things her way and consequently buy the product for the top price. Each time I pulled away, the deal got sweeter and the time to act got shorter because she kept telling me the deal was only good for today.

Isn’t this how the world operates? You find yourself in a situation where “everyone” is telling you THIS is the way that leads to happiness. You are led to see things in a particular perspective that is fun for a while until reality is revealed and your perspective changes. If only we had something tangible that could preempt our perspective to reality from the start! Oh yeah... We do. It is the Bible. It is given to keep our perspective pure and true. And of all the New Testament books, James is probably the most practical and adept at perspective setting from a practical point of view.

Introduction of James

James is the first of what are called the General Epistles.¹ You will sometimes hear the General Epistles referred to as the Catholic Epistles. Does this mean they are particularly attributed to the Catholic Church? No, “catholic” means universal and it is simply a synonym of “general.” This nomenclature is derived since these books do not have a specific audience named to which each book is directed. Their respective audiences are understood to be all Christians and churches in all ages.

James 1:1 specifically states he was writing to the Jewish Christians of the dispersion. These were Israelites who no longer lived in Israel, but were dispersed, or scattered, around and outside the location of the original 12 tribes, *aka*. The Promised Land. Because of the spiritual decline of this nation, God, as He promised (Deuteronomy 4:27), scattered the Jews among the people of other nations. This scattering was their punishment, but God turned bad to good when these figurative “scattered seeds” bore fruit in the form of convert as Christianity continued to take hold in the concentric circles spiraled outward from Jerusalem.² See what God did there? He just changed the perspective!

Now these Jews—tired, beaten down, afflicted, hurting—needed some encouragement and some practical ways to live life in this new reality brought in by the teaching of Jesus Christ culminating in His death, burial, resurrection and ascension. Jesus had made the paradigm shift; and although He modeled and taught exactly what to do, many Jews were late adopters. James wrote to these Jews to remind them of the ways to behave. Better yet, the converted Gentiles have this book for the same reason—to hold the line amongst sinful escapades and short memories.

Specifically James did not always have 100% acceptance into the Biblical Canon. Martin Luther, as an example, did not consider it to have apostolic authorship nor did he highly value it doctrinally.³ One of Luther’s main issues was that he felt James included a doctrine of works for salvation and he felt this flew in the face of one of his famous proponents: *sola fide* (faith alone). Luther still included James, but put it at the end and did not include it in the table of contents, as he did for the

¹ The General Epistles include James, I & II Peter, I, II, III John and Jude.

² Wiersbe, Warren W. The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 2, p. 335.

³ Tasker, R.V.G. Tyndale NT Commentaries: The General Epistle of James, p. 13.

same reason with the books of Hebrews, Jude and Revelation.⁴

Another controversy dealt with the authorship of James. Many scholars agree that the James identifying himself as the writer of the book is the half-brother of Jesus. In this overview, we do not have time to dive into other individuals proposed as authors, including the brother of John/son of Zebedee, the father of Judas (not Iscariot), the son of Alphaeus, and James the Younger.⁵

From Faith to Faith, Hebrews to James

In the Biblical Literacy Class study of Hebrews, Mark Lanier taught that one of the main themes is Faith. Hebrews gives us the definition of “Faith” –“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1). Hebrews further defines faith as the only way to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Then James picks up that last theme and drives home the point that if you have Faith, then you will absolutely show it by what you do (James 1:26). If there are no works, that afore mentioned faith is dead! So, change your perspective in order to go from hurting, tired, and useless to healing, energized and alive!!

For the remainder of class, we will “check out” the following themes like library books form a Theological Library Practicum. Let us see want to see how we can apply these “works” to our lives today as Christians scattered across the entire world. As a result, perspectives can change releasing us to handle whatever comes our way in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 13-14.

⁵ Barclay, William. The Letters of James and Peter, pp. 8-9.

1. Trials and Temptations

2. Faith and Works

3. Taming the Tongue

4. Haughty and Humble

5. Patient and Prayerful