

GOD WITH US
Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 3 – James
Works are the Fruit of Faith
James 1-2

Introduction

The book of James was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus (see Matt.13:55 and Mark 6:3) and leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem. The letter is among the earliest in the New Testament, having been written when the Jewish-Christian believers were still meeting in synagogues (note James 2:2). The letter was addressed to “*the twelve tribes dispersed abroad*” (1:1), meaning Christian Jews who had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire – likely those that were scattered abroad in the persecution noted in Acts 8 after the martyrdom of Stephen. James, as the leader of the Jewish-Christian community, felt the responsibility to write a general pastoral letter to the scattered flock, giving them guidance in how to live out their faith in a world that was hostile to the Christians, encouraging them to remain steadfast in the face of trials. The opening lines concerning “trials” marks a keynote of the letter. The letter has parallels to Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7). Like Jesus’ Sermon, James provides a sort of “Guidebook for the Christian Community.” Here are some of the parallel topics found in James and the Sermon on the Mount:

- Joy amidst trials (James 1:2 & Matt. 5:1—12).
- Pursuing maturity (James 1:4 & Matt.5:48).
- Asking God for good gifts (James 1:5 & Matt.7:7f).
- Dealing with anger (James 1:20 & Matt.5:22).
- Hearers and doers of the Word (James 1:22 & Matt.7:24-27).
- Poor are rich in God’s eyes (James 2:5 & Matt.5:3).
- Blessings of mercifulness (James 2:13 & Matt.5:7).
- Blessings of peacemakers (James 3:18 & Matt.5:9).
- Blessings of humility (James 4:10 & Matt.5:5).
- Warning about friendship with world (James 4:4 & Matt.6:24).
- Don’t judge others (James 4:11-12 & Matt.7:1-5).
- Moth and rust spoil riches (James 5:2f & Matt.6:19).
- Warning against taking oaths (James 5:12 & Matt.5:33-37).

The Theological Contribution of James

James is a very *practical* book, dealing with various aspects of Christian living. Yet, there is an important theological message here concerning the place of *good works* in the salvation equation. Good works, while not the root of our salvation, are the expected fruit of saving faith. James was quite adamant about this issue.

As we learned in our study of Galatians, there was a charge leveled against the early preachers of the gospel, namely that the doctrine of *grace* (unmerited favor from God) promoted *license* (freedom to sin). Paul's answer to this charge was found in the Spirit-led life (Galatians 5-6). Freedom from the penalty of sin through the cross of Christ is accompanied by ongoing freedom from the power of sin through the indwelling Spirit. A true Christian will never see grace as a free ticket to sin; rather, God's amazing grace is the impetus for us to walk in step with His Spirit, bearing the "fruit of the Spirit," and becoming more and more like Christ.

James sounds a similar note as Paul, only he makes the point in a different way. He argues that *true saving faith will always be accompanied by good works*. James is not saying that works can save us; rather, he is saying that true saving faith *produces good works*. Faith is the root of our salvation – works are the fruit of our salvation. John Calvin, the great reformer/theologian, put it this way: "*Faith alone saves; but the faith that saves is never alone.*" Thus, while being very practical in tone, James makes a significant contribution to New Testament theology: Saving faith is a life-changing power that will ultimately be evidenced in the fruit of good works. If there is no fruit of good works, then it is likely that the person's faith is nothing more than "dead faith," not "living, saving faith."

Outline of James

James does not have a clear "outline;" rather, it reads like a collection of teachings on a variety of topics. Sometimes there is a clear connection between one topic and the next; at other times there is no connection. Following is a listing of the topics in order:

Salutation: 1:1

The Testing of faith 1:2-8

Rich and Poor 1:9-11

Persevering in trials 1:12

How Sin takes root 1:13-18
Slow to speak, slow to anger 1:19,20
Doing the Word, not merely hearing 1:21-27
The problem of Favoritism 2:1-13
Dead faith vs. Living faith 2:14-26
The Tongue 3:1-12
True Wisdom from Above 3:13-18
The Danger of Loving the world 4:1-10
Judging your brother 4:11-12
Humility in planning ahead 4:13-17
Warning to the rich 5:1-6
Admonitions to patient endurance 5:7-11
Warning about making oaths 5:12
Praying for one another 5:13-18
Restoring a sinning brother 5:19-20

Salutation: 1:1

The opening greeting is simple. James is the willing bond-servant of the Lord, writing to the Jewish believers in the diaspora (dispersion). A “bond-servant” was different from an ordinary servant in that the bond-servant had willingly given up his/her rights to become the lifelong servant of the master.

The Testing of Faith 1:2-8

James’ first subject gives us a sense for what his readers were enduring as they sought to live out their faith in a hostile world.

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect (mature) and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2-4).

God allows trials to test (refine) our faith. Qualities such as endurance and maturity are the good fruits of difficult situations; thus, we can “consider it all joy” not because of the trial itself; but because of the outcome. See Romans 5:1-5 for the same idea.

The immediately following comment about “praying for wisdom” (1:5-8) is best understood in relation to the trials mentioned in the previous verses. When we do not understand what God is up to, or how to endure through a trial, we should ask Him for wisdom.

Are you going through a trial? Have you considered that God wants to use this trial to refine your walk with Him and grow your character? Ask God for wisdom as to what He is doing in your life. Also ask for wisdom as to how you should proceed through the trial. Remember also that often, our greatest testimony to the world concerning our faith in Christ comes in the way we navigate the trials that God allows us to experience.

Rich and Poor: 1:9-11

James has much to say about rich-poor issues (1:9-11; 2:1-9; 4:13-17; 5:1-6). It seems that the rich were oppressing those of humble means, looking down upon them in the public gatherings, withholding their wages, etc. James' message to both rich and poor is that in God's kingdom there will be a great reversal of fortunes. The rich will fade away in the midst of their earthly pursuits, while the poor will ultimately "*glory in their high standing*" (because of their faith in Christ; see 2:5).

Persevering in trials: 1:12

James returns to the subject of trials, this time encouraging believers as to the reward that awaits those who persevere through them:

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (1:12).

There are different “crowns” mentioned in the N.T. letters, each signifying a different kind of reward in heaven. The “crown of life” (here and at Revelation 2:10) seems to be a special kind of reward reserved for those who have honored Christ in suffering.

How Sin takes root: 1:13-18

There is a difference between “testing” and “temptation.” While God has much to do with the tests that come into our lives, He has nothing to do with the temptations that can lead us to sin. James is the only N.T. writer that provides us with this insight into the *4-step process* of how sin takes root:

“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (1:14-15).

“Death” is always the consequence of sin (see also Romans 6:16,21,23; 8:6,13). Physical death is the product of sin. Eternal death (separation from God forever, “hell”) is also the product of sin. But sin also produces “death” in our lives here and now; in our relationships, our society, our environment, our health, etc. God is not the author of sin or of death; rather, He is the giver of “*every perfect gift that comes from above*” (1:17), especially the gift of salvation that allows us to be His children (1:18).

Study James’ description of how sin takes root. It’s clear that once we have been “carried away by our lusts,” sin is the inevitable result. Thus, part of the key to gaining victory over sin is to deal with our lusts before they “carry us away.” How are we to do this? 1) Be aware of your unholy desires. Identify them. Be honest about the lusts that keep taking you down. 2) Ask God to show you the roots of these unholy desires. Unholy desires are our attempts to fill legitimate needs . . . in the wrong ways. 3) Ask for help. It is impossible to overcome patterns of sin in isolation. We need people who know us, who pray for us, and who ask us the hard questions. This is one of the reasons we all need 2 a.m. friends. Look at the last 2 verses in the book of James! It’s all about helping one another from straying into sin. Look back at Galatians 6:1. Same idea! God put you into a Christian community of believers for a reason. Who are you connected to?

Slow to speak, slow to anger: 1:19-20

James has much to say about “the tongue” (1:19,20; 1:26; 3:1-12; 4:11,12; 5:12). We should listen much more than we talk. It seems that people who talk too quickly are prone to a kind of anger that does not reflect the character of God.

*One of our cores Life Studies at OPC is called *Listening Well*. It is designed to not only help us to be “quick to hear,” but also to be *effective in our hearing* so that others *feel heard* when they share their hearts with us.

Doing the Word, not merely hearing 1:21-27

We come to one of James’ main themes – faith in ACTION. His teaching here echoes what Jesus taught about hearers vs doers of His words (Matt.7:24-27).

“Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able

to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (1:21,22).

The Word of God, when implanted in our heart and mind, is able to “save” our souls. This can refer to the moment of salvation when the message of the gospel is first received; but it can also refer to the day-by-day experience of listening to God’s Word and being “saved” (in an on-going way, or “sanctified”) from the impact of sin in our lives. Either way, the Word of God, when humbly received, has the power to change us.

Yet, James does not want us to be merely hearers who humbly receive God’s Word. He wants us to be effective doers who apply God’s Word to our lives. His analogy is fitting:

“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” (1:23-25).

James concludes this section with some examples of what faith in action looks like (1:26,27). Keeping our tongue in check, visiting orphans and widows in their distress, and keeping ourselves from being polluted by worldly behavior – these are all evidences of *true religion*.

It is all too easy for us to listen to another message, or to read another devotional – to take in more information. The harder step is to ponder deeply certain pieces of God’s truth (the parts that His Spirit is trying to focus our attention on) and to ask God for the wisdom and strength to apply these truths to our daily lives. For example: I heard a message recently on reaching out, in love, to our neighbors. It was a great message, and I felt a nudge from the Spirit to take a step toward one of my neighbors. The “blessings” that James talked about (1:25) will only come when we DO what we have been TOLD by the Spirit of God. Yes, I need to get moving toward my neighbor. I need to put some feet on my faith! I need to take what I heard from the seat to the street. How about you? What has the Spirit been talking to you about lately?

The problem of Favoritism 2:1-13

Relationships between rich and poor, in the Church, should look different than they do in the world. Yet, based on James' strong words, it is clear that the earliest Christian communities struggled to treat all visitors with equal dignity and respect.

“For if ‘someone’ comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor person, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives” (2:2-4)?

James makes several key statements about the rich and the poor:

- God has chosen the poor to be “rich in faith and heirs of His kingdom.” What they lack in this world, they will gain in the next, since they are among “those who love Him” (2:5).
- It is the rich who were persecuting the Christians, taking them to court and trying to get them to confess Caesar as Lord, and to blaspheme the name of Christ (2:6,7).
- We are to “love our neighbor” without regard as to whether they are rich or poor. To show favoritism is a sin (2:8-13).

Favoritism can take many forms; it is not always an issue of wealth. There can be favoritism at work when we only interact with people “on our level.” Favoritism can show up at school when we choose to hang out with only a certain crowd that we like. It can show up when we maintain negative attitudes toward people of different races and ethnicities. It can be present when we think less of people who have had less opportunities to pursue education as we have. Think about your own world – the people you cross paths with daily. Does God bring to your mind anyone that you are “dishonoring” (James 2:6) by the way that you are treating them, or ignoring them? If so, what steps can you take to honor this person(s)?

Dead faith vs. Living faith 2:14-26

Here we come to a key passage in James – the place where he makes his major theological contribution to our understanding of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. James wants us to understand clearly that a complete absence of life-change (good

works) is evidence that the individual has *not truly embraced a saving faith in Jesus Christ*. True faith is always accompanied by different levels of “works.” He begins with an example:

“What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (2:14-17).

James points out that even demons “believe” in God; but they shudder at the thought of divine judgment because their belief has not been translated into humbly submitting to and following God (2:19). He then gives two examples, from the Old Testament, of people who “had faith” in God; but who also had the action to show the validity of their faith.

- Abraham “believed in God” and this made him “right with God” (Genesis 15:6; James 2:23; also Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4:3). Yet, James argues that when Abraham was willing to obey the command of God and offer his son Isaac on the altar, his faith was “completed” (James 2:21,22). In other words, his outward actions demonstrated his inward disposition (faith) toward God.

- Rahab, the harlot from Jericho, had heard of the mighty deeds of the God of the Jews. She came to a place in her heart where she “believed in” that God. Yet, a time came when she needed to *act on her faith*. She hid the Jewish men who had been sent by Joshua to spy out the city of Jericho. Her outward actions gave evidence that her inward disposition toward God (faith) was real.

Note: Abraham and Rahab were two very different people; but both are here placed on equal footing before God. Most would have viewed Rahab as being ‘less-than’ Abraham. God dismissed that view in placing them next to each other - a good example of God demonstrating equality regardless of gender, ethnicity, personal history, rich and poor etc.

James’ final statement presents a compelling analogy.

“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (1:26).

James' message about the importance of living, active faith points to the reality that even in 1st century Christian communities there were plenty of "formalists" who were going through the motions, saying all the right words, singing the right songs, and saying they believed in all the right things; while their lives told a very different story. Their lips said one thing (I believe); their lives said another thing (I don't really believe). Jesus warned of this in His famous Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 7:15-23). "You will know them by their fruits" He said. Think about your own life for a moment. What are some of the key evidences (fruit) in your life that show the reality of the Spirit of Jesus living inside of you, changing you from the inside-out? How have your actions changed since the day that you accepted Jesus into your heart?

Discussion Questions

1. James has covered many topics in just the first 2 chapters. Are there any topics that speak to you more than others?
2. On the relationship between faith and works, John Calvin said: *Faith alone saves; but the faith that saves is never alone.* Reflect on that statement. What are your thoughts about it?
3. What practical area of your life is God most working in these days? How is He changing the way you live and act and relate?
4. Are you currently (or someone you are close to) walking through some form of a trial? If so, read back to the opening admonition from James to pray for wisdom in the midst of the confusion and mystery. What is God wanting us to value in the outcome of our trials?