

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 4 – James Trials, the Tongue & Treasures James 3-5

Introduction

James focuses on the *fruit* of saving faith – changed character, good works, compassion, charity, speech, etc. He was not interested in people claiming that they had faith; he wanted to see the *evidence of living faith* in everyday conduct. Thus, practical life themes appear in a somewhat disconnected way throughout the epistle. In this section, we will primarily survey chapters 3-5, looking at various themes; but will also refer back to chapters 1 and 2 where these same themes have already appeared.

TRIALS

As we noted in the previous study, James spends considerable time on trials and suffering. He opened his letter on this theme, because the dispersed Jewish Christians were suffering persecution.

“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).

Trials are painful; yet, because of the end results (refining of faith, spiritual maturity) God’s people can find reason to “*consider it all joy.*” Trials come in “*various*” forms, yet, it matters not what form the trial comes in; James’ point is that God will guide us through the trials so that the result is what He desires – making us more like Jesus. To this end, James encourages us to *pray our way through trials*, asking God for wisdom and insight:

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach (finding fault), and it (wisdom) will be given. But you must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that person ought not to expect that they will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded person, unstable in all their ways” (1:5-7).

Trails often confuse us and shake our faith in God. For this reason, we need to ask God for *wisdom* as we go through trials. We may ask for wisdom as to God's purpose for us in the trial, as well as wisdom for how to navigate the trial itself. Trials happen to everyone, so it is not "if they come", but "when they come". The question to ask God is, "What?" not "Why?" Lord, what do you want to teach me, or do in and through me, or use me to encourage others...? Not, Lord, why are you letting this happen to me? Why me? James emphatically says, "*Every good and perfect gift comes from above...*" (1:17).

Praying with a deep sense of faith that God will answer is also a theme in James, found at the beginning (1:5-7) and end of his letter (5:13-18), both times in connection with suffering. We are to pray for wisdom at all times; but trying times call for special prayers.

James encourages the sufferer to *persevere* (literally, "remain under") the purifying work of any trial God allows:

"Blessed is a person who perseveres under trial; for once they have been approved, they will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (1:12).

Of the several "crowns" mentioned in the N.T. (rewards in heaven), the *crown of life* refers to a special reward reserved for those who have endured suffering in the name of Jesus (see also Revelation 2:10). The suffering might or might not end well in this life; but it will most certainly be well rewarded in the next life.

Later in the letter, James mentions *patient endurance* in trials. He invokes the examples of the prophets (most of whom suffered for their ministries) and Job, the ultimate example of suffering.

"Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (5:7-11).

Just as a farmer needs to patiently wait for the harvest from his planting, so we also need to patiently wait, through the period of our suffering, for the harvest of our reward from God. That reward may or may not come to us in this life; but we are sure to be rewarded when we meet the Lord Jesus in the next life. Another letter to the ‘Hebrews’ devotes the entire chapter 11 to people who suffered by faith but never saw the fulfillment of what God had promised. Their reward for certain was reserved for heaven!

Just as James began his letter with the admonition to *pray with faith* in the midst of trials, so he ends his letter with a similar admonition. His major addition here is that at times we may want to *call for the elders of the church*, inviting them to pray, along with anointing with oil (a symbol of the power of the Holy Spirit).

“Is anyone among you suffering? Then they must pray. Is anyone cheerful? They are to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then they must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over the person, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and if they have committed sins, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous person can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit” (5:13-18).

Praying “in faith” does not mean that we can guarantee HOW God will answer; rather, but we can know that God WILL ANSWER our prayers. God always has the authority to answer YES, NO or WAIT. The apostle Paul prayed 3 times that an illness be removed, but God answered that He would allow the illness to remain, so that God’s power might be displayed through Paul’s weakness (2Cor. 12:7-10). At Oak Pointe Church, our Prayer Director along with the elders often meet to honor the request of people to anoint them with oil and to pray over them. We pray with faith that, if God wills, He is able to instantaneously, or progressively, bring healing to a sufferer. Yet, we also pray acknowledging that we do not pretend to know the mind or will of God. We ask Him to have His way and, no matter what, to grant the sufferer the comfort, wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit.

The TONGUE

Of all the N.T. writers, James has the most to say about the tongue (our talk). *Jesus said, “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34; and 15:18,19).* Since James is most concerned about a true form of religion that changes the *heart*, it makes sense that he gives attention to what comes out of the mouth. Back in ch.1 he had already introduced this theme:

“This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (1:19,20).

It is human nature to be the opposite! Quick to speak, slow to listen, and quick to become angry. James says that this *should change* as we progressively walk with Jesus and grow in maturity. This is where if we pay attention to our reactions, and seek understanding that is more hidden within ourselves, we can root-out the issues that cause the quick reactive tongue. A reactive, self-protective response is not a good reflection of the character of God. Again, at the end of ch.1, James mentions the tongue:

“If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless” (1:26 – NLT).

For James, the bridled (controlled) tongue is a sure sign of Christ-like maturity; while the unbridled (uncontrolled) tongue is a sure sign of a form of religion that is worthless.

Have you ever asked anyone to tell you whether or not you are a good listener? Or if you tend to dominate conversations? Most people won't tell you these things, unless you ask for their honest feedback. A good goal in relational settings is this: When you leave a conversation, does the other person feel 'heard?' Do you know more about them, or do they know more about you? Do they feel like you have really taken the time to understand them? This is by far the hardest to do in the context of your own family relationships where interrupting or reacting are long-instilled patterns. If you leave most conversations, having done most of the talking, then you should consider taking our Listening Well Course. It is designed to improve your listening skills and, thus, to improve your relationships. Do you want people to enjoy being around you more? Try becoming a better listener, and watch what happens!

James interest in the topic of the tongue becomes apparent when he spends nearly the entire 3rd chapter focusing on it. His main idea here is that the tongue is a beast that is *difficult to tame!* It is noteworthy to read his opening line to teachers! A teacher is setting an example and can be a huge stumbling block for their students if what they say doesn't line up with how they behave. This can be a parent or anyone in authority who instructs.

“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what they say, they are perfect, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also, the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh” (3:1-12).

Another way to learn about this issue continues in James’ description of “wisdom” (3:13-18) directly following (3:1-12). The description of “false wisdom from within” and “wisdom from above”, describe the root of our relational behaviors. Envy and selfish ambition produce disorder. “*But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy...*” (NLT). God’s wisdom filling the heart produces a pure and ‘others-centered’ type of relating.

The “tongue” is a huge issue, not just because of what comes out of our mouths, but also what we write and/or post on social media. Whether our words are spoken or written, whether they involve language, pictures or videos . . . our hearts are being revealed to those who follow us through the messages we are constantly posting, texting, emailing, etc. Some people destroy their reputation, opportunities, or even lives with just a few careless posts on social media. “See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire” (James 3:5). In fact, employers now usually visit the social media sites of prospective employees as ‘their 1st interview’, even before interviewing them in person, believing the saying: What you see is what you get. How about you? What are your words saying about your heart? Are your words, messages, pictures and videos representing a heart that is seeking to “know Jesus and make Him known?”

Another BIG issue addressed in the Loving Well class and the Listening Well class has to do with the % of how much the actual “words” play in our relating. Only 7% are the actual words! This is shocking! 38%=tone of voice, and 55%=nonverbals like our ‘look’, warm smile, and other facial expressions, as well as body language like looking tense or relaxed etc. The problem with “text-talking” or emotionally charged emails is that the other person on the receiving end does not receive the “full 100% communication” from us. IE: there can be enormous damage, misunderstanding or wrecked relationships when choosing to text or email emotional issues. Emotionally charged communication is hard work but needs to be humbly conducted IN PERSON. Are you quick to text or email a reactive reply? Instead, be led by “wisdom from above” and be willing to yield to your urge to react in writing, and reply with, “I sense that this is a longer conversation. Do you have time to get together and talk in person, or on FaceTime?”

James makes one more comment about the “oaths” and “promises” that come from our mouths. This line is almost a verbatim repeat of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt.5:34-37).

“But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment” (5:12).

The tongue should bring forth trustworthy, not deceptive words. People should be able to believe what we say, without us having to back it up with a follow-up statement like, “I promise”, or “I swear on the Holy Bible!”. “Yes” or “NO” should be enough.

TREASURES

James has more to say about rich-poor issues than every other N.T. writer, with the exception of the gospel-writer Luke, whose narrative is packed with this theme. The reason for James' emphasis was this: people from different social classes were either part of the Christian community or were visiting it and interacting with the Christians. Cultural practices regarding class distinctions – eg. honoring the wealthy and mistreating the poor, master-slave relationships, etc. – were carrying over into the church from prior traditions or current culture; thus, James had strong words on this subject. In chapter 1, he quickly raised the rich-poor issue:

“Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements” (1:9-11 – NLT).

The “poor” (“person of humble circumstances”- NASB) could be the under-resourced person, or it could be the one suffering persecution from the powerful (1:2-8). In any case, James wants people to see their status in this world and the next *from God’s perspective*. The lowly person can be lofty in God’s sight (because they are “rich in faith and heirs of His kingdom” – see 2:5). On the other hand, the rich person may be living under the *illusion of security and prosperity, believing that they are more blessed and more important*. But, because life is but a vapor (mist) that passes away quickly, the rich person may be left standing before God with nothing to show for their self-focused, earthly pursuits.

James is echoing the parables of Jesus that dealt with rich-poor issues: The foolish rich man who stored up treasures on earth but was not “rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21); The poor beggar Lazarus and a rich man, who both experienced a great reversal in the next life (Luke 16:19-31). Like Jesus, James was trying to help those who lived in humble, earthly circumstances to live with an eternal perspective and to find hope in the next life. At the same time, he was warning the rich not to take pride in this life, or to take advantage of the less fortunate, ignoring that there is truly an eternal life beyond this earthly life, and their attitudes and actions would definitely matter!

In an extended section in ch.2, James makes it clear that the rich-poor issue was not just an issue between rich and poor . . . *it had become an issue for the church as a community, in terms of the way they treated rich and poor people.* The attitude of *partiality* and the practice of *favoritism* had crept into the church.

“My brethren do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a person comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor person 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” (2:1-4)?

There might be several “*evil motives*” driving favoritism. Being with ‘people of status’ makes us look good. Showing favors toward such people might come back to us as ‘return favors’ later. Moreover, the presence of ‘important people’ may seem to lend credibility to our organization or movement. In any case, *favoritism is sin*. James gives God’s perspective on rich and poor:

“Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called” (2:5-7)?

While the poor are not automatically “*rich in faith,*” it is often the case that the poor in this world are less attached to earthly hopes and more in tune with their need for God and in search of an eternal hope. Jesus said: “*It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt.19:23,24). Riches can lull us into a false sense of security here and now and dull us to our need for God and our ultimate accountability to God.

James concludes his warning against favoritism:

“If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (2:8,9).

Following Jesus, the N.T. writers summarize the entire intent of the O.T. Law with the command to *love your neighbor*. James calls this “the royal law.” We might paraphrase it like this: *Treat your neighbor like royalty, whether they are a prince or a pauper!*

Is there favoritism in your life? Who can you move toward, even if it feels uncomfortable or unnatural for you to do so? A neighbor? A co-worker? A server at the restaurant you frequent. A clerk at a local store? Someone in your class? We are commanded to treat every person with dignity and respect (esp. your family, your ‘closest neighbor!) How can you be more like our impartial God this coming week?

Toward the end of James, there are two extended passages aimed at the rich. Both begin with the phrase, “*Come now.*” This is an invitation to the rich to reconsider their foolish ways. The first passage deals with arrogance in forming plans for the future.

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will LIVE (!) and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin” (4:13-17).

The rich have already been warned that life is fleeting (see 1:9-11). James here reminds the rich (and all of us) that we are “*just a vapor.*” Our dependence on God *ought to* shape the way we make decisions about the future.

*A former disciple was presented with a financial move up the ladder in the government, meaning uprooting his family to the opposite side of the country. He and his wife were still new believers and growing in their faith in their present location. He had to weigh the pros and cons, and he took into consideration MORE than simply the corporate climb up the ladder. It was a courageous move to turn down the promotion, choosing instead to stay at the level of pay and position he was in for the sake of other weightier priorities in light of where his family was in their new spiritual journey. **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5,6).***

The final passage dealing with rich-poor issues is a direct hit against rich people who, in their pursuit of riches, oppress the poor. James warns of a severe judgment upon such people.

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous person; they do not resist you” (5:1-6).

The idea of earthly treasures rusting and being eaten by moths is taken directly from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt.6:19-21). The cries (complaints against injustice) of the oppressed had reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth (hosts of angels, or armies). The judgment of Christ would soon fall upon the wicked rich person, who was oppressing those who worked for him.

Social injustice is a huge issue in the Scriptures. God sees when the powerful take advantage of the vulnerable. Christians are to have NO PART in any form of social injustice. Instead, we are to OPPOSE it and seek to RECTIFY injustices, defending the weak. What are you doing to challenge and, where possible, correct social injustice in your world? Where are you seeing one human being taking advantage of another . . . and stepping in to stop it? Christians, rich or poor, should fight against social injustice as a matter of faith and conscience before the Lord of Sabaoth!

Discussion Questions

1. Of the 3 major practical subjects that James addresses – Trials, the Tongue, Treasures – which topic hit you most directly? Why?
2. With both Trials and Treasures, James emphasized the need for an *eternal perspective*. Why is this so important? How do we maintain an eternal perspective when dealing with such issues?
3. Look again at the passage on planning for the future (4:13-17). How does that speak to you concerning your own plans?