
James

Lesson 1

“James, Introduction, and Chapter 1”

Objective: To introduce the Book of James with its historical setting and provide an exegetical overview of chapter 1 along with some hermeneutical insights.

Materials:

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- Commentaries

 - Books

 - Bible Dictionaries

 - Encyclopedias

 - Journal Articles

 - Greek Text

Procedures

1. Provide a fresh translation of the text from Greek.
2. Introduce the issues surrounding the church's acceptance of this work and authorship.
3. Provide an exegesis of chapter 1.
4. In the context of the exegesis provide some hermeneutical ideas for our modern world.

The book of James is one of those books that has often been sidelined, ignored and even maligned. Martin Luther called the Book of James an “Epistle of Straw”¹ indicating his disdain for this book, but others have found in this letter a richness, a depth, and a beauty, that inspires and challenges them.² James in this encyclical letter addresses all of his compatriots and fellow believers in the Jewish diaspora as head of the Jerusalem church.³ This book was not easily accepted into the canon of the New Testament. There were, and there continue to be questions regarding its authorship. The traditional view among those in the Protestant tradition is that the author was James the younger


¹ “In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an **epistle of straw**, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. But more of this in the other prefaces.”

² “For him [James] the thought of God’s unchangeableness [1:17] is one of pure and unmixed comfort, peace, joy, happiness. And this is indeed eternally true. But let us not forget that the Apostle’s joy has its explanation in the fact that the Apostle is the Apostle, that he has already long since wholly yielded himself in unconditional obedience to God’s unchangeableness. He does not stand at the beginning, but rather at the end of the way, the narrow but good way which he had chosen in renunciation of everything, pursuing it invariably and without a backward look, hasting towards eternity with stronger and ever stronger strides.” Søren Kierkegaard, trans. Walter Lowrie, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves! and Three Discourses 1851* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968) p. 230.

³ Richard Bauckham, *James*, in the New Testament Readings series (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 13.

brother of Jesus. The history of this question is far from simple, and issues of theology regarding the virginity of Mary impact the views held by the various groups causing those on the other side of the divide to be deeply entrenched in their approach to this work. We will seek to survey these various views regarding James and his relationship to Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the other apostles. Some may see this as unnecessary, and unfruitful, but I disagree. Understanding others, who are genuinely trying to be faithful to the call of God is never wasted effort and it appears that the various views regarding James come from a genuine desire to understand who James really is, and how we should regard his message.

It might be of some value to note that there seems to be a tremendous symmetry between the message, thought processes and emphases between the message of the Book of James and that which we have recorded in the Gospels regarding Jesus. It is also important to note that the response of interpreters to the message of the Book of James and that of Jesus also shows parallels: interpreters respond by radical critiques of the message, or by domesticating it and thus softening its impact. James tends to



focus on Torah obedience, practical theology, and ethics. This is perhaps part of the reason that James has so little appeal to theologians and yet his material is commonly the subject of sermons and other discourses that focus upon the practical applications of Scripture. Some also see James as contradicting the teachings of Paul and even other parts of the Bible and this causes some to discount the message of this book. It is perhaps James's radical pronouncements with regard to the marginalized, the poor and the wealthy that contribute most to this marginalization.⁴ The words of James deeply challenge, offend, and convict people in ways that cause them discomfort, and even distress, and so it is easier to avoid that discomfort and distress by marginalization of this work. It must however be noted that the message of James aligns concisely with the message of Jesus.

It should be noted that in reality most interpreters agree that there little or no contradiction between the teachings of Paul and those of James with regard to faith in works. It is their approach that makes them appear to be different. A substantive battleground for the Book of James has been, and in some circles

⁴ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, in the Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries series (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 22-23.

continues to be in the area of determining who is this James who wrote this letter? James was a quiet common name and this, along with theological issues, have been instrumental in creating some level of confusion with regard to the identity of James and his relationship to Jesus, in particular. Theories regarding the Epistle's authorship vary and the internal and the external evidence has a level of ambiguity that has permitted a variety of views to persist. The author begins by calling himself, "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," in a manner that is at the same time self-effacing and exuding tremendous authority. This designation then gives him the qualifications necessary to follow with numerous commands to those whom he addresses in the letter that follows.⁵

In English we call this work after the name of its author, which in Greek *Iacobus* (Ἰάκωβος). Had it not been for the Latin alternate rendering (*Jacomus*) of this name it might have come down to us in English as Jacob. A number of modern European languages now have two male names that are derived from a

⁵ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, p. 28.

common linguistic root (Jacob and James).⁶ It should be noted that most interpreters would argue that the author of this letter implicitly claims to be James the brother of Jesus. This then leaves three basic options for how James the brother of Jesus authored this letter. 1. James could have written this letter before, or without having encountered the writings of Paul with regard to justification by faith. 2. Some argue that James is actually writing in response to Paul's message that had been heard or was beginning to be heard. 3. Others would argue that James did not actually write this letter at all. They object to the possibility of James the brother of Jesus having written this letter based upon the high quality of the Greek in the Epistle. Some would counter that a scribe was involved in the composition of this letter in the way that Paul also used a scribe in the composition of his letters. This would then explain the quality of the Greek.⁷ There is no real way of determining which of these views is correct and in reality they do not heavily impact our interpretation of the message of James.

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan: 2008), p. 47.

⁷ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 29-30.

The issue of the identity of James is considered critical in determining the canonicity and authenticity of its message. Interpreters have understood the meaning of the term *adelphos* (“brother” **ἀδελφός**) in different ways. There are three primary views in this regard that are named after the most common advocates of the various positions in the fourth century when this issue was hotly debated, they are: 1. The Helvidian. 2. The Hieronymian. 3. The Epiphonian theories. The term *adelphos* (**ἀδελφός**) normally is used to designate a biological brother and so the simplest and most likely explanation is that Jesus and James are related by blood. It is commonly the case that the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels (Matthew 12:46; 13:55-56; 28:10; Mark 3:31-32; 6:3; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; 20:17) were seen as the younger children of Joseph and Mary. This position is called the Helvidian theory after an obscure figure made famous by Jerome’s criticisms of his position.⁸

Helvidius points to the example of biblical verses such as Matthew 1:25 which says that Joseph did not “know” (**γινώσκω**) her until the birth of Jesus. To Helvidius this verse then implies

⁸ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 29-30.

that after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, had sexual relations. He also cites Luke 2:7 where Jesus is referred to as the “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος) of Mary which he argues implies that she had other children. In this view James is then the younger brother of Jesus and the son of Mary and Joseph. In the Epiphanian theory, which came to be the dominant view in the Eastern tradition, it is argued that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were children of Joseph from a previous marriage. This theory is named after Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis around A.D. 366. He takes his cue for this position from earlier texts such as the *Protevangelium of James* that was written in the middle of the second century where it states that Joseph is a widower who had at least two other sons from a previous marriage. This older son is even said to have led the donkey that carried Mary to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. The final theory is the Hieronymian theory which is named after its steadfast proponent Jerome. He puts forward the view that the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus are in reality his cousins. He held so firmly to the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary that he preferred this view over any that might threaten this view. He postulates that since Paul calls


James one of the Apostles he must be one of the twelve apostles of Jesus (Galatians 1:18-19).⁹

It seems most probable that James was the actual younger brother of Jesus and also that after the death of Jesus he becomes the primary leader of the mother church at Jerusalem and that he is referred to as an apostle. This James is known outside of the New Testament, the earliest of these accounts is that given by Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* where he records that James is brought before the Sanhedrin by the newly appointed High Priest Ananus who had him stoned to death along with others. (*Antiquities of the Jews* XX:200-201). Eusebius gives a somewhat different account that he says he received from Clement of Alexandria in which James is thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and then beaten to death with a fuller's club. Eusebius also gives an account attributed to Hegesippus which combines throwing James from the pinnacle of temple, stoning him and the striking of him with the fuller's club. This account also says that at the time that James died Vespasian began his siege of Jerusalem.¹⁰

⁹ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 30-34.

¹⁰ David B. Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, pp. 34-40.

Perhaps it is not so much the issue of who the author of the Book of James was nor other historical details that have led so many to not only question this letter's authenticity and its validity, but also its message, because of the subversive nature of the message. James, in a way that is very much reminiscent of Jesus challenges the order of the world and calls for those who would be his followers to become champions of the poor, the weak and the powerless. This message has perhaps even been seen by some as Marxist-Leninist infiltration into the doctrine of the church. Of course such an accusation is absurd: the book of James was written long before such doctrines were known and bringing anachronistic arguments to the issue only clouds, distorts, and enflames the issue. James almost totally repeats the message of the Sermon on the Mount in his epistle. The message of the Book of James convicts us, challenges us, and calls us to live life in the light of a reality that is not comfortable, not reconcilable with a life of ease and comfort. This work challenges us to continually see the injustice in our world, to fight that injustice, and to truly



recognize that this world, in its unredeemed, and unsanctified, state is not our home.¹¹

The Book of James calls on its readers to live a life of wisdom, not the wisdom of our modern world or that of human concoction, but to recognize and follow the wisdom of God. It challenges us to recognize and to truly acknowledge that we, as human beings, are not the center of the universe. It calls upon us to recognize that that place is occupied by the God who created all that exists, but more than recognition James calls for acknowledgment through actions. This is not a book concerned with having the correct answers to some celestial quiz it is a book concerned that the correct understanding of the world demands correct action on the part of the creature. We are challenged to address inequality, oppression, poverty, injustice in the radical and subversive way that Jesus did during his life and to be willing to give our life to challenge the false nature of the world in which we live.

The message of James also reiterates the message that was delivered when someone stood up in public on the very first day

¹¹ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, Revised ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 1-6.

that the full message of the Gospel was delivered to the world and that is that the message of the good news of God is not for the few, it is for everyone. Some call this day the birthday of the church. It was the day that the spirit of God swept over the chaos of the deep disorder that had been created by the sinfulness and rebellion of man, and as the time of creation the hovering spirit of God began a new and powerful creative activity that would result in something new and good. The leader of those who explained to those present the meaning of what God was beginning in this moment had only a few weeks earlier been a sniveling, lying coward who had denied even knowing Jesus. Now he would be the spokesperson for God in this pivotal moment when the plan of God would finally be revealed and the new creation would begin. This message would spread; it was never intended to be a message for the intellectual elite, the powerful, or even for those who were religious. This was a message for everyone.¹²

N. T. Wright starts his commentary on James with a great illustration regarding waves, he says:

¹² N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, In the New Testament for Everyone series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. ix-xi.

I used to think the waves had come from far away. Standing by the sea and watching the grey-green monsters roll in, it was easy to imagine that this wave, and then this one, and then the one after that, had made the journey from a distant land. Here they were, like the Magi, arriving at last to deposit their gifts.

But of course it isn't like that.

Waves are what happens when wind and tide take hold of the waters that are there all the time and make them dance to their tune. Just yesterday I stood in the bright sunshine and watched them sparkling and splashing around a little harbour, making the boats dip and bob. A fine sight; the waves seem to have character and energy of their own. But they don't.

They are the random products of other forces.

The challenge of faith is the challenge not to be a wave. There are many winds and tides in human life, and it's easy to imagine ourselves important because we seem, from time to time at least, to dance and sparkle this way and that. The question is whether the character that develops within us is the real thing, or whether, as James says in verse 6, we are simply double-minded and unstable, blown and tossed about by this wind or that.¹³

Jacob (James), slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the diaspora, greetings.

James writes with the authority of a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. This at first look appears as such a humble

¹³ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 3-4.

and lowly title, but what title could carry more authority than the one James lays out here? He writes to the twelve tribes of the dispersion. Two views are taken of the meaning of James here: 1. That he is indeed writing to those who are the physical descendants of those who are dispersed around the world from the borders of Palestine. 2. That James has in mind here the faithful remnant of God's people, the true Israel of eschatological salvation (cf. Jeremiah 31:8; Ezekiel 37:19, 25). This is the sense that was appropriated by Christians who laid claim to this status as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).¹⁴ The question then is to whom is James writing? It is most likely that he is writing to the true Israel that has accepted Jesus as the Messiah, but also those that are descended physically from the twelve tribes of Israel. James was, after all the head of the Jewish church at Jerusalem and it appears that here he is writing to that segment of the church.¹⁵


1:2 Regard it as a source of great joy when you fall into various trials, 1:3 because you realize that the testing of your

¹⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *James*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 48 (Nashville TN: Nelson Reference and Electronic, 1988), pp. 4-11.

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 28-30.

faith produces patient endurance. ^{1:4} and let the patient endurance result in a mature workmanship in order that you might be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

James moves past the initial greeting to identify more clearly the audience to whom his letter is addressed. It is addressed to those that are undergoing trials. James will identify this group and what they are experiencing more as the letter develops but here he calls for a response that is very different from what be expected. He calls upon his audience to consider it a joy to come under testing. He calls for them to do this because in these trials a byproduct will come, that byproduct will be endurance. James recognizes a benefit in these trials actually “testing” the faith of these Christians living under trying circumstances in the places beyond Palestine. As we begin reading the letter of James it does not begin with a sense of building up the audience or with deep theology, it begins in a fashion that is very much reminiscent of Jewish wisdom literature. It begins with very practical admonitions as to how to be wise before God. To do that, more than intellectual knowledge is required; action is needed as well, and this is where James



begins. He expects and anticipates knowledge in his audience, and that knowledge demands action that aligns with that knowledge. This then is wisdom.

James does not call for some kind of quiet resignation to trials but for an active resistance in the cause of God. The focus of James here is upon developing an attitude of militant patience that does not wear down the Christian's resistance to trials but continually strengthens and empowers that person. The fuel for greater resistance and perseverance are the trials.¹⁶ James masterfully and powerfully gives his audience the key not simply to endure but to be transformed by the trials in such a way that those trials empower and encourage. Truly this is a mature view that propels the one with such a view into a new arena of existence and gives such a person a power that turns the world on its head. Normally it is the case that experiencing oppression, marginalization, and persecution is a debilitating or draining experience. It tend to dehumanize and destroy the human spirit. In this instance James writes to those experiencing such things,

¹⁶ Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2004), pp. 337-338.

words of hope, but more than hope, power. James calls his audience to transformation into what God has called his human image to be from the beginning even using hardship and pain as a tool to make this happen. In this process they become more human rather than less human.¹⁷

^{1:5} If any of you is lacking wisdom, let him ask God, the one giving to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ^{1:6} But ask in faith not doubting for the one doubting is like a wave of the sea driven and blown by the wind; ^{1:7} for that person should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord, ^{1:8} since he is double-souled, and unstable in all his ways.

This section begins with an understanding of wisdom that is in so many ways unique to the Jewish community among the cultures of the Ancient Near East. For the Jews wisdom was something that could be defined as the ability to live life in such a way as to follow God and be what God had created humanity to be. James is using the term wisdom here in this Jewish fashion. He is certainly not telling his audience that if they pray to God he will make them smarter, with a higher IQ. The plea here, from

¹⁷ Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, pp. 60-61.

James, is to pursue that which leads to a godly life, one devoted to pursuing that which will transform a person into the human that God always intended a person to be, a person that truly lives as the image-bearer of God in the world. James calls upon his audience to make this request in humility, recognizing the Lord as the source of such wisdom and who seeks to give this to those who humbly seek it, in faith. Faith is critical here, this is not a hail Mary pass hoping it might help; James here calls for a confident faith that challenges his readers to trust God, especially in the times of trauma.

In such circumstances God gives “generously” and “without reproach”, this is the desire of God and he waits as a good and generous father for such a moment in the life of his children and he does not say, “What took you so long you thick-headed dunce?” God has longed for this request from his children and he longs to reward this open, honest, humble, faith-filled request. James does warn his readers not to doubt but he goes beyond this using a term that literally means “double souled” (δίψυχος). James here provides the earliest usage of this term, (that has currently been found in Greek literature) though it does become common

in Christian literature from this point onward. Today we might translate this as “half-hearted”, which expresses the divineness that James is saying is counterproductive in this endeavor.¹⁸

James called for a singleminded determination that is not affected negatively by external forces. The imagery here is of one who is not to be driven or affected by winds as is a wave of the sea. This person is to be dominated by a desire to follow God in a single-minded determination that causes him to withstand these forces. If this is not done then nothing should be expected from the Lord, because they are “unstable.” Again, there is a connection being made with the Hebrew concept of wisdom that powerfully anchored a person in the word and will of God so that they are not tossed about by the latest whim of society, or culture, in a way that disregards the Lord. If a person does follow the whim of his own mind, or of society, they are on their own and should expect nothing from God.

1:9 But let the humble brother boast in his high position, 1:10 and the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the grass he will pass away. 1:11 For the sun rises with burning heat and dries

¹⁸ A. K. M. Adam, *James A Handbook on the Greek Text*, in the Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament series (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 10.

up the grass and its flower falls off and the beauty of its face is destroyed just as the rich in his journey withers away.

James here begins this section telling the “lowly,” the man of “humble,” position to boast in his “high position.” Once again we find James challenging the perspective of the world. In terms of what the world admires and boasts in, riches, fame and power are elevated. People pursue these things with their time, and more importantly, with the hearts. James is challenging this set of priorities and instead challenging his audience to recognize that these things are signs of a mis-spent life. I have heard it said that when someone is very proficient at playing pool this is a sign of a mis-spent youth. James is here saying that the accumulation of wealth is a sign of a mis-spent life with priorities in the wrong place. Have you ever met someone who considered themselves to be rich? I have not. I have, however, met many people that I considered rich, and I am almost certain that I have met many that have considered me to be rich. James is not really trying to define where that line is he is trying to get his audience to focus on the priorities of the Lord rather than on the priorities that the world sets to measure success.

James here very much writes in a fashion that is reminiscent of Hebrew wisdom literature, with one of those themes, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes, being the fleeting (vaporous) nature of our life on earth as human beings. Surely the words of James here will have reminded his audience of this body of literature and they would have recognized that the call of James here is a call that echoes the call of those who wrote the wisdom literature of Israel in the past. He is calling upon them to focus their attention upon the priorities of God and not the accumulation of wealth as a source of security and comfort. He is actually saying that the pursuit of wealth is fleeting and does not provide security at all. It is temporary and insecure.

^{1:12} Blessed is the man who endures temptation, because becoming approved he will receive the crown of life which is promised to those loving him (the Lord). ^{1:13} Let no one being tempted say that, "From God I am being tempted;" For God is not tempted by evil and he tempts no one. ^{1:14} But each one is tempted by his own desires being drawn away and enticed; ^{1:15} then the desire, seizing the opportunity, gives birth to sin, and the


sin finishes giving birth to death. ^{1:16} Do not be deceived, brothers of my beloved ones.

James begins this section with a word that, for most Christians, reminds them of the Beatitudes of Jesus. Perhaps this should not be surprising to us as they were brothers after all. He then states that the one who endures temptation will receive the “crown of life” as a reward to those, perhaps here we would expect him to highlight obedience, but instead we are confronted with the motivation for such actions in the form of the love for the Lord. Action that is self-seeking is not in view here. The resisting of temptation that James indicates will receive this reward is not motivated by fear, or selfish motives, but out of love. There is a tendency to even think of temptation as some form of test sent from God, and James wants his audience to clearly understand the source of temptation. First of all, that source is not from God who cannot be tempted by evil nor does he use evil to tempt anyone. The source of these temptations is from within the person themselves: This is from where temptations spring, not from outside. This desire then grows as a child grows in the womb and if fed, nourished, and looked after, it will come forth

full born as sin. It will begin a family tree, of that which is at its source a creation of our own heart; and it ultimately brings forth death to the one who conceives it. James calls upon his audience not to be deceived into allowing this to happen.

^{1:17} All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights from whom there is not variation or shadow of change. ^{1:18} Wishing to give birth to us through the word of truth so that we are the ones who become first fruits of his creation.

In these verses James grounds what he has said previously in what is true about God himself: God is the generous source of all that is truly good and of every perfect gift that comes from above. James carefully defines the source and in some sense the nature of the gifts he speaking of here. Everything that truly is a source of light in the world is from God. This is an echo of Isaiah 40 where we are told that God became our father by the word of truth. God has begun here his fresh, new, family tree, that is brought into existence through the word of truth, the gospel of Jesus. James continues to challenge his audience to look at the world differently; to be transformed by the gospel message into



something new and different in the world. Standing firm against temptation is the beginning point of what God is doing with his people in the world.¹⁹

1:19 You must understand, brothers of my beloved ones; every man should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 1:20 because human anger does not accomplish the righteousness of God. 1:21 Therefore laying aside all moral uncleanness and all evil excesses in gentleness, welcome the implanted word, the one being able to save your soul.

In this section James introduces others of his key themes: first, calling upon those of his audience to be listeners. He calls upon them to be quick to listen and he links this here to the issue of anger. How easy it is for us as humans to hear something that quickly causes our anger to flair, but James calls for another way. He calls upon those hearing his words to listen carefully and to lay aside human anger, because it does not accomplish the will of God. How easy it is for us as human beings to become angry and to consider our anger, in some way, to be righteous; well here James calls us out on that and says such anger does not

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, p. 9.

accomplish the righteousness of God. It is most often self-centered and self-righteous, making it more about us than really about God. In traditional wisdom fashion James seeks to reorient our worldview in such a way that the reality of God sits at the center of our reality, rather than self.

James links all of this to theme of moral uncleanness and ties gentleness to it speaking of the word that is implanted in the person. There is a link between this implanted word, moral cleanness and gentleness. The implanted word will produce these other aspects if it is growing and taking root as it should and the final outcome will be the salvation of the soul. James makes it clear that he sees a correlation and one cannot truly be present without the other. The living, actively growing word of God will bring change, if there is no change there is a problem.

^{1:22} But become one that does the word and not only a hearer deceiving yourself. ^{1:23} Because the one hearing the word is not the doer, this one is like a man beginning to look at his face in the mirror; ^{1:24} to consider himself and departing and immediately he forgets what sort of person he was. ^{1:25} But the one looking into the perfect law of liberty and the one remaining

(steadfast), does not become one hearing in forgetfulness but he becomes a doer of deeds, therefore you are blessed in being the one doing.

The words of James here are both distressing, while at the same time, in some sort of strange way, comforting. The church today faces the fact that many of the people that attend are “hearers” only and not doers. They are nominal Christians at best. In the time of James the same problem existed and because it did he addresses this matter. These were people that were happy to listen to the word, but who left and were not really changed by what they heard. James here uses the illustration of someone looking into a mirror and then forgetting what they looked like. They took a quick glance and found what they saw interesting but they forget and carry on with their life in the same way they had before they heard the message. The remedy that James proposes for this problem is to remind his audience of the word of God; they are not just to hear it be to actually let it take hold in their lives and allow their lives to be transformed by the word.²⁰

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone James, Peter, John and Judah*, pp. 11-12.

1:26 If anyone considers themselves to be religious but does not bridle his tongue, he is deceiving his heart, the religion of this one is worthless. 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the father is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress, to keep oneself spotless from the world.

James then goes on to lay out what such a changed life would look like. James is extraordinarily practical, and the words that he leaves here at the end of chapter one are infinitely practical, but more than that they reflect the very nature of God himself. First of all James calls on his readers to control their tongue. He uses the metaphor of a bridle here. He says that if a person is not willing to control his tongue then his religion is worthless. In verse 27 he goes on to define more closely what he means when he uses the term “religion” (θρησκεία). This is a word that is often used of devout, or pious religious practice and James here defines such practice that is “pure” and “undefiled” as caring for orphans (ὀρφανός) and widows (χήρα) in their distress. This religion that James calls for is to look after the weakest and most vulnerable in their time of distress. They are to do this while at the same time keeping themselves unstained

by the world. The world system is tainted, and the challenge for Christians is to live in the world without allowing the impurity of this world and its system to stain them and change them. They are to change the world, not be changed by the world. The call here is straightforward and simply said, but so hard to actually perform.

Synopsis

Despite the fact that the the Book of James has been maligned, ignored by many there is a tremendous richness and wealth of inspiration there. There have also been many that have disputed that James, the younger brother of Jesus was the author of this work, but this is most likely who wrote this letter. There are tremendous parallels between this letter and the teachings of Jesus. James is also very practical while as the same time presenting things in a challenging fashion much like his older sibling did. He focuses on Torah obedience, practical theology and ethics and does not deliver a theological treatise like Paul. Some have seen the teachings of James to disagree with those of Paul, but that is more reflective of their understanding than any real disagreement.

James (Jacob) writes to the twelve tribes of the dispersion calling himself a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, a title of humility for the slave and respect and honor for the master. The Greek of this letter is of an extraordinarily high standard and this has caused some to question whether this could have been written by a Palestinian Jew like James? Such an objection is unfounded

and there are multiple ways that James could have composed this letter; such as using a scribe, or perhaps he was just well-versed in the Greek style. James was martyred for his faith and at least some say that once James was gone from the Temple God allowed the Romans to attack under Vespasian.

This letter challenges us in very practical ways in a style that is very much reminiscent of Jewish wisdom literature and in the style of Jesus himself. The message of this book convicts, challenges and inspires, calling for a proactive powerful faith of action. We are challenged to see the injustice in our world and to be counter-force to fight against all injustice, especially on behalf of the weak and the powerless. The central motivation for this lifestyle is the recognition of the wisdom of God and the fact that acknowledging this is demonstrated through action. The action of the followers of Christ are a part of God's new creative activity sweeping over creation in a fashion reminiscent of the spirit hovering over the deep in Genesis 1:2. We are to be joint participants of the tsunami of change generated through the power of God and not to be affected by the winds of worldliness

that challenge us to be like a wave tossed about by any and every wind.

James recognizes that such a stance will put those taking it at odds with the world and he seeks to fortify his audience to endure the hardship that will ensue. He does this in a very creative fashion that challenges them to see trials as a source of producing endurance and maturity. He goes on to challenge them to seek wisdom from its ultimate source and indicates that if they will ask God will give it to them. He invokes them to be people of faith with a single-minded resolve that is securely anchored in their trust of God. He also calls upon his audience to recognize that worldly position is not the same in the eyes of God as it is in the eyes of men. Wealth should be seen as a sign of humiliation and danger and humble circumstances as “high position.” As is clearly taught in Ecclesiastes man is but a vapor in the span of his life before God and soon withers. The calling of man is to resist temptation and seek the approval of God rather than the approval of the world or self. One leads to life while the other gives birth to death.

Everything that is good comes from God. If we are to truly follow God we should be slow to anger, quick to hear laying aside all evil and embracing gentleness, welcoming the word of God that has been implanted in us and is capable of saving our soul.

Hearing the word, while failing to do it is deception. As followers of Christ we are called to not only hear but to do what the word of God says. James in a very practical manner challenges the recipients of his letter to bridle the tongue and to look after widows and orphans in their distress, keeping oneself from being tainted by the world. This is pure religion.

Questions

1. Why does it matter if James is the younger brother or not in the interpretation of the Epistle of James?
2. Why do you think some people do not like the Book of James?
3. Why do you think James, the brother of Jesus might be called called an apostle?
4. Why do you think James wrote to the Jews of the dispersion?
5. What is wisdom?
6. How do you see James applying wisdom in his epistle?
7. How does James challenge his readers to see trials?
8. What response does he expect to be the result of trials?
9. What should the result of trials be for Christians?
10. Where does wisdom originate?
11. How are wisdom and faith connected?
12. How do faith and doubting relate to one another?
13. How does James respond to wealth?

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14. What is the nature of man in comparison with the nature of God?
 15. What response does James call for in the face of temptation?
 16. What is temptation?
 17. What gives birth to death?
 18. What does it mean to be the first fruits of creation?
 19. What is the place of human anger in the service of God?
 20. Why do you think James focuses on doing?
 21. What is religion?
 22. What does it mean for James to call on his readers to look after widows and orphans in distress?
 23. How do we get spotted by the world?