

Man's Bible Study

A Study of James

September 2021 – May 2022

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Trials and Tribulations

Who is James? It is understood by ancient testimony that the author of this letter is James the half-brother of Jesus. James was not an original disciple of Jesus, but became one after Jesus was raised and appeared to James. James later became one of the elders of the church in Jerusalem. Josephus states that he was murdered by the Jews at the time the Romans invaded.

James begins with an unusual statement: those who are put to trials are ultimately blessed. At first this seems contradictory. However, James goes on to explain that out of trials comes patience, and patience can perfect us in Christ. Perfection is an important idea in James. In James 2:22 we will be told that works perfect us. In James 3, we will be told that keeping our mouth under control makes us perfect.

James suggests that what we need is wisdom. Wisdom could be defined as knowledge applied. It means divine knowledge, and in chapter 3 we will be told it comes from above. In chapter 4 we will be told that we don't receive it when we don't ask for the right reasons.

James then moves to the disparity of the rich and the poor. Multiple times in James we will be warning the rich of the danger that their wealth presents. Wealth presents a dangerous temptation, which is the next part of the conversation. Like trials, we must face temptations to be proven (approved) faithful. Unlike trials, temptation is not from God, although at times the two are nearly indistinguishable.

QUESTION: *Why doesn't James tell us he is Jesus' brother as opposed to a servant of Jesus?*

QUESTION: *The letter is addressed to the twelve tribes; how do we know it applies to us?*

QUESTION: *What is a trial, where does it come from, and how can it give us patience that perfects us?*

QUESTION: *Why should we pray for wisdom?*

QUESTION: *How is it that wealth is dangerous?*

QUESTION: *What is temptation, where does it come from, and how does it demonstrate we are approved?*

Proper Christian Conduct

After considering the way that we are challenged as Christians, James moves to describe our conduct as Christians. First he speaks to our control of our mouth. The mouth is perhaps the main theme of the letter. First he warns us of the danger of the anger of men. James says that our wrath does not produce God's righteousness.

All of this is summed up with James' command to receive the Word of God in our heart. This command is qualified by this statement: we must ACT on the word of God, not just hear it. Without action, the Word is of no effect. James describes a man who sees himself in the mirror but forgets to adjust his image. Without action the mirror serves no purpose. The mirror (the perfect Law of Liberty) is only effective if we act on what it says. Primarily, James will continue to say this is first found in controlling our tongue.

What is the basic of Christ? James defines true personal religion at the end of the chapter as being two things: visiting widows and orphans and abstaining from sin. This is meant to specify the generality he will discuss in the next chapter; true religion is based on serving others and not sinning.

QUESTION: *Is it a sin to be angry? How should we view anger?*

QUESTION: *Can you think of ways that the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God? How can we distinguish righteous indignation or anger as Jesus did in Mark 3:5?*

QUESTION: *What does it mean to be a hearer and not a doer?*

QUESTION: *What does James mean when he uses the word "religion"?*

QUESTION: *Some see James 1:27 as authority for the church to handle matters related to the care of orphans (i.e. orphanages). How would you respond to that claim?*

Dangers of Partiality

What is partiality? We might describe it as a prejudice, a bias, or a preference. We might be partial to a sports team, a food or a place. James has a great concern that some Christians show partiality to other Christians. In particular, James is concerned that sometimes we make judgments based on appearances or wealth.

Followers of Christ are to see one another as equals. There is no such things as laity or clergy. Jesus even told the Apostles that they were not to lord over one another (Matthew 20:25-27). There is no distinction between rich and poor. We are not permitted to have racial distinctions or class distinctions. It is summed up in Galatians 3:28 when Paul said *“there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”*.

James shifts now to make the case that if we are guilty of this sin, then we are guilty of all sin. We are all under the law of liberty, the royal law. If we break only one rule, we are a guilty law breaker. That means that there is really no measure of the penalty of sin. We cannot tell God we have only broken a few laws and are not guilty of sin. All lawlessness is sin (1 John 3:4). Therefore, whatever law we choose to live by, we are obligated to live by all of it.

QUESTION: *Many denominations have “laity” and “clergy”. How does this portion of James speak to that?*

QUESTION: *What racial division caused problems in the New Testament?*

QUESTION: *How do we commit blasphemy by dishonoring the poor?*

QUESTION: *Is man’s law similar to God’s, that breaking one law makes us guilty?*

QUESTION: *What are other names for the law of liberty and the royal law?*

QUESTION: *When someone wants to apply part of the OT, what is the problem?*

Faith Without Works Is Dead

The second part of James 2 is perhaps the most controversial chapter in Scripture, especially for the Protestant movement. Most protestant churches believe we are saved by *faith only*; James 2:24 is the only place in the entire Bible where “faith only” is found; “*a man is justified by works, and not by faith only*”. James is explicitly clear: no one is justified by faith alone; in fact, faith is not “faith” without works.

To understand this better, we need to define the idea of faith and the idea of works. The word translated “faith” is the same root word as the word translated “believe” (Greek - *Pisteos*). Hebrews 11:1 defines faith, and Hebrews 11:6 tells us we what we must believe about God. This special belief can only be from things that God has said; Romans 10:17 says it can come only by the Word of God.

James is clarifying that to have this “Faith” requires that we must act on what God has said. This is nothing new; the entire chapter of Hebrews 11 describes the actions that defined the faith of people of the Old Testament. It is not enough to believe in God; we must actually do what God has said to have faith. The Bible defines “Faith” as believing what God has said through His word and obeying it.

It is this obedience to what God has said that is the meaning of the word “works”. The reason that it is confusing is that these works alone are not what save us; meaning, there is no such thing as a work that is worth the same as the “gift” of God. But since God credits “faith” as “righteousness” (Romans 4:3), and since “faith” is defined as both believing and obeying/acting, then without works of obedience none can be saved.

James uses two examples of this type of Faith. One is Abraham, and one is Rahab. When Abraham obeyed God, his obedience by belief was a faith that God called righteousness. When Rahab saved God’s messengers, she too demonstrated she believed in God. Both were saved by a faith that was believing and obeying.

QUESTION: *Why do so many teach that we are saved by “Faith Only”?*

QUESTION: *Is infant baptism an example of “faith only” or “works only”?*

QUESTION: *According to Titus 3:5, who does the “work” of baptism?*

QUESTION: *What does it mean that “Faith without works is dead”?*

Dangers of The Mouth

James' letter is about being careful with what we say. He warned us in chapter 1:13 not to accuse God falsely (**blasphemy**); he told us in 1:19 not to be rash with our words (**outburst of wrath**). Overflow of wickedness may refer to filthy speaking (**profanity**) in 1:21. We were warned of deceiving ourselves if we fail to bridle our tongue in 1:26 (**lying**). Chapter 3:9 brings out cursing men (**cursing**). We will be warned again in chapter 4:11 not to speak evil of one another (**gossip**), and in 3:14 and 4:13-16 not to boast sinfully (**boasting**). We are warned not to grumble in chapter 5:9 (**complaining**). We are told not to swear oaths (**lying**) in 5:12.

There are many ways we can sin with our mouths. The important point that James brings all of this to in chapter 3 is that there are serious, eternal consequences to failing to control our speech. When he declares that a person can be perfect if we control our tongue, he may not mean this as hyperbole; it may be literally true that the most difficult thing to control in our lives is our mouth.

This is James most powerful statement: a person who does not control their tongue will go to hell (3:6). Jesus taught clearly that all types of sins are manifested by our mouth (Matthew 15:18 "*But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies*"). Jesus also stated that for every idle word we speak, we will be held accountable on the day of Judgment (Matthew 12:36).

James has contrasted things we do with our mouth that are sinful with things we do with our mouth that are good. We can ask God for wisdom (1:5) We can praise God (2:9); we can speak as those judged by the law of liberty (2:12); we can lament and mourn our sin (4:9). We can pray for each other (5:13) and we can sing songs of praise (5:13). Finally, we can confess our sins to one another (5:16).

A follower of Christ will be known primarily by their speech (Colossians 4:6, Titus 2:8, 2 Corinthians 8:7). This is a twofold truth: first, we will be known by the speech we do not use, and then we will be known by the speech we do use.

QUESTION: *Define the following:* blasphemy; outburst of wrath; profanity; lying; cursing; gossip; boasting; grumbling.

QUESTION: *How are various works of the flesh demonstrated by our speech? For example, how is murder revealed by our words (as stated in Matthew 5:21-22)?*

QUESTION: *Define the following words:* meekness; mercy; peace

QUESTION: *We are told that the Word of Truth (Scripture) is the source of wisdom (2 Timothy 3:15). Is praying for wisdom a contradiction of this idea?*

Friendship With The World

James previously told us that there are two wisdoms: the wisdom of the world, which is based in carnal and demonic desires, and the wisdom of above, which comes from the Father. The results of this worldliness is envy and strife. In chapter 4 this theme continues, telling us the motivation and result of this behavior: friendship with the world, which creates enmity with God.

We are told in Scriptures that God is the enemy of worldly men. While we were enemies, Christ died for us (Romans 5:10). What is worldliness? In 1 John 2:16 we are told that all that is the world is the *“lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”*. James 1 summarized this as being our desires.

So what does friendship with the world mean? Another example of this is Jesus telling us in Matthew 6:24 that we cannot serve two masters; we cannot pursue God and money. Friendship with the world is the love of worldly things. It is loving things for selfish reasons. It is wanting to be the best, the most famous, or the most powerful. It is all of the reasons Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3, and it is the temptations presented to Jesus in Matthew 4.

The opposite of being worldly is being Spiritual. This means to be lead by the Spirit, which is manifested as the Word of God (John 6:63, Galatians 5:25). The Spirit of God dwells in us by Faith (Ephesians 3:17). This connects the wisdom of God as being from the Spirit of God.

James demands that we must ceased to be double minded, and instead draw near to God, and He will draw near to us. He demands that we cleanse our hands, purify our hearts, lament and mourn (our sins), and humble ourselves. We are to cease judging others unrighteously and boasting that we know the future.

QUESTION 1: *Why does James use the term “adulterer” to describe people who have a friendship with the world?*

QUESTION 2: *Jesus said that only those the Father draws near can come to Him (John 6:44). What did Jesus say in John 12:32 would cause that to happen?*

QUESTION 3: *How does a person humble themselves?*

A Warning About Wealth

Several times now James has warned those who seek God not to seek wealth. In chapter 1 he declared that a rich man will suffer humiliation when his wealth is lost (and that this was a good thing). In chapter 2 he warned us not to favor the rich, who are in a way the natural enemies of those who seek the Gospel. Now we have the direst warning against pursuing wealth.

Is it a sin to be rich? There are several problems with that question. First, “rich” is not something that can easily be identified. Rich and poor tend to be subjective to others. Any American in the 21st century would be rich compared to a wealthy man in ancient Israel. Secondly, while Jesus warned us against pursuing wealth (Matthew 6) and even told a man to give away his wealth (Matthew 19), we know that there were wealth Christians who were told to use their wealth in the service of God (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

But to love money and to pursue it is a great danger of all. Jesus plainly declared that we cannot love God and money. Paul declared that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Now James is telling us that (often) obtaining wealth means exploiting others, and that the testimony of that exploitation is against us in the day of judgment.

James is declaring that a life lived in pursuit of luxury is the problem. We consider the parable of the rich man in Luke 12:16-21. There God struck dead a man who, when blessed with wealth, determined to have a life of ease. Later we read of Lazarus and the rich man, which revealed that living a life of luxury was the reason for his torment.

James now encourages us to be patient in our difficulties, and expect the fruit of perseverance. But we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of suffering. One thing we do is to grumble and complain. When the Israelites complained in the wilderness, they were struck down by God. God expects patience and trust in trials. Instead, James points to the prophets as an example of suffering.

QUESTION: Who is the Lord of Sabaoth (vs 4)?

QUESTION: If we are not to live a life of luxury, what are we to live a life of?

QUESTION: What are some of the benefits that we receive now when patient?

QUESTION: Why would we grumble against our own brethren when suffering?

QUESTION: How is Job a model for us in suffering?

Prayer and Faith

Following immediately on the warning of failing tests, James makes the plea that we might not swear in this condition. As Jesus declared in the Sermon on the Mount, our yes should be yes and no should be no.

James now directs us to some means to spiritual problem solving. Much of this revolves around being active in our response to circumstance. In particular, we are commended to prayer. James says that “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (NKJV; fervent is left out in the NASB). Let us consider three things listed that make for prayer: 1) Effectiveness, 2) Fervency and 3) Righteousness.

What is effectiveness? We might consider that part of the effectiveness of prayer is how we pray. Jesus said that we are to pray in the name (authority) of Jesus (John 16:23) to the Father for the will of the Father (1 John 5:14). We pray in the will of God for things God has told us to pray for.

Fervency refers to the intensity or consistency of our prayer. Prayer ought to be continual, constant and ongoing; we are to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Our prayers must be intense and demonstrating the energy of effort.

Finally, prayer is effective based on the righteous character of the person prayer. God has said He does not hear the prayers of sinners (John 9:31), but the “*the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry*” (Psalm 34:15). We need to have a righteous relationship with God in order to know our prayers are heard.

In his closing remarks, James commends us to work on delivering each other, much as Paul does in Galatians 6:2. One of our greatest purposes as Christians is to help one another to make the finish line.

QUESTION: *Is it a sin to swear an oath?*

QUESTION: *Why does God not hear sinners? What does it mean He does not hear?*

QUESTION: *What does it mean when we say we can only pray for that which is the will of God?*

QUESTION: *How can prayers be made more effective? More fervent?*

QUESTION: *Why does James tell us that Elijah had a nature like ours?*