

## New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 20 – James

James was a half-brother of Jesus, someone who was raised with the benefits of the same godly home and upbringing. Like his siblings, he was not immediately attracted to Jesus as the Christ, but was later converted, became a witness of His resurrection and was among those who waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. James was soon recognized as an apostle. He became one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem and even served, it would seem, as the moderator of the first Jerusalem council.

The Epistle of James was one of the earliest letters of the New Testament to be written. The apostle, who now describes himself as “a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”, sent it to Jewish converts whom he addresses as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad”. James probably knew several of those very people at this early time, or at least some of their relatives who were still in the area. He certainly knew the hardships and persecution they were facing, as well as their often ill-conceived and inappropriate reactions to those troubles. He does not attempt so much to teach them Christian doctrine as he does to stimulate among them Christian life and character, and his instruction closely resembles that of Jesus Himself in His Sermon on the Mount.

Chapter 1 begins in a way that would probably surprise his readers, calling on them to rejoice in their several trials because such testing of faith produces patience, which in turn builds character. If they lack wisdom, let them pray for it, and God, who delights in His people, will surely supply all they need if they pray for it in faith. The testing and exercising of faith are important themes of this letter, and it is here that true faith is distinguished from all counterfeit varieties.

Trials and temptations come together, but we must not confuse them. God tries the faith of His people in order to improve it, like gold refined by fire to remove the dross, but temptations are from the devil and their purpose is to destroy faith. We must resist temptations, therefore, not allowing ourselves to be enticed by them or to give in to them. Those who so endure possess a saving faith, being so tested and tried they grow in faith from strength to strength, and these are they who will receive the crown of life; on the other hand, those who give in to temptation and live a life of sin are under the judgment of death.

Let the Christian, then, be ready always to receive the Word of God, to respond to his trials in faith rather than reacting to them in anger. Let him know that it is not enough to hear the truth – faith is more than mere head knowledge – a genuine faith will embrace the truth and commit to living it out in life. Here is a doer of the Word, and this is the person who is blessed in what he does. If someone fails to control what he says, he is deceiving himself. True religion is demonstrated by those who help others in need, such as widows and orphans, and by not allowing oneself to get caught up in worldly ways.

Chapter 2 shows how faith calls for wholehearted and consistent commitment, not expressing partiality for the rich over the poor, but loving one's neighbour as himself and treating everyone with the same respect. Jesus had compassion on the poor, after all, and it should have been His example that these converted Jews followed. Instead, they showed favour to the rich who dragged them into their courts and they dishonoured the poor. How do we behave? Such partiality is sin, and God's judgment is without mercy to those who show no mercy.

So begins this most famous passage in the letter relating faith and works. Salvation is by faith apart from works, but not by faith without works, for true faith works. Any faith which does not produce good works is dead. Works, then, are the fruit of faith and the convincing evidence that such faith is real and alive.

It is right here, however, that we need to be careful. When James tells us that Abraham was justified (declared righteous before God) by works, he does not imply that works are the instrumental means of winning divine favour, or that they must be added to faith in order to secure that favour. He simply means that a true and living faith, a justifying faith, cannot fail to produce such works in the same way that a lemon tree always bears lemons rather than apples.

Let us observe, too, in passing that Abraham did not have to offer up his son Isaac on the altar; it was his willingness to do so which showed his faith to be real. Yet God did have to offer up His Son on the cross in order to achieve His people's redemption. There was no one who intervened to stop Him. There was no ram in the thicket to replace His sacrifice. God did not waver or delay to offer up His Son, and He did that in order to provide the legal basis for the believer's justification. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Chapter 3 points out that we are responsible for what we say, that not many in any church are to become teachers, therefore, since teachers are the ones who will come under a stricter judgment should they lead others astray. The tongue is such a small member of the body; it is so easy to take it for granted and not appreciate the damage it does. We may even think that we can control the tongue when, in fact, left to himself no one can. Controlling the tongue requires the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who helps the believer in all his infirmities, and this is why self-control is rightly called a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23).

Believer, do you call upon the Lord as David did to set a guard over your mouth, to keep watch over the door of your lips (Psalm 141:3)? How often we regret our silence as we look back and realize that we should have said something when we had the opportunity to do so, yet the greater damage is done when, like these converted Jews to whom James is writing, we dare to say things which come right from the pit of hell and undermine our testimony of Christ!

There is a world of difference between that wisdom which descends from above and the wisdom which is earthly, sensual and demonic. The difference is easily discerned in what it produces, whether it is gentle, willing to yield and full of mercy, or self-seeking and full of every evil thing.

Chapter 4 takes us to the core of what is so very wrong with a careless, worldly kind of Christianity. The covetousness of an idol-making heart can lead even a believer away from waiting on the Lord into behaviour which too often resembles that of his unbelieving neighbour. Does it not move this wayward soul to question whether he is really a Christian? And, if he is a new creation in Christ, why does he not long again for that first love which once captured his affections?

Clearly, such distracted believers need to be confronted and lovingly challenged, which is precisely what James is doing here. Does anyone actually think that the apostle is going too far in addressing them as adulterers and adulteresses? If so, he needs to recognize the tyranny of sin, to remember that evil company corrupts good habits, and to reflect on what a shameful witness this is before the eyes of a watching world.

Their present backsliding does not mean of course that they can lose their salvation, but they do need to know that friendship with the world stirs up the

enmity of the Lord who tells us that He is a jealous God and it can move Him for a time to withhold blessings from His people. Have we become careless and backslidden? If we see ourselves in any of this, we need to hear and heed this same godly counsel to resist the devil and draw near to God, not to sit in judgment over one another or be too confident in what we can achieve.

Chapter 5 cries out to the rich who heaped up for themselves the treasures of this world and defrauded the poor around them, calling them now to weep and howl for the miseries which are soon to be unleashed upon them. In stark contrast to that dreary picture, it also calls believers to be patient in their troubles, to await the coming of the Lord who before long will receive each one into glory. They are not to grumble against one another, but to remember the patience of the prophets and the perseverance of Job. Above all, they are not to swear, but to speak the truth and commit themselves to that.

The sick should rely on the Lord for everything – using supernatural means (calling on the elders for prayer), but also natural means (using oil, not for ceremonial but medicinal purposes) – for both are supplied by our heavenly Father from whom all blessings flow. More than heals, the Lord also forgives (1 John 1:9). We cannot say that either prayer or medicine will cure the sick, necessarily, but these are salutary provisions to minister to those who are in need and to see them through to the end. The fervent prayer of a righteous man is very effective, and the prayers of the prophet Elijah, a man like us, are cited as a case in point.

Finally, and perhaps most remarkably, the Lord is pleased to use His people in an even greater ministry: not only to help each other in regard to earthly needs, but as well to be there to benefit the backslidden in regard to their heavenly needs, and, more still, to reach out even to the unconverted with the soul-saving gospel of Jesus Christ. How amazing that the Lord should use such weak means as we are to accomplish such great ends, and how eager we should therefore be, beloved, to make ourselves ready for just such a ministry (1 Peter 3:15)!

Rev. Tom Aicken

