

James' Three Primary Themes Restated

James 1:12-27

Review:

1. **Author** – “James,” brother of Jesus, leader of the Church at Jerusalem
2. **Audience & Occasion** – “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion”
 1. Jewish believers or churches made up predominantly of Jewish Christians – scattered around Syria and beyond.
 2. James in one sense is speaking to his flock, in another to the growing number of churches springing up among the Jewish communities around the world.
 3. These believers were commonly persecuted, and had trials of various kinds – often they were poor and marginalized, and they also needed instruction and correction for a variety of problems (don't we all have problems too?), as will become clear as we study the epistle.
3. **Genre** – “the letter of James”
 1. James is a letter with similarity with Wisdom literature – it is known as the Proverbs of the New Testament. Also has some similarities to Prophetic literature in that James boldly denounces sin.
 2. Perhaps most striking is the similarity James has with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and other teachings.
4. **Characteristics of the Book of James**
 1. 60 commands in 5 short chapters but almost no mentions of the Gospel, Jesus' death & salvation by faith. This and its strong requirement of works led Martin Luther and others to doubt its canonicity.
 2. Despite this controversial character, the book has been warmly embraced and loved by average Christians for thousands of years. It is incredibly practical and helpful. And its words are memorable.
 3. The Gospel does shine through this book in hidden ways:
 - The commands in James do not give us confidence that we can keep them – the bar is raised very high – 2:10, 4:17, 1:22
 - There are paradoxes presented too: we must control our tongue 1:26, but no one can 3:8; we must avoid the pollution of the world 1:27, but our envy and quarrels prove we are worldly 4:1-4.
 - Furthermore, we are all in peril since within us are desires leading to sin and ultimately death – 1:14-15
 - But we are not left to ourselves, God birthed us anew, of his own will, leading to life – 1:18,21
 - Indeed “mercy triumphs over judgment” – 2:13 since “the Lord is full of compassion and mercy” – 5:11.
 - God does “grace to the humble” – 4:6.

Statement of the Three Primary Themes of James (1:1-11)

1. **The Trials of the Christian Life (vs. 1-4)**
 - A. INEVITABLE “when”
 - B. VARIABLE “various kinds”
 - C. REJOICEABLE “count it all joy”
 - D. VALUABLE (or productive)
2. **The Wisdom {for Trials} Needed (vs. 5-8)**
3. **The Problem of Riches and Poverty (vs. 9-11)**

James' Three Primary Themes Restated (1:12-27)

1. God and Our Trials (vs. 12-18)

- A. The PROMISE of trials – “he will receive the crown of life” (vs. 12)
 1. Happy is...
 2. Perseverance/endurance is remaining “steadfast under trial” and results in being approved (cf. 1 Pet. 1) or having “stood the test.” Passing the test comes from the maturity and growth that the trials bring as explained in v. 2-4
 3. “Crown” *which is* life – the crown is eternal life itself and is promised to believers (Rev. 2:10/2 Tim. 4:8)
 4. “To those who love him” – all believers are described as those loving him. Their lives are characterized by love for God. Is it true of us that our lives are those full of love for God?
- B. The PERIL of trials – “I am being tempted of God” (vs. 13-16)
 1. Note on context
 - a) “Test” and “Tempted” are from the same word
 - b) God does “tempt” people – Abraham, Israel, many OT examples, (Gen. 22:1, Ex. 16:4, Deut. 8:2, 16, Judg. 2:22, 3:1)
 - c) So what’s going on here? The key is to see how this fits the context of what goes before and after. Vs. 16a connects 13-15 & 16-18, and birth terminology does as well.
 2. Two Responses to Trials
 - a) We’ve seen the first response already:
 - See Trials as TESTS – ENDURANCE – MATURITY – GENUINE FAITH – ASSURANCE & HOPE or an alternative to this:
 - b) 2nd response to trial:
 - See Trials as TEMPTATIONS (God is out to get me. This is an impossible situation – a set-up to fail.) – which leads to SIN – bringing forth ultimately DEATH (as we shipwreck our faith)
 - c) The biggest danger of the trial is not what it can do to us, but what it might do “By us” – by our reaction to it (bitterness, hatred, envy, abandoning the faith).
 - This starts subtly – “God must not love me. Maybe God doesn’t care about me. God must be punishing me. God isn’t trustworthy. How could this happen to me. This isn’t fair.”
 - WAIT – James says. “DO NOT BE DECEIVED”. God doesn’t intend our failure through his tests – he gives them to us as GOOD GIFTS.
- C. The PERFECT GIVER of our trials (vs. 17-18)
 1. God is GOOD (he gives good gifts).
 2. God doesn’t change (hasn’t stopped loving you).
 3. God IS in control. (he is “ABOVE”, and the Father of lights – controls the heavens)
 4. God intends/wills our spiritual birth – he means the trials to produce endurance and faith in us. [this spiritual birth prevents doubt giving birth to ruin]
 5. God gives trials as GOOD GIFTS for our ultimate joy.

2. Wisdom in ACTION (vs. 19-26)

- A. WISDOM
 1. This section hearkens back to v. 5-8 and forward to 3:1-4:12.
 - a) Although the word “wisdom” is not found here, wisdom themes (proper speech and conduct) are.
 - b) There is also a clear parallel between James’ call to be a “doer of the word” and Jesus’ parable of the Wise Man in the Sermon on the Mount – Matt. 7:24-27.

- c) Wisdom relates to speech in chapter 3 and 4 with the relation of 3:13-18 (wisdom from above) and the teaching on the tongue (3:1-12) and verbal fighting (4:1-12). 3:13-18 characterizes wisdom in similar terms as what we find in this passage (v. 19-26) – good “works” done “in humility.”
2. Wisdom is needed to:
 - a) Understand and endure trials.
 - b) Properly respond to poverty or wealth.
 - c) Act peaceably in trying times – finding unity with one another in the assembly.
 - d) To prove that your religion is worthwhile and that your faith is living – ultimately to receive the crown of life.
- B. Wisdom in ACTION “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath”
1. The three commands which encapsulate wisdom (v. 19)
 - a) Christians should “respond to God’s Word with obedient listening, careful speech, and a humble demeanor.”
 - from *James (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, C. Blomberg & M. Kamell, pg. 81
 - b) James lists the commands and then develops them in a round-about, reverse order. (3-1-2)
 - c) These three commands are fleshed out further in 3:1-4:12.
 2. Slow to Wrath, or anger (v. 20-21)
 - a) “Wrath” – not merely outbursts of anger but deep-seated rage
 - b) “Righteousness of God” (not that produced by God in this context, but that befitting or directed to God)
 - c) “Produce” or “work out” – this is an apt description for how a believer lives for God (see v. 21)
 - d) Instead of anger/wrath/rage we should be characterized by humility – vs. 21.
 - e) “Having put off” – implies they already have put off their old life (cf. Eph. 4:22/Col. 3:8)
 - f) “Implanted word” – that seed was put there when we were given new birth, it is now a part of us (grafted to our very nature) – but we should “receive” it or take to heart the truth of its existence and hope in its future flowering and growth in our life
 - g) “Able to save” – able is “being able” the only present continuous verb in this verse – the power is in the word not our receiving or putting off.
 3. Quick to Hear (v. 22-25)
 - a) “Hear” – the concern in v. 19 is that we tend to speak before listening, but here in v. 22 he further develops what he is getting at with being “quick to hear” – what kind of hearing does he want?
 - b) “Become” or “Be” – is present and implies a continual, repeated action – we must continually be doers of the word in specific situations and occasions.
 - c) Parallel with Matt. 7:24-27 “hears these words of mine and acts on them” or “does them” or “puts them into practice” – just like the foolish man felt secure on the sand, so some people feel secure in knowing facts and hearing words but are actually deceiving themselves.
 - d) “Mirror” – polished brass, it would require someone to stare intently at it to get a good picture of themselves. But going away and doing nothing is absurd. So is how some of us treat Scripture. We have an appearance of studying the word intently, but we don’t change our ways and actually live out the word in a wise gospel-centered life.
 - e) “Perfect law of liberty” – the Gospel – the new law (with a corresponding ethic that Jesus taught) which gives true liberty (in contrast to Torah) [see also the contrast in 2:11-12]
 - f) Those who are doers – do [good] works (as later developed in ch. 2) and are blessed/happy (like v. 12) in their doing. – they have a good life now in their good works-oriented life of godly wisdom (transformed by God’s implanted word and new birth). – see Eph. 2:10, Tit. 2:14.

4. Slow to Speak (v. 26)
 - a) “Seem” – not necessarily in fact, but it seems that way on the surface
 - b) “Religious” – technically refers to devoted to cultic rites/worship/deities/gods – didn’t have to be false gods and wasn’t typically a hypocritical or shallow devotion. But James is implying that it is shallow with his word “seem”.
 - c) Not bridling the tongue – is key in the evidence that someone’s faith is shallow. James 3 will elaborate on this.
 - d) Silence or slowness in speech was a hallmark of a wise person (see Prov. 10:19 and 29:20).
 - e) “Deceiving their heart” – again, like the one who is not a doer of the word, someone who doesn’t restrain his speech deceives himself if he thinks he is also truly religious.
 - f) “Worthless” – this religion or faith is utterly worthless, idle, empty, fruitless, powerless, lacking truth.

3. Our Obligation toward the Poor (vs. 27)

1. Context
 - a) This verse in one sense restates the third theme (which will be again developed throughout ch. 2).
 - b) In another sense, this verse goes immediately with v. 26 to continue to describe true religion.
 - c) And in another way, the verse concludes the entire introduction that is chapter 1 – in the verse itself you almost have all three themes as the poor are oppressed (trials), and keeping unspotted from the world involves wisdom.
2. Obligation to the Poor
 - a) “Religion,” “pure,” “undefiled” – ritual worship, the OT often requires pure and undefiled worshippers (see Ps. 24:4)
 - b) “God and our Father” – the ultimate judge or recipient of our worship is God. James also uses “Father” as a term for God, in a very similar way to Jesus’ use of “Father” and “Our Father” is a term from the Lord’s Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (again).
 - c) “Visit” – implies both visiting and being with them in their misery (to comfort them), but also providing material help to them
 - d) “Widows” and “orphans” – these are two of the most common classes of destitute people in James’ day. See also God’s repeated concern for them: Dt. 10:18, Ps. 146:9; Jer. 7:6; Zech. 7:10, **Ps 68:5.
 - e) “Distress” – the term is “thlipsis” which is tribulation – their suffering is part of the tribulation believers experience in this world (Acts 14:22) and the use of the term may be a way to encourage those in the church who are suffering to remember that part of their poverty and suffering is caused from persecution for their faith (a trial they must endure and see as a good gift).
 - f) This practical mercy is part of the good works that doers of the word do (v. 22 and 25).
 - g) Helping the poor is an obligation, but not the sum total of Christian duty. We must also maintain moral purity in this world – keep “unspotted” from the world. “World” is typically the evil system of this age in James (see: 2:5, 3:6, 4:4).
3. Summary of the Three Themes
 - a) Vs. 27 summarizes James entire message.
 - b) It shows how they are to live during their trial and how to endure it.
 - (1) Take care of the poor – HANDLING POVERTY/WEALTH
 - (2) Remain pure – LIVING WITH WISDOM/FAITH that WORKS
 - (3) In the world [which is maligning you and tempting you] – ENDURING TRIALS