

The Letter of James

Purpose

The letter of James has less to do with teaching theology—compared to other New Testament books—and more to do with commanding (imperatives) his readers to obey the theology that they already know. “Imperative verbs occur with greater frequency in James than in any other New Testament book. James rebukes and exhorts his readers, and any theology that is taught comes only in conjunction with the overriding purpose.” (D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 415-16.)

The purpose of this letter is to exhort the believers to Christian maturity and holiness of life. James is very concerned with the practices of the faith around which his themes revolve.

Themes

Many scholars and readers have been frustrated with the apparent lack of any structure or unity to the letter. There seems to be no single train of thought that James follows. The letter seems to have more of the feel of wisdom literature with its short discussions on morality and godly living than of a unified letter with a couple of focused points developed throughout the letter. This makes extracting themes that run throughout the letter very difficult. However, there are few major themes James develops in his letter.

Trials and Temptation

There are three major passages that focus specifically on trials and temptations: 1:2-4, 1:12-15, and 5:7-11. The first passage deals with the reason for trials and how God can use them in the lives of the believers. The second two deal with the temptation to blame God or give up in the midst of the trials. For James, trials can either serve to strengthen a believer in his faith in God or they can be the very thing that causes him to lose faith in God depending on whether he chooses to see them from God’s or man’s perspective.

Sin and Human Nature

James deals a lot with the human nature and the forces of evil that influence it. First, James did not see the human as *all* evil. He reminds his readers that humanity was made in the likeness of God (3:9). Thus, to allow evil to reign in our bodies is inconsistent with God’s intent for us and the transformation that the Spirit is working within us.

However, James is also a realist about our tendency for evil and inconsistency. He first develops this in 1:5-8 when he refers to humanity’s double-mindedness in their convictions and to what they will submit themselves. James develops this as he deals with the way that we conduct ourselves in the matters of trials, money, speech, charity, conflicts, and prejudices.

Faith That Works

The word “faith” is mentioned 15 times in the letter; fourteen of them are in the first two chapters, making this topic very important in James’ letter. The Letter of James teaches that faith in God should result in behavior that is in harmony with God’s will. Though this theme is seen

throughout the letter, it is most explicit in 2:14-26. For James, a true salvation automatically results in a life of godly works and fruit—not that the works earn one salvation but that salvation produces good works. James makes it very clear that a mere confession of certain ideological beliefs is not enough (2:14, 19); instead, the confession must lead one to be a doer of the Word (2:17). Though this theological principle is not explicit throughout the letter, 2:14-26 becomes the foundation for all his imperatives toward the believer in the remaining chapters.

In this James echoes many of Jesus' teachings on faith and works that present very real challenges not only to the believers' faith but to their behavior. James's teachings have their roots most specifically in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. James makes no fewer than 15 references or allusions to Matthew 5-7 in his epistle.

There are three major points that James develops from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. First is the need for the believer to demonstrate righteousness through behavior (Matt. 5:20). James specifically develops five major behaviors in his letter (trials, prejudice, speech, conflicts, and money). Second, Jesus clarified the believer's goal to be perfect like our heavenly Father (Matt. 5:48). James also develops this, beginning with the purpose of trials (1:3-4). Third, Jesus taught that believers should live to obtain God's approval, not the approval of their fellowmen (Matt. 6:1). James explains what this means as he develops the five behaviors.

These three revelations in the Sermon on the Mount contribute to the hidden framework on which James hung his challenges to his readers. All of these challenges deal with spiritual immaturity.

Outline

- I. Enduring Trials (1:1-18)
 - A. The Testing of Faith (1:1-8)
 - B. Trials and Temptations (1:9-18)
- II. Applying the Word (1:19-3:18)
 - A. The Obedience of Faith (1:19-27)
 - B. Partiality vs. Obedience (2:1-13)
 - C. Passivity vs. Obedience (2:14-26)
 - D. Speech and Obedience (3:1-12)
 - E. The Wisdom of Obedience (3:13-18)
- III. Witnessing to Divine Providence (4:1-5:20)
 - A. The Reward of Faith (4:1-10)
 - B. Avoiding Worldly Influences (4:11-5:6)
 - C. The Patience of Faith (5:7-12)
 - D. The Prayer of Faith (5:13-20)

I. Enduring Trials (1:1-18)

A. The Testing of Faith (1:1-8)

James was probably the half-brother of Jesus Christ who evidently became a believer late in Jesus' earthly ministry (Jn. 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7) and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem early in its history (Gal. 2:9; Acts 15:13-21).

1. How does James describe himself in verse 1?

James calls himself a slave of Christ, which demonstrates complete submission to Christ. It is interesting that he does not refer to himself as the brother of Jesus or as the church leader. The leader of the church in Jerusalem is humbling himself before his readers.

In verse 1, the word *servant* (NIV, ESV), *bondservant* (NASB), *slave* (NET) is most accurately translated "bondservant," referring to one who willingly sells himself into slavery to another. Thus, its true force is as *slave*. For a Jew this concept did not connote drudgery, but honor and privilege. It was used of national Israel at times (Isa. 43:10) and associated with Old Testament personalities, such as Moses (Josh. 14:7), David (Ps. 89:3; cf. 2 Sam. 7:5, 8) and Elijah (2 Ki. 10:10).

2. To whom is James a slave in verse 1, and what is the significance of this?

Notice that James calls himself a slave of both God and Jesus Christ, putting them on an equal level. As a Jew, there is no way that James would have ever imagined doing this unless he truly viewed Jesus Christ as God.

The "12 tribes scattered abroad" most likely refers to the Jewish Christians who lived outside of Judah. They are either a product of the scattering of Jews after the stoning of Stephen or of the evangelism of missionaries who had gone outside of Judah. There is a good chance that these churches are a mixture of Jews and Gentiles since they live outside of Judah and are therefore less likely to stay completely separate from each other.

3. What should one's response be to trials, and for what reason, according to verses 2-3?

We are to consider it literally "all joy," which carries the idea of intensity rather than having only joy ("nothing but joy"). He is not suggesting that our response should only be joy, but that it should provide an occasion for us to respond with genuine joy. The reason for the joy is the knowledge that this testing will produce endurance in one's life. We are not commanded to rejoice that we have trials or in the pain that they cause but rather in what they can produce in us.

In verse 3 the *testing of faith* does not refer to a test that one would go through to determine the existence or assess the quality of one's faith; rather, it is intended to *purify* or *refine* faith that already exists and to *demonstrate* its genuineness in order to pronounce it approved.

In verse 3 the Greek etymology of *perseverance* (NIV), *endurance* (NASB, NET), *steadfastness* (ESV, RSV) is "remaining under," which paints the picture of one who is able to carry a heavy load for a long time. It also carries the idea of the heavy load

producing strength in the individual over a period of time; much like the effect of lifting weights.

4. What is the final goal or result of the testing, according to verse 4?

The final goal is that you may become perfected or complete in your character. The text gives an exhortation (“let”) to the believer to allow this result in their lives. The benefits of the trials are solely based on how one responds to them. The positive and negative references to the perfection suggest a stronger meaning than maturity and refers to the wholeness of the believer’s character in that the end goal is truly perfection. That this is not obtainable in this life is not a reason to lower the bar.

“When believers respond to such trials with joy, faith, and obedience, their Christian experience is no longer just intellectual or theoretical. They develop proven faith (v. 3), full and complete character (v. 4) and the kind of practical obedience James called for throughout his epistle. The corollary to this is that a faith that is not tested by adversity will always remain shallow and incomplete.” (Buist M. Fanning. “A Theology of James” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 419.)

5. What should one do and expect when they lack wisdom, according to verse 5?

If we do not understand God’s view, we are told that we should ask for wisdom because this is what God desires to give us. This is made clear in the Old Testament (Prov. 2:6) and in the New Testament when Jesus stated that we are to come to God expecting good things from Him when we ask (Matt. 7:7-12).

In verse 5 the word *generously* comes from a root whose meaning is “single” or “sincerity.” Paul uses it with the idea of sincerity in Eph. 6:5 and 1 Cor. 11:3. The idea of “single” can be seen in Luke 11:34 and Prov. 10:9. Thus the emphasis is not so much on God’s generosity in giving as it is in His single, undivided intent to give to us what we need in order to please Him. (D. A. Carson. *The Letter of James*, pp. 58-59.)

Wisdom is the means by which one can both discern and carry out the will of God (Prov. 2:10-19; 3:13-14; 9:1-6). It goes beyond a factual knowledge about life and has more to do with a relational understanding of God, what He desires of us, and how to execute His will in our lives and the lives of others. It denotes “a fixed, righteous order to which the wise man submits his life.” The wisdom we are to have, according to the context, is being able to see the trials from God’s perspective instead of from our own human perspective. It is also being able to discern His will in how we should behave and what choices to make in the midst of the trials.

6. What is the contrast in verse 6, and for what reason should one heed this contrast?

The contrast is between the one of faith who asks God in verse 5 and the doubting one in verse 6. In 2:14-26 James will make it clear that one must have faith to truly live the Christian life. However, James does not expect one to never doubt, for this is impossible. The word “doubt” here carries the idea of not wavering. Paul uses this word of Abraham in Rom. 4:20, yet we do know that there were times that Abraham did doubt the promise of God (Gen. 17:15-18 for example). The idea is a consistent perseverance in one’s desire for God to answer prayer. If one has no faith at all, then what is the point of even asking? This person is compared to the sea in a picture of

undulating waves, where the surface of the sea has no consistent shape because the wind controls its form. According to Heb. 6:19, the anchor of the believer's soul is secured to the throne of God, thus one can have a consistent faith.

“In Scripture asking in faith always means one of two things. It means either believing God *will* do what He has promised or, if He has not promised, believing that He *can* do what the person requesting asks (cf. Matt. 8:1-4; Mark 4:35-41).” (Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on James*, p. 13.)

7. For what reason should the doubting person not expect to receive wisdom, according to verses 7-8?

The person is called double-minded, which literally means “doubled-souled” in the Greek. This is the first time in Greek literature that this word occurs. However, this is not the first time the concept is presented in Scriptures. In Ps. 119:2 God praises the single-minded one and in Ps. 12:2 and Hos. 10:2 He condemns those that are divided in their devotion. This single devotion is ultimately seen in Deut. 6:5 where God calls us to devotion to Him alone. The double-minded is someone who trusts and obeys God part of the time but not consistently. A double-minded person is one who has a divided opinion or allegiance.

“This inconsistency is caused by a division in the innermost self, and ‘inner disunity of heart.’ Doubt is not equivalent to double-mindedness, but simply a manifestation of this deeper problem. In this sense humanity’s plight is not merely that our outward behavior is sometimes good and sometimes evil, but that we have no inward wholeness, integrity of heart and mind.” (Buist M Fanning. “A Theology of James” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 420-21.) The double-minded human here is contrasted with the single-mindedness of God in verse 5. This idea of man’s double-mindedness will be continued throughout the letter (1:13-15; 3:19-12; 4:1-3).

In verse 8 the word *unstable* is used only in James 3:8 and Isa. 54:11 to refer to the effects that a violent storm has on the sea. Here, James is continuing the imagery of the wind-tossed sea of verse 6.