

Study 2: James Chapter 1

Introduction

James hits the idea very early of putting our faith into practice. There is no half-way house. Either we are for God, or we are only playing at our religion. Our relationships with our fellow brethren in the church are just as important as our individual relationship with God. We live in the real world, and James gives us much instruction on dealing with the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Body of the Study

Joy in the face of temptations

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 2 in preparation for next week

What are the three things James describes in 1:26-27 that we need to do, if we are to put our faith into practice?

Notes for study 2: James Chapter 1

Introduction

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Joy in the face of temptations

James begins the letter with the instruction and encouragement to the Christians to “...count it all joy when you fall into various trials...” (1:2 NKJV). He points out that the trials did not come about because of their actions, or in retribution for things that they might have done. They were just things that *came about*. They *fell into* them. God is not the author of these things, but he allows us to be tested – He did it with Abraham, and He did it with Job, and a whole range of others Old Testament characters. Through the trials, we develop *character*. We can either learn to cope with and deal with the things that confront us “...knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience...” (1:3 NKJV) or we can allow it to break us.

James is not (necessarily) talking about temptation to sin, but rather how we cope with and deal with the things that God allows life to throw at us. What if we lose our job? What if we have health problems? What if our house gets destroyed in a flood, or a cyclone, or a bushfire? (Or a whole range of other similar examples). Remember that this applies to the interaction of brethren within the church community. We have a wonderful support network to help us with our trials. But ultimately it leads us to develop patience. We can't control a lot of what happens in our lives, and we just have to be content to let God lead us!

When we have complete trust in God, and “...let patience have its perfect work, we will be perfect and entire, lacking nothing...” (1:4). This doesn't mean that we will get our old job back again, or our house back again. What it means is that God will ensure that we have everything that we need in order to live our lives for Him. It might mean that we will be like the apostles when He sent them out – they were to take nothing for their mission – not even a change of clothes or a spare pair of shoes, or money. We need to rely on God (Mt 10:5-15).

One point that shines through here is that God wants us to have a positive outlook “...count it all joy...” (1:2); “...ask in faith without doubting...” (1:6). We need to have a focus on achieving and overcoming, rather than just trying not to fall. We are almost bound to end up where our focus is – if it's on trying not to fall, then we are likely to end up falling; but if our focus is on achieving and overcoming, then we are likely to end up there!

James notes that we need to have wisdom to help us with achieving and overcoming “...If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach...” (1:5 NKJV). Sometimes wisdom is confused with knowledge. Roper says¹:

“...knowledge is primarily concerned with *facts* while wisdom is primarily concerned with the *application* of those facts... The word most associated with wisdom in the Old Testament is the word “*understanding*.” In the book of Proverbs wisdom and understanding are constantly linked, and often used interchangeably... By “understanding,” ... I mean, coming to see things as *God* understands things, coming to see things as God sees them. The phrase *divine insight* well expresses it...”

¹ Roper, p.19

God wants us to have this wisdom, but we need to *ask Him* for it! However, we must “...ask in faith without doubting...” (1:6). This is about putting our faith into practice, and testing the depth of our faith. James adds, “...for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man think that he will receive anything from the Lord...” (1:6-7 NKJV). If he asks without truly believing that God will deliver, then he really didn’t believe in the first place. He says he believes, but he doesn’t really - “...he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways...” (1:8). Double-minded has the same idea as two-faced. We say one thing in one situation, but then in a different situation we say the exact opposite. [Someone once accused Abraham Lincoln of being two-faced. He replied “If I had another face, do you think I would wear this one?”]

James describes such a man as *unstable in all his ways*. He is flitting around without getting anywhere, he doesn’t know where he wants to go, or why he wants to go there, and is staggering around like a drunken person. The description is of a man of misery with no purpose in life. By contrast, as christians, we have purpose in our lives, we know where we are going, and that the way to get there is through the blood of Jesus, and God liberally gives us the wisdom to deal with the distractions along the way!

The interaction of the growth of such wisdom in the local church community is addressed by James “...Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation...” (1:9-10 NKJV). The ones who are viewed by the world as being lowly are actually exalted by God. Being held in esteem in the church, they may become puffed up (although this is in direct contrast to what the wisdom brings). However, the rich in the world are (generally) those who have power and command over others. But things don’t work that way in the church! So, the rich man needs to be humble – he needs to remember that he is human and not immortal, and like “...a flower of the field he will pass away...” (1:10 NKJV). He is like a flower or the grass that is burnt by the hot sun and soon dies and withers up – “...So the rich man will also fade away in his pursuits...” (1:11 NKJV).

Enduring temptations

James has already established that our trials and problems are the way in which our faith is strengthened (1:2-4). It allows us to grow and develop “...Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life...” (1:12 NKJV). This applies to those who have passed the test “*endured and has been proven*”. It is like the testing of a new product that has undergone a series of tests and trials – or a new car in a proving ground. When they have passed the tests they are approved for our use, and we can use them with confidence.

However, more than just product testing that leads to the ability to go to market, the approval for the christian results in the best prize of all “*the crown of life*”. The prize is not limited (unlike the market place for tested products), but is certain for all who pass the test “...the Lord has promised to those who love Him...” (1:12 NKJV).

God allows us to be tested, but He is not the one who does the testing. The book of Job provides us with great insight to the battle that goes on between God and Satan. Satan has been allowed to have some power for a little while, but in the end, that power will be taken away. God wants us to have free choice. Man was created with free choice. Adam and Eve were given free choice in the garden, and they chose evil rather than good. We have free choice, and we have all (at some time or another) chosen evil rather than good. Paul reminds us “...there is none righteous, no not one...” (Rom 3:10). Whilst our trial enable us to grow, they are not pleasant, and we must not blame God for the situation “...Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone...” (1:13 NKJV).

James has moved from the outward testing of circumstances to the inward testing of our faith – what we would normally regard as *temptation*. The problem is not external, although people always want to blame someone else for their problems. Sometimes people even blame God. But, we must internalise the problem – it lies with US! James spells it out for us “...*But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed...*” (1:14 NKJV).

There is a consequence for our thoughts, when we put them into actions “...*Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death...*” (1:15 NKJV). We can see James’ chain-of-thought here: desire-enticed-sin-death. Desire (lust KJV) is not sinful in and of itself. It is a natural reaction, however we need to keep it under control, because where it will lead us is to enticement to carry our actions out – and when we do that is sin!

If we think that we can carry on with evil desire and control our actions, then James reminds us “...*Do not be deceived my beloved brethren...*” (1:16 NKJV). We must break the chain, and it must be broken before it leads to sin. And if it has led to sin, then it must be broken by repentance before it leads to death. The death that James has in mind is spiritual death (which of course, follows physical death).

In total contrast to this chain of evil leading to death, James points out that there is another chain that comes from God “...*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created...*” (1:17-18 NIV). The chain is God-good gift-salvation-firstfruits.

The term firstfruits is contrasted with the main harvest. In this case, our growth as a christian and the development of our wisdom provides the guarantee of the main harvest, which is our eternal redemption. In other places, Paul uses the same description (firstfruits) to describe Jesus’ resurrection as guarantee of our resurrection (1 Cor 15:20), and also the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 5:5) as a guarantee of our eternal reward.

Putting things into action

James calls us to action – particularly putting into practice our wisdom in dealing with issues in the local congregation. “...*Therefore my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath...*” (1:19 NKJV). An illustration may help here (I’m sure we all have some, and if we think about it, have done or said things we regret):

Just this morning, a work colleague came in and asked if I had a map of the new electoral boundaries. He had had a discussion of an issue with the local councillor, and had previously seen a map showing the boundaries, but had mis-read it. He thought he was certain of his ground, and asserted such. My colleague is flying to England in the next few days, and said to the councillor “I bet you my airfare to England that I’m right”. Unfortunately he was wrong! The councillor was very gracious and said that he would accept a much lesser gift (such as a box of chocolates). I pointed out to my colleague that I’m sure he would have a great holiday with his local councillor coming along to carry his bags for him.

This story illustrates the point that James is saying. We need to think before we speak. Sometimes we upset people by what we say (and sometimes how we say it) even though we might not intend to. 20/20 hindsight is a wonderful thing! Even worse, if we get hot-headed, we even go out *intending* to upset people! That is *not* how we ought to behave as christians “...*for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God...*” (1:20 NKJV). There is a direct contrast here between how we ought to behave, and how we often behave.

James leaves us in no doubt what to do about it “...*Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you...*” (1:21 NIV). This comes back to the double-minded man. He might be pretending to be pure on the outside, but on the inside he is far from it. We need to be totally and completely tuned into God.

Neither can we just *say* that we love God, without putting our faith into practice “...*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves...*” (1:22 NKJV). James is not addressing those who are *swift to hear, and slow to speak* here, but rather those who are only half listening – they come along and listen to the sermon on Sunday but on Monday they forget what they have heard and carry on in their lives as if nothing had happened. They have no intention of putting their faith into practice. James describes this person as *being “...like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was...”* (1:23-24 NKJV). In contrast to this “...*he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does...*” (1:25 NKJV). The point James is making here is that we need to put our faith into practice – it needs to be a living and a doing faith.

The real test of this in the church community (as well as the general community) is how we control what we say. He will have much more to say about this in chapter 3. This is a true test of our faith “...*If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless...*” (1:26 NIV). But it’s not just about controlling what we say (ie controlling our inter-personal skills), it’s also about what we **do** to others “...*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world...*” (1:27 NIV).