

Study 7: James Summary

Introduction

This summary is intended to provide a succinct overview of the letter. In future, it will provide a “quick-read” introduction to the letter, and together with the “introduction” study (Study 1) will provide a contextual framework for the book.

Body of the Study

Introduction

Joy in the face of temptations (Chapter 1)

Enduring temptations

Putting things into action

Rich Man Poor Man (Chapter 2)

The Royal Law

Faith and Works

Teaching the word (Chapter 3)

Controlling our tongues

The Specific Problem of the Tongue

The root-cause of the problem

Fighting Within (Chapter 4)

Spiritual Adulteresses

Righting the wrongs

Finding Fault with Others

Condemnation of the Rich

A call to patience (Chapter 5)

Instructions concerning oaths

Instructions concerning prayer

Final appeal

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read the whole book again in a single sitting

Notes for study 7: James Summary

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.

The second chapter introduces two great themes of scripture – that of partiality and favouritism in the church, and the great theme of faith and works. Many people have dismissed the epistle of James because of a misunderstanding of Faith and Works.

Those in a teaching role in the church must have only been there because of the personal glory that it brought. They had little concern for the growth that it brought about in those that they were leading. It showed up in their inconsistent manner of life. In-fighting was occurring, and the brethren had stopped looking to God for their strength. Instead they were self-centred and were making cutting remarks and evil slanderous statements at one another. Whilst they claimed to be Christians, their behaviour did not reflect Jesus. They were double-minded and unstable.

The cause of the problem was external, and they needed patience to deal with it. Rather than supporting one another through their trials, they were blaming each other.

Joy in the face of temptations (Chapter 1)

The letter begins with the instruction and encouragement to “...count it all joy when you fall into various trials...” (1:2 NKJV). The trials did not come 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. James is talking about how we cope with and deal with the things that God allows life to throw at us. What if we lose our job? Or have health problems? Or if our house gets destroyed in a flood, or a cyclone, or a bushfire?

We have a wonderful support network within the church community to help us with our trials which ultimately 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!

We need complete trust in God, and “...let patience have its perfect work, we will be perfect and entire, lacking nothing...” (1:4). This means is that God will ensure that we have everything that we need in order to live our lives for Him. We need wisdom to help us achieve and overcome “...If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach...” (1:5 NKJV). Wisdom is about the application of knowledge.

The discussion of the double-minded man permeates throughout the epistle. God wants us to have wisdom, but we need to *ask Him* for it, and “...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, saying one thing in one situation, and then but the exact opposite.

The interaction between brethren is the key issue in the epistle, and James says “...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. 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!

Enduring temptations

Our trials and problems allow our faith to be strengthened and 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). 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 moves from the outward testing of circumstances to the inward testing of our faith. The problem is not external, although people always want to blame someone else for their problems. But, the problem lies with **US!** James spells it out “...*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). James’ chain-of-thought is: desire-enticed-sin-death. Desire (lust KJV) is not sinful in and of itself, but we need to keep it under control, because it will lead us to carry out our actions– and that is sin!

In contrast to this chain of evil leading to death, another chain 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.

Putting things into action

We are called to action – particularly putting our wisdom into practice in dealing with issues within the congregation. “...*Therefore my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath...*” (1:19 NKJV). We need to think before we speak. There is a direct contrast here between how we ought to behave, and how we often behave.

There is no doubt about what we need 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 must be totally and completely tuned into God.

We cannot 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 addressing 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. Our faith needs to be a living and a doing faith. The real test of this is how we control what we say “...*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). It’s not just about controlling our speech, but also 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).

Rich Man Poor Man (Chapter 2)

An extension of putting our faith into practice is how we relate with each other in the church, especially in the levelling of social status’s. This situation must have been common amongst the churches *scattered abroad*, and James draws a simple contrast between a rich man and a poor man – a “have” and a “have not”. One has “...*fine clothes and gold rings...*” (2:2) whilst the other is “...*a poor man in shabby clothes...*” (2:2 NIV). The application of this is obvious “...*have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?...*” (2:3 NKJV). God looks at our hearts – at the inner man – and we must not jump to wrong conclusions about people based on their outward appearance.

The Christians were being persecuted, and the ones causing the trouble were the rich. The class distinction was beginning to invade the church. Once the distinction and platforms of the rich and the poor are abolished, it is a level playing field for all of God's people.

The Royal Law

James presents a moral argument to support treating people equally, which he describes as "...the royal law..." (2:8), and shows that this is consistent with scripture (Lev 19:18). "...If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers..." (2:8-9 NIV). The term "Royal Law" is a description of the nobility of the principle rather than the name of a law.

The true test comes when we try to identify who is our neighbour – the whole point of the parable of the good Samaritan. By showing partiality we are not treating everyone equally, and are neglecting some of our neighbours. James says "...but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors..." (2:9 NKJV). To show partiality is sinful, and it is a practice in a chain that must be broken.

The section concludes with an exhortation to action "...So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty..." (2:12 NKJV).

We are judged in accordance with the Law of Christ, which is a law of liberty. That doesn't mean that we have the liberty to sin or the liberty to break the law. Rather, we will be judged with mercy "...For judgement is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgement..." (2:13 NKJV). God is merciful, and He will show mercy to us – but first we need to show mercy to others. And in the context of the discussion here – by showing mercy to the poor in the shabby clothes.

Faith and Works

The practical application of our faith comes down to *doing something* – putting it into action. Faith is not just about belief. We need to work at it. However James is not discussing works of a meritorious nature – we have done "something" therefore God "owes us". There is nothing that we could do to put us in any position of having God owe us anything. The debt is always going to be the other way. James is talking about work that we do in gratitude for what God has done for us.

In the great chapter on faith in the NT - Hebrews 11 we see that these people *did something* because of their faith. It was a *doing* faith – and that is exactly the point that James makes. "...What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?..." (2:14 NKJV). We need to put our faith into action. "...Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?..." (2:15-16 NIV). The person who says such a thing but does nothing about it is just full of hot air, and really didn't wish the person well at all. On the contrary, the person who goes out of their way to ensure that a brother or sister has the things that they need shows their faith by the actions. James concludes "...Even so faith, if it hath not works is dead, being alone..." (2:17 KJV). The KJV version here uses the words "faith" and "alone" together, and this is the only place in the NT where these two words are together in the same verse.

The kind of faith that saves us is not just saying "I believe", but a faith that demonstrates that we believe by the things that we do. "...As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead..." (2:26 NIV).

Teaching the word (Chapter 3)

When James says "...let not many of you become teachers..." (3:1 NKJV), he is discussing the role of public teaching in the church. Many of the other NT examples refer to our personal evangelism. He fills in some of the gaps here when he adds "...knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgement..." (3:1 NKJV).

Those in the public teaching position have the potential to lead people astray, and are placed in a position of trust, and with that trust comes accountability. The teachers must be concerned about how the teaching *changes the lives* of those who hear the message. It comes back to the practical application of our faith that James has previously talked about.

Controlling our tongues

We are not perfect, and even the most experienced teacher cannot deliver a perfectly pure message “...*for we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man...*” (3:2 NKJV). We all make mistakes, and fortunately we are judged by a merciful God (2:13). If we were perfect, we would be “...*also able to bridle the whole body...*” (3:2 NKJV). James is leading into a discussion on controlling the things that we say (which leads to the things that we do) – and hence the discussion on controlling our tongues. Jesus was the only example of a man who was in perfect and complete control in every situation. James gives four examples of how our tongues (our speech) can bring us undone before he gets back to the root of the problem.

- Bits in Horses’ Mouths
- Ship’s Rudders
- Wildfire
- Taming of Animals

The Specific Problem of the Tongue

The specific problem is made manifest “...*But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God...*” (3:9 NKJV). The inconsistencies come back to the double-minded man (1:8) as the root-cause of the problem. The double standard is further seen “...*Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing...*” (3:10 NKJV).

We are to be in control of our tongue, and to take control of our thoughts and our speech. If there is any doubt about our ability to control these things, James adds “...*My brethren, these things ought not to be so...*” (3:10 NKJV). James is quite specific as to whom he has in mind – it is not those outside of the church. He says *my brethren* so the problem comes back to those who are professing christians on the one hand, but when their back is turned around, they swear and curse, use profanities, and put other people down by what they say. Their speech betrays them.

The root-cause of the problem

Two kinds of wisdom are the root cause of the problem. One comes from God, and the other from Satan. James asks the question “...*Who is wise and understanding among you?...*” (3:13 NIV). He is addressing the teachers (3:1), but the problem is not in what they teach, but that their lives are inconsistent with their teaching. “...*Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom...*” (3:13 NIV). They were being hypocrites and their lives do not reflect their teaching. At the very least, we need to control our outward expressions, even if underneath we still are bitter and twisted. Ultimately it comes from our total commitment to God, totally trusting in Him, and letting Him deal with the target of our hatred. This is especially so in the context of the letter, as James is specifically addressing those inside the church (3:9).

The double minded man who purports to say one thing, but in practice by his actions does the opposite, only teaches because of his selfish desires “...*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice...*” (3:16 NIV). The result is disorder, and underneath the (hidden) practice of all kinds of evil. The man is *unstable in all his ways*. In contrast, true wisdom comes from God “...*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy...*” (3:17 NKJV).

Fighting Within (Chapter 4)

Peace that comes from wisdom that is pure and from God, and sown by peacemakers is in direct contrast to what was happening in the local congregations. He asks “...*What causes fights and quarrels among you?...*” (4:1 NIV). There was arguing and bickering about some issues and we can look around and imagine the types of things that might have been going on.

The problem began with *lust*, which led to covetousness and infighting “...*You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight...*” (4:2 NIV). They wanted to be like those around them. Their minds were on physical things rather than spiritual things. They were never going to get what they were after in the first place, because they had the wrong motives. “...*You do not have, because you do not ask God...*” (4:2 NIV). But it didn't stop there. Even when they did ask, they still didn't get what they wanted. “...*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures...*” (4:3 NIV). It comes back again to the double-minded man (1:7-8) who on the one hand says that he is committed to God, but on the other hand denies Him by his actions.

Spiritual Adulteresses

The root of the problem is worldliness instead of Godliness, and James describes them as “...*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God...*” (4:4 NIV).

The idea of *friendship* is something much deeper than what we would normally think of as *being friendly with our neighbours*. The problem is when we have a desire to be like them (when we lust after and covet such things). This cannot co-exist with our relationship with God. When we do this we “...*make ourselves an enemy of God...*” (4:4). God is hurt by our behaviour “...*Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?...*” (4:5 NIV). God is a jealous God – He wants our 100% devotion to Him and Him alone.

Although we err against God, He does not reject us, “...*He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resist the proud, But gives grace to the humble"...*” (4:6 NKJV). God does not cover our sins if we turn against Him and do not repent. But if our hearts are truly wanting to serve God, that His grace is bigger than our sin, and He will forgive us.

Righting the wrongs

James provides a short list of instructions to enable us to get these things right in our lives:

- Submit yourselves, then, to God. (4:7)
- Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (4:7)
- Come near to God and he will come near to you. (4:8)
- Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (4:8)
- Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. (4:9)
- Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (4:10)

It requires our submission to God, and then we will find no place for the things that distract us away from Him. The source of the problem is Satan. If we resist Satan, then he will flee from us.

Finding Fault with Others

The practical application into the local church “...*Do not speak evil of one another, brethren...*” (4:11 NKJV) tells us what's been happening in the church(es). There was separation between the rich and poor (2:4), bitterness and envy (3:14), and internal fighting (4:1). Rather than thinking good things about the brethren, some were looking to find fault, and were then spreading that around the congregation.

Speaking evil about someone else makes you a judge of that person – you have already judged them to be evil, although you might not know the full facts and circumstances of their situation. Rather than *doing* what God says, we are playing at being God by judging them. “...*He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if*

you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge..." (4:11 NKJV). Some of the brethren wanted the others to conform themselves to their own standard. "...*There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and destroy. Who are you to judge another?...*" (4:12 NKJV).

From another perspective – the brethren were being self-centred and excluding God from the equation. Instead of relying on God they were relying on themselves. They had forgotten that God is in control of the world, and had not put Him in control of their lives. "...*Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes...*" (4:13-14 NIV). In contrast, we need to realise that our life is short. However, some of these brethren were boasting and bragging about what they were and weren't going to do. "...*As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil...*" (4:16 NIV). And it wasn't just that they didn't know any better. They knew full well what they ought to do, but had chosen not to do it "...*Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin...*" (4:17 NKJV). The specific context is about these people who knew they ought to include God in their plans, but had omitted to do it.

Condemnation of the Rich

James resembles the voices of the prophets who declared God's coming judgement on the nations because they did not repent. The judgement is against the rich, so that the readers would know and understand how God viewed things, and that the actions that followed were not coincidences, but rather the actions of a righteous God bringing judgement against those who opposed Him.

The rich have set themselves up as self-sufficient and self-righteous and ignored the plight of the poor. They had in effect stolen the money that was due to the poor for wages when they didn't even need the money themselves. The poor were living hand-to-mouth, and depriving them of the wages meant that they would go hungry and may lead to starvation. This was in contrast to the rich who just added to the excessive stores held in their barns. They had their possessions so long that they were just rotting away. They had fraudulently held back wages for the poor "...*Indeed the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the Lord of Sabaoth...*" (5:4 NKJV), whilst they themselves lived a life of excess "...*You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter...*" (5:6 NIV).

A call to patience (Chapter 5)

The Christians were suffering from the actions of the rich "...*Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord...*" (5:7 NKJV). The expression *the coming of the Lord* at first glance might refer to His return at the Second Coming. However James says that it *is at hand* (5:8), so it more likely refers to the time when God will bring justice to the oppressed (with the overthrow of the Jewish leaders and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple).

James gives some illustrations to support his chain-of-thought:

- **The farmer:** The instruction is clear "...*You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand...*" (5:8 NKJV). However, James is also strong in the application "...*Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold the Judge is standing at the door!...*" (5:9 NKJV).
- **The prophets of old:** "...*Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord...*" (5:10 NIV). There are numerous examples of the OT prophets who felt discouraged by their situation and the extensive sin around them, and the revolt against God.
- **The patience of Job:** who was known because of it "...*As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about...*" (5:11 NIV).

With the oppression against them, the brethren must have felt very despondent, and they were grumbling about the situation. But it had gone further – they were getting irritated at one another,

and were grumbling against each other. James reminds them that God is the righteous Judge, we need to let Him do the judging, not us (4:11-12), and that the time for His judgement is soon (5:9). The story of Job gives us great insight into suffering. Job had not done anything, but Satan inflicted great conflict on to him. At the end, God brought about justice, and *the latter days of Job were better than the beginning* (Job 42:12). Just like Job's reward, God will reward us when we show faithfulness with patience, "...*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy...*" (5:11 NIV).

Instructions concerning oaths

The brethren are instructed to cease the action of using oaths, "...*Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned...*" (5:12 NIV). Everett¹ notes:

All men should realize that swearing by something sacred does not change a lie into truth. Swearing may be necessary in civil matters where men do not have a respect for truth for the sake of truth. But among disciples a man's word should be his bond; therefore, his yea should be yea – a compelling need for more indicates an evil intent...

Instructions concerning prayer

The brethren were suffering because of the trials inflicted onto them by the rich. They needed to be patient and not retaliate. Some of them were getting frustrated, and were getting nasty with their brethren, and blaming the brethren for their predicament, rather than those who were truly the cause. As a result they were grumbling against one another (5:9). They were making false accusations, and trying to back them up by swearing an oath. Rather than blaming the brethren, James reminds them that they need to take their burdens to the Lord "...*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray...*" (5:13 NIV). Conversely, there is a natural reaction to being happy "...*Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise...*" (5:13 NIV).

We are assured of the power of prayer, and the need to confess our sins to one another "...*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective...*" (5:16 NIV).

A great example of the power of prayer comes from Elijah (1 Kin 17:1; 18:42-45) "...*Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops...*" (5:17-18 NIV). Elijah found himself in many testing circumstances, and he felt his inadequacies just as we do. Yet, he was faithful to God, and knew that He would answer prayers if it was His will. God's response was to answer Elijah's prayers and grant his requests.

Final appeal

The letter concludes with James' final appeal to the brethren "...*My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins..*" (5:19-20 NIV). We need to remember what is happening amongst the churches. Their faith was being tested by the situation that they were in, and many of them were consequently acting in inappropriate ways. The role of the elders was to guide them and bring them back to the Lord. However James makes the point that we all have this responsibility, not just the elders.

¹ Everett p. 76