

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

By

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LESSON TWENTY

JAMES

We have now reached that part of the New Testament containing the general or catholic Epistles. They are so called because they are addressed not to any particular individual or church, but to the church at large. And yet this is not true of all of them, not true of the one whose study we are entering upon, which is addressed to a particular class of Christians named in the first verse. This gives an opportunity to remark that this general title, like the headings to the chapters in our English Bible, and the superscriptions in italics at the end of some of the books are not part of the inspired text, and have no authority but that of the human printer or editor - often not to be relied upon, as in the present case.

Who was the author of this Epistle?

There are three persons named James mentioned in the New Testament.

- one was the brother of John,
- another the son of Alphaeus, and
- a third the brother of our Lord.

The first named was martyred at an early date in the history of the church (Acts 12), and is not likely to have been the author, because the Epistle reveals a state of Christian or church development more advanced than that likely to have been true then. Nor is it likely to have been

written by the son of Alphaeus, for nothing is heard of him in the later history of the church, while the James who wrote this Epistle is evidently well known and influential, a fact which was also true, it would seem, of James the brother of our Lord.

It is he, apparently, who presided at the first council of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15), and who is distinguished in other places as a leader, notably in Acts 12:17; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; Jude 1, etc.

A peculiar interest attaches to the fact that, as the brother of our Lord, he did not believe on Him as the Messiah up until the resurrection perhaps. Compare John 7:5 with Acts 1:13, and I Corinthians 15:7.

His conversion may have taken place at the time mentioned in the last named Scripture, which, if so, accounts for his presence with the church as shown in the reference to the Acts. Tradition teaches us that he was a particularly holy and just man, being designated indeed, "*James the Just*"; and that he ended his life in martyrdom, being stoned to death under one of the high priests, some time after the death of Festus mentioned in the Acts.

As to his religious character, he was a very strict Jew, a faithful observer of the law, both moral and ceremonial, without, of course, relying upon it as a ground of salvation.

He gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship in their work among and for the Gentiles, but personally he remained more firmly attached to the Jewish form or aspect of Christianity. His place in the Christian scheme was to win over the Jewish people, and no one probably was better fitted for this than he.

The Persons Addressed

The Epistle is addressed "**to the twelve tribes scattered abroad,**" which proves its Jewish designation; but that they were Christian Jews nevertheless is shown in the further language of the salutation, where James styles himself "**a servant of Jesus Christ.**"

There are several indications in the Epistle of their Jewish origin, however; for example, their place of assembly is called an "assembly" (*synagogue*) (2:2), and there are several references to the law.

As to their social condition they seem to have been composed of rich and poor, the tendency of some of the former being both to oppress and despise the latter, as we shall see. Like all the other classes of Christians, they were passing through trials of various kinds, and like them, too, they were more or less under the influence of false teachers.

The doctrine of justification by faith only was especially being perverted among them, and from various points of view, indeed, their condition was disclosed as quite unsatisfactory. The writer comforts them in their trials, but he sternly rebukes them for their sins, and seeks throughout to give them much needed instruction concerning the matters in which they were in error.

The style of the Epistle is fresh and vivid, sententious and rich in graphic figure. There is not in

it the logical connection found in Paul's writings, the thoughts rather arranging themselves in groups strongly marked off from one another; but yet the writer goes at once into the midst of his subject, and with the first sentence beginning a section says out at once what is in his heart. The first words of each section might almost serve as a title for it, while that which follows is the development of it, ending usually in a kind of recapitulation. (*How to Study the New Testament*, second section, pages 163, 164).

Outline

We will now look at the contents of the Epistle in outline.

After the salutation (1:1), the writer offers:

1. Some instruction concerning trial (chap. 1).

"Temptations," in verse 2, is to be taken in the sense of trials.

- why should they be received with joy (v. 3)?
- In what spiritual condition will such a reception and use of trial result (v. 4)?
- what will effectually aid in that direction (vv. 5, 8)?
- along what lines of trial were they being exercised (vv. 9, 11)?

Notice that the poor man is to find comfort in his truly high estate in CHRIST while the rich man is to find comfort in a truly humble spirit before GOD in view of the facts referred to.

But there are two kinds of testings which come upon believers, those already spoken of as "trials," whose source is divine, and whose purpose is strengthening and purifying, and those now brought into view as out and out "temptations," not from GOD, but from themselves.

- what reward comes to the disciple who successfully encounters these (v. 12)?
- what is their immediate source and outcome (vv. 13, 15)?
- what three arguments are presented in verses 13, 17 and 18, to show that GOD is not the author of these temptations?
- on the ground, then, that we have our good from GOD, and our evil from ourselves, what lesson is drawn (vv. 19, 20)?
- speaking of our being "**swift to hear**," whose words has the writer in mind (v. 21)?
- what shows, however, that the "hearing" he has in mind is a very practical experience (vv. 22, 25)?
- speaking of our being "**slow to speak**," how does he emphasize its importance (v. 26)?
- in what does "**pure religion**" consist other than in mere talk (v. 27)?

Remember here, that James is talking to believers in CHRIST, to those who supposedly have "religion," and he is merely instructing them how it should be manifested. Men are not saved by benevolence and kindness to the widowed and the orphaned, or even by strenuous efforts after a pure life, but by CHRIST, who bore their sins in HIS own body on the tree; yet they show that they are saved by such works as these spoken of in the text.

2. We next have some instruction or admonition concerning respect of persons, or the relation of the rich and the poor (2:1-13).

This would seem to be connected in thought with the trials of the poor mentioned in chapter 1. It not infrequently happens that the very people who, in their need, complain of the over abundance of the rich, are the most obsequious in their conduct, as if they expected something from them as a result. Perhaps it was so here. Or it may be, that this instruction laps on still more closely to what had just been said about "**pure religion**," and visiting the fatherless and widows, and keeping one's self unspotted from the world (1:27).

Respect of persons was really incompatible with anyone of these things. It was equivalent to saying that these two things could not be held at one and the same time.

- what instance or illustration is given of them holding it (vv. 2, 3)?
- of what wrong would they be guilty in such a case (v. 4)?
- what kind of judges would such partiality show them to be (same verse)?
- what would demonstrate the unwisdom as well as unkindness of such partiality (v. 5)?
- what would show their meanness of spirit (v. 6)? Their disloyalty to their Saviour (v. 7)?
- on what principle rather, should they exercise themselves toward rich and poor alike (v. 8)?
- how were they in danger of violating this principle (v. 9)?
- what fundamental truth about sin is enunciated in this connection (vv. 10, 11)?

3. Some instruction on the relationship of faith and works (2:14-26).

We have seen that the subject of respect of persons probably grew out of the declaration about "**pure religion**" at the close of chapter 1, and there is reason to believe the same of the present subject. Certainly it has a close relation to it.

Before considering the verses at all in detail, it may be well to remark on a criticism sometimes made that James is here contradicting Paul.

The latter insists upon faith without works, while the former insists upon works with faith. But there is no contradiction really, because Paul is simply laying down the principle of salvation, while James is showing the working of that principle in the life. Paul as well as James insists upon a faith that lives, and works and brings forth fruit, and was himself a fine example of it.

I think the Epistle of James was written at quite an early period, before Paul's Epistles were very generally known at least, and possibly before the council was held at Jerusalem (Acts 15), which may account for his treatment of the subject of faith from a different standpoint to that made necessary by the admission of Gentiles into the church.

Faith saves, James declared, but it is not the kind of faith which produces no fruit. It is not dead faith, but living faith.

- what illustrations of a fruitless faith are given in verse 16? And verse 19?
- what two illustrations of a fruitful faith are given in verses 21-25?

Read carefully verse 22, which teaches us that Abraham's faith was simply shown to be faith, a perfected thing in that sense, by his obedience to GOD. So our faith in JESUS can hardly be called a saving faith if it works no change in our lives and produces no results.

4. The fourth natural division of the Epistle contains instruction or rather an admonition concerning the control of the tongue (3:1-18).

Just as the instruction in the second and third divisions grew out of something written in the first chapter, so also here.

He had exhorted them on the ground of a certain premise to be "**swift to hear and slow to speak**"; following that he had showed them how to hear in the sense that they must be doers of what they hear; and now he would show them how to be slow of speech in the sense that they should "**set a watch before their mouths and keep the door of their lips.**"

The word "masters" in verse 1 means "*teachers.*"

This shows the direction of their temptation to talk too much. They affected teaching, airing their opinion about things which they did not understand, after the manner of those rebuked by Paul in his letters to Timothy and Titus. There was danger to themselves as well as others in their doing this, as verse 1 indicates.

A heavier responsibility rested upon teachers than upon the taught, and there was the strong likelihood of stumbling in that capacity (v. 2).

Note now how he speaks first, of the power of the tongue (vv. 3-5).

- what three illustrations does he employ?

Secondly, he speaks of the evil of the tongue (v. 6).

- how is it described?

- what does it do?

- whence the source of its iniquity?

Thirdly, he speaks of its uncontrollableness (vv. 7, 8).

- with how many wild, and subtle, and strong things, does he compare it in this regard?

- after speaking thus of the tongue in general terms, how does he apply the subject to the present condition of things (vv. 9, 10)?

- by the use of what similes does he seek to better it (vv. 11, 12)?

- what is the relation between wisdom and speech (v. 13)?

- what does the strife of tongues indicate as to the condition of the heart (v. 14)?

- what is the source of such strife (v. 15)? Its product (v. 16)?

- how does true wisdom compare with it as to its source, character, and effects (vv. 17, 18)?

5. An admonition concerning worldly-mindedness (4:1-5:6).

Like some of the other divisions of this Epistle this one is so closely connected with the last, and grows out of it so naturally, that it is difficult to say just where the division occurs.

The writer had been speaking of envying and strife in their expressions through .the tongue, and now puts in his plow a little deeper to show their source in the antecedent condition of the heart. The word "lust" in this chapter is not to be taken in the limited sense of sensuality as now commonly employed, but in the broader sense of worldly pleasure or gratifications of any kind.

I confess that in this connection verse 2 presents great difficulty.

Consistency makes it necessary to suppose that James is here addressing Christians as throughout the Epistle, and yet how incongruous to think of Christians committing murder to gratify their desires! Luther translated the word "kill" by "hate," and doubtless expressed the real meaning by so doing, although, to quote Neander, "James used the stronger expression in order to designate with the utmost precision the nature of that evil which, whatever may be the outward form of manifestation, is still the same."

Nor let it be thought strange that such persons as these should be referred to as engaging in prayer (v. 3), for nothing is more common in our own time than for worldly-minded Christians to supplicate Heaven for the gratification of desires purely and entirely selfish, giving no consideration either to GOD's purpose or pleasure, or the interests and well-being of their neighbors.

How plainly and bluntly James reveals the cause for the non-results of such prayers!

- what names does he bestow upon these worldly-minded Christians (v. 4)?
- how does the language of this verse indicate that he has in mind adulterers in the moral and spiritual sense-professing loyalty to GOD and yet consorting with the world?
- what shows the incompatibility of such things?
- what, however, was their hope under such circumstances of sin, and in what direction should they look for deliverance (v. 6)?
- what prerequisite was necessary on their part in order to obtain this grace (vv. 6-10)?
- how, chiefly, did the want of humility seem to show itself in the case of their prayers (vv. 11, 12)?

But this worldly-mindedness took to itself various forms, and James addresses himself to another in the verses following in this chapter.

- what false reliance upon the mundane is spoken of in verse 13?
- how is it rebuked (v. 14)?
- what advice and admonition is given (vv. 15, 16)?
- it was not enough for them to know this truth, how does he teach them the need of acting upon it (v. 17)?
- what further application of worldly-mindedness follows in chapter 5?
- who are addressed now?
- what warning is given them?

- "**Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days,**" how vividly it applies to-day!
- are we not nearing the last days, and are not treasures heaping up in the coffers of the rich as never before?
- what three charges are laid against the rich here (vv. 4, 6)?

Fraud, voluptuousness, injustice! How awful to think of these things under the cloak of Christianity! Or shall we say that James is here referring to the rich outside the Christian church altogether? It is difficult to say. Different readers will have different opinions as their experience leads them to think.

Notice carefully, however, the judgments coming upon these rich people. What miseries indeed!

6. The Epistle closes, however, as it began, with comfort for the tried and oppressed (5:7-20).

- what hope is set before the oppressed laboring men of that day (vv. 7, 8)?
- how different, is it not, from the principle of the strike and the boycott?
- if the rich of our day be at fault, are not the poor equally so, the Word of GOD being the standard?
- what examples of long-suffering patience are set before them in verses 10 and 11?
- what closing recommendations and exhortations are now set before all concerning oaths (v. 12)? Concerning heavenly-mindedness in the opposite experiences of life (v. 13)?
- what specific directions are given concerning the sick (vv. 14-16)?
- what testimony to the efficacy of prayer is given in this last named verse?
- how is it illustrated (vv. 17, 18)?
- with what statement of the believer's privilege does the Epistle close (vv. 19, 20)?

~ end of Lesson 20 ~
