

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Epistle of James

(SB_James_Lsn4)

Outline of James

SALUTATION (1:1)

PROLOGUE – RESPOND PROPERLY TO TRIALS (1:2-18)

- Embrace trials (1:2-11)
- Do not blame God (1:12-18)

THEME – BE SWIFT TO HEAR, SLOW TO SPEAK AND SLOW TO WRATH (1:19-20)

BODY OF THE LETTER: CULTIVATING THE BEHAVIOR (1:21-5:6)

- Be Swift to Hear (1:21-2:26)
 - Involves more than listening; involves good works (1:21-27)
 - Demonstrated by impartiality in treatment of others (2:1-13)
 - Demonstrated by the combination of faith and good works (2:14-26)
- Be Slow to Speak (3:1-18)
 - Control the tongue (3:1-12)
 - Conduct demonstrates wisdom (3:13-18)
- Be Slow to Wrath (4:1-5:6)
 - Wrath is created by worldliness (4:1-5)
 - Wrath is cured by humility (4:6-5:6)
 - Humility is demonstrated by repentance from sin (4:6-10)
 - Humility is demonstrated by restraint in speech (4:11-12)
 - Humility is demonstrated by reluctance to boast (4:13-5:6)

EPILOGUE: PERSEVERE IN TRIALS (5:7-20)

- Perseverance will be properly rewarded (5:7-11)
- Perseverance is empowered through prayer (5:12-20)

**The sections highlighted in yellow are the sections covered in previous lessons. The sections highlighted in blue are the sections to be addressed in this lesson.

Summary of the Book of James Up to Chapter 3

In chapter 1 (see prior session notes), we've examined the context of James' message as it is addressed to Jewish believers in and around Jerusalem during the first ten years or so after Jesus' resurrection. In this chapter, James addresses the subject of how the believer should respond to trials and testing. He deals with the believer's attitude toward the trials (1:2-8) regardless of whether the believer is rich or poor in this world (1:9-11). Then he deals with the believer's attitude toward God when the believer is undergoing testing (1:12-18). He establishes the general outline for his epistle which is that believers should be swift to hear, slow to speak and slow to wrath (1:19-20). Finally, towards the end of chapter 1, he begins to elaborate on the first characteristic of believers who are undergoing testing – be swift to hear. Being swift to hear (possessing humility) involves more than just listening or physical hearing with the ears, it involves evidence that one has internalized the Truth through the deeds one performs (1:21-27).

In chapter 2, James begins to deal with some practices within the Jerusalem church in which believers were not demonstrating that they had internalized the Truth. Some believers were treating rich people who had entered the assembly with favoritism or with preference (2:1-13). (These rich people were probably Jews and some might have been believers and some could have been unbelievers as there is indication in James' letter that both were present in the assembly). Chapter 2 of James' letter concludes with an examination by James of the relationship between faith in the life of the believer and deeds (2:14-26). James does teach a justification of one's faith by works in these verses; however, it is important to recognize that he is not dealing with one's faith in Christ's work on the Cross as the payment for one's sin and determination of one's eternal destiny (i.e. phase 1 faith). James is dealing with the daily manifestations of faith in the life of the person who is already a believer – how does the believer evidence his continuing trust in the Lord to others? This is phase 2 faith that accrues experiential (not positional) righteousness.

James uses two illustrations that would have had great significance to the Jews to whom he ministered. First, he uses the illustration of Abraham who was a believer when he offered Isaac on the altar. It is important to note that Abraham was already a believer by the time he offered Isaac on the altar – a fact that is attested by Genesis 17 (the offer of Isaac) following the declaration of Abraham's righteousness in Genesis 15 by a number of years. (Paul used the same logic supported by Abraham's life to prove that deeds, i.e. circumcision, are not required for salvation in Romans 4:1-5 and James is very aware that works are not a requirement for salvation as evidenced by his leading the Jerusalem Council in their declaration of the same in Acts 15). Abraham's phase 2 faith as a believer is justified by his deeds.

James next uses the illustration of Rahab, the prostitute, who, because of her phase 2 faith, was delivered (saved physically from harm) and who justified her phase 2 faith by her deeds. She too was already a believer by the time the spies arrived; however, if she had failed to trust the Lord at this critical juncture, she would not have benefited from the deliverance that the Lord provided and she would not have been justified by her deed of hiding the spies in faith.

Exegesis of Chapter 3

Be Slow to Speak (3:1-18)

Exhortation – Consider Carefully the Desire to be a Teacher (3:1-2)

3:1 LET not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment. 2 For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.¹ (James 3:1-2)

In verses 1 & 2, James exhorts his readers to not desire to become teachers since teachers are subject to a higher degree of accountability to the Lord – a fact that is especially noteworthy given the prominence of the use of the tongue. The mention of this risk factor is the impetus for James to spend several verses (vv. 3-12) addressing the need to control one's speech. His teaching in this passage in chapter 3 on the use of the tongue must have been deferred until this point since: 1) James has mentioned the need to control the tongue previously (1:19, 26) and 2) he needed to deal with some obnoxious practices by some of the Jewish believers, i.e. preferential treatment of the wealthy, as well as the relationship between phase 2

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

faith and one's deeds. All of this instruction that is contained in chapter 2 falls under the first sub-component of James' exhortation – "be swift to hear" (1:19).

Why did James find it necessary to exhort the Jewish believers in verses 1-2 regarding the desire to be teachers? This seems rather strange. Approximately 20 to 30 years later, the writer of Hebrews would reprimand his audience because they should have been teachers, but were not (Heb 5:12). The Greek construction of the imperative in James 3:1 seems to indicate that this desire among the Jewish believers to become teachers was quite common.² Paul dealt with the same issue in 1 Timothy 1:3-7 which was written about 20 years or so after James' letter in A.D. 62.

3 As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, **4** nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than *furthering* the administration of God which is by faith. **5** But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. **6** For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, **7** wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions. (1 Tim 1:3-7)

It is quite likely that among those to whom James and Paul wrote, there were those who had only learned enough to be dangerous, yet who were filled with approbation lust and desired to be in the spotlight that a teaching position provided. There have always been and will always be those personality types that are driven and energized by the limelight and want to be in control of others so that their insatiable need for approbation can be filled. This attitude or behavior pattern should not characterize the believer. Rather, the believer should be motivated by a simple desire to lead others to life-giving Truth. That's it – nothing else.

It is doubtful that the reference here is to official teachers of the apostolic or prophetic status. These are the unofficial teachers (*didaskaloi*) in the synagogue meetings of the church family where much latitude was given for even strangers to speak. Paul frequently used this courtesy given visitors. James' complaint was simply that too many believers were overly anxious to speak up and show off (cf. John 3:10; 9:40-41).³

In verse 2, James is making a simple argument to explain his position taken in verse 1. His choice of the Greek word *ptaio* – 1st person plural, present, active, indicative – is an acknowledgement by James that everyone has sinned (cf. 2:10). However, James highlights the prominent role that the tongue plays in sin by indicating that if one can control one's tongue, then that believer is mature ("perfect") and able to not sin in any other way since sins of the tongue are the most difficult to avoid.

Instruction on the Need to Control the Tongue (3:3-12)

In this passage of Scripture, James provides examples to illustrate the powerful impact that an improper use of the tongue has in life (vv. 3-6). He then deals with the dualism of which the tongue is capable – both to destroy and to edify (vv. 7-12).

² Frank E. Gaebel, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1989-1998), electronic version. The present imperative of the Greek word *ginomai* is used.

³ John F. Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985), 827.

- Illustrations of the Powerful Impact of the Tongue (3:3-6)

3 Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 4 Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. 5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. (James 3:3-6)

James uses three illustrations of how a relatively small, insignificant part of something much larger and more powerful provides direction to that of which it is a part. The three illustrations are of the bit that is placed in the mouth of a horse to steer and guide the beast (v. 3); the relatively small rudder of a ship that is used to steer and guide the ship (v. 4); and a small flame that ignites an entire forest (v. 5).

- The Tongue is Capable of Both Edification and Destruction (3:7-12)

7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race. 8 But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless *our* Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 11 Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Neither *can* salt water produce fresh. (James 3:7-12)

In these verses (7-12), James provides his readers with instruction regarding the dichotomous nature of the use of the tongue. The tongue can be used to produce both edification and destruction – a dual capacity which is not duplicated in the rest of nature. Characteristic of Jewish writers and of our Lord Himself, James makes frequent use of illustrations from nature. When combined with the fact that the Greek that James uses is both ancient and eloquent, his use of such illustrations highlights the fact that James was steeped in Jewish tradition and even well-versed in Greek classics.⁴

A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are as a scorching fire. (Prov 16:27)

When James states in verse 8 that “no one can tame the tongue,” he is not saying that believers are incapable of taming the tongue. Rather, he is contrasting the fact that we frequently misuse the tongue with the fact that we are able to eventually train even God’s creatures. The implication is – then why can’t we tame our tongues?

James then provides three illustrations from nature in which creation does not produce two different things – 1) a fountain of both fresh and bitter water; 2) a fig tree that produces both olives and figs; and 3) salt water producing fresh water. Therefore, again the implicit question – why should we produce both good and evil with a member of our body?

⁴ Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 827.

Conduct Demonstrates Wisdom (3:13-18)

13 Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. **14** But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. **15** This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. **16** For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. **17** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. **18** And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)

James appears to continue to be addressing those who desired to be teachers. He uses the Greek word *sophos* which was the technical term among the Jews for the teacher, the scribe, the rabbi. It is combined with the Greek word *epistemon* which describes one who is an expert or possesses special knowledge or training.⁵

Thus anyone who would be a teacher, who claims to be an expert with special understanding, is under obligation to "show it by his good life." He should possess "know-how" and be skilled in applying God's truth to practical, everyday living. The KJV term "conversation" is not to be restricted to speech. In 1611 it possessed the much broader meaning of "conduct," "manner of life," and was at that time a good translation of *anastrophes* (NIV, "life").⁶

How Do We Recognize the Wise Man?

Again, James reflects his Jewish roots as he builds upon themes provided by no less than Solomon. Inordinate ambition inspires jealousy and jealousy motivates one to contentious talk that causes strife, wounds and anger instead of peace, gentleness (humility), kindness and mercy. Wisdom is characterized by gentleness, reasonableness, peace, kindness, and mercy. There is no hypocrisy in wisdom. (Note the connection between the fruit of the Spirit of which Paul speaks and the wisdom of which James speaks). The demonstration of the love of Christ by believers was a really big deal – something that is so easily pushed to the side as believers fight a spiritual battle on so many fronts and when they face attacks from those who reject the Truth. The reality of the battle sometimes seems more real than the invisible. And the tendency to rely upon our own devices and coping mechanisms fogs our vision of the all-sufficiency of Christ and our need to trust Him fully in all things.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. **24** Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **25** If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. **26** Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:22-26)⁷

⁵ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, electronic version.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Remember that Paul wrote the letter to the believers of Galatia in about A.D. 49, perhaps only a few years after James wrote his epistle. Paul wrote Galatians after his first missionary journey where he made his first brief foray into Gentile dominated Asia Minor. Note that even at this early date, Paul is referring to the fruit of the Spirit.

13:1 IF I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind, *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor 13:1-7)⁸

A Special Note About James' Use of the Word "Gentleness"

The particular characteristic stressed in this verse is "humility that comes from wisdom." The word translated "humility" in NIV is *prauteti*, more commonly rendered "meekness."⁹

Proutes is gentleness, but not a passive gentleness growing out of weakness or resignation. It is an active attitude of deliberate acceptance (TDNT, 6:645). The word was used to describe a horse that had been broken and trained to submit to the bridle (William Barclay, *New Testament Words* [London: SC M, 1971], pp.241-42). So this gentleness is strength under control, the control of the Spirit of God ... It is a gentleness "that comes from wisdom" or is characteristic of wisdom James does not have in mind the Greek concept of speculative or theoretical wisdom but the Hebrew idea of practical wisdom that enables one to live a life of godliness.¹⁰

Foolishness is characterized by ill-chosen words that cause strife and contention – words that arise from the soul that is mired in selfishness, jealousy, anger, and bitterness.

Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him. Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, "Was I not joking?" For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. (Prov 26:17-22)

Equation: "Bitter Jealousy" plus "Selfish Ambition" equals "Arrogance" and "Lying Against the Truth"

James' makes some very interesting statements in verses 14 & 15. In verse 14, James essentially equates the presence of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition with arrogance and lying against the truth. Furthermore, in verse 15, James indicates that such arrogance and lying against the truth does represent one type of wisdom – a wisdom that is earthly, natural and demonic. What does James mean? Is James saying that a believer can produce thoughts and actions that have a source other than God, namely the world, the flesh or even demons?

The answer is a resounding "yes." James is not saying a believer can be demon possessed, but he is saying that the believer can be influenced by thought patterns that are demon influenced. We know from our prior studies of various Scriptures that Satan is the ruler of this cosmos (world). He has a system of governance and his forces (demons) are organized.

⁸ Paul wrote 1 Corinthians on his third missionary journey while he was in Ephesus around A.D. 56.

⁹ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, electronic version.

¹⁰ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, electronic version.

Demons do not directly implant thoughts in men's minds; however, as co-sponsors of Satan's worldly system of governance, demons are Satan's agents that are used to promote worldly thinking that encourages selfishness and greed that leads to jealousy, strife and division. When the writers of Scripture reference Satan's attacks against believers or Satan as the source of wrong thinking in believers, this is what they mean. There is a wisdom that is of this present world and many times, it results in advancement according to the world's standards. The apparent success of individuals who are engrossed in the world's system led Job to ask "Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?" (See Job 21:7). The veil of worldly prosperity often hides a soul that is the equivalent of a maggot-ridden, rotting piece of flesh. The allure of the veil of worldly prosperity entices the foolish to pursue the acquisition of worldly wisdom and enter into the inner sanctum of worldly success only to discover in time that the compromises with the devil that are necessary to secure one's worldly wealth and position lead to a soul rotten with envy, jealousy, hardness of heart, and a lonely death surrounded by all the worldly treasures that will be left behind. In the case of the believer who has trodden such a path, he has effectively substituted worldly treasure for his eternal inheritance – not his eternal salvation, but his eternal inheritance.

"Earthly," "natural," "demonic" – these three words are simply synonyms for worldliness, the sinful nature of man, and Satan's system. They are all intertwined to provide the battleground for man's soul. James' point is that those who practice reasoned speech and exercise critical discernment in their choice of words are wise believers and will demonstrate to the world spiritual maturity rather than hypocrisy – a hypocrisy demonstrated by the contrast between believers who speak (teach) peace and love on the one hand, but whose lives are full of strife, lack of humility, selfish ambition and jealousy on the other hand.

To achieve "righteousness," spiritual maturity, practical holiness—the theme of this book—a believer must learn to speak with care. Winsome speech comes from a wise spirit. A controlled tongue is possible only with cultured thought. A mouth filled with praise results from a mind filled with purity. A believer should stand confidently (chap. 1), serve compassionately (chap. 2), and speak carefully (chap. 3). He should be what God wants him to be, do what God wants him to do, and speak as God wants him to speak.¹¹

¹¹ Walvoord, and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 829.