

SUMMER CLASSICS
WISDOM FOR LIVING:
(5) JAMES
WISDOM AND RIGHT RELATIONS

James 1:1-5, 19, 26-27

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PROLOGUE

Some of the books of the Bible are known as the Books of Wisdom. They include: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs in the Old Testament, and the Letter of James in the New. The Books of Wisdom try to get us to think *before* we act.

A young man had made arrangements to go out with his friend one day when he suddenly remembered that he had promised to visit his grandmother. He asked his friend if he would mind making a short stop with him at his grandmother's house. His friend agreed. While they were visiting the grandmother, the friend noticed a dish of peanuts on the coffee table. While the young man was in the kitchen helping his grandmother with something, the friend being quite hungry ate all the peanuts in the dish. When the two returned from the kitchen, the friend apologized for eating all the peanuts. The grandmother said, "Oh, that's quite all right dear. Since I lost my dentures, I can only suck the chocolate off."

SCRIPTURE

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. {2} My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, {3} because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; {4} and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. {5} If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you...{19} You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...{26} If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. {27} Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:1-5, 19, 26-27 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of Wisdom literature is not academic but practical. It tries to teach people how to make good choices in life and apply faith in God to everyday reality. Today we are going to consider Wisdom and Right Relations in the Letter of James.

The author says little about himself other than he is "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." That he has no need to say more strongly suggests that this is the most prominent James of the early church, James the Lord's brother, also known as James the Just.

He did not accept the authority of his brother until after the resurrection, which, by the way, is strong evidence that the resurrection did, in fact, take place. Otherwise, how can we account for James' remarkable transformation?

The Letter of James is more of an essay than a personal correspondence and is addressed to congregations of (largely) Jewish Christians scattered around the empire. It was a time of economic adversity and political uncertainty. It was a time when differences between rich and poor were exacerbated, even (unfortunately) in the church.

The letter has many short sayings not unlike the Book of Proverbs. It also has many affinities to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Some think it contradicts Paul on matters of justification. James says:

“Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works?” (Jam 2:21).

But Paul says:

“If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” (Rom 4:2).

But the two use the word “justification” in different ways. Paul uses it in the legal sense of a change in status from guilty to not guilty. James uses it in the evidential sense as an outward demonstration of an inner reality. Paul quotes Genesis 15 where Abraham had not yet been circumcised. James quotes Genesis 22 where Abraham shows he is willing to surrender everything to God, including his own dear son.

The teaching of the Letter of James is especially concerned with righteousness. Many people today, Christians and non-Christians alike, express an interest in spirituality, but not many express an interest in being righteous. Perhaps this is because we equate “righteous” with “self-righteous” and a “holier than thou” attitude. Whatever the reason, the Bible spends far more time on the subject of righteousness than it does on spirituality. If we want to grow in the Spirit, we must be concerned with righteousness.

Righteousness *can* refer to moral behavior and so a righteous person would be one who does what is right. But the Bible connects righteousness to sound relationships. Righteousness refers to right relations. A righteous person is one who is rightly related to God and who expresses that relationship in positive ways toward others. There are many obstacles to growing in righteousness but James addresses three concerns that keep coming up again and again.

1. GROWING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS DEPENDS ON: CONTROLLING THE TONGUE

Growing in righteousness depends on being able to control the tongue. The word “tongue” is

used here as a metaphor for human speech. James says:

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless (26).

People who have uncontrolled tongues render their religious practices worthless. We all know the sting of being made the subject of gossip, and yet we all continue to participate in the spread of gossip. It is as if we cannot help ourselves. James tells us:

No one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:8-9 NRSV).

James uses this indicting illustration. In church we use our tongues to praise God. But then we turn around and speak evil of other people, and they are made in God's image (Gn. 1:26-27; 9:6). In James's day the emperor would set up his statue throughout the realm. If anyone insulted the statue, they were treated as if they had cursed the emperor to his face, for the statue was the image of the emperor. So James argues that insulting another human being, made in God's image, is like insulting God himself.

What we say with our tongues does matter. Perhaps as a child you said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But the saying is not true. If you break your arm it will heal in about six weeks. But a disparaging remark will continue to bring hurt years after it was first uttered.

We need to train our tongues for blessing, but this is hard to do. The story is told of a sales representative named Jake who had been away from his family for three weeks and was lonely. As he sat down in a little café to eat, the server asked, "What would you like?" Jake responded, "I want some lasagna and a few kind words." The young woman soon returned with his order, set it in front of him, and turned to leave when Jake said, "Say, what about my kind words?" She leaned down to his ear and whispered, "Don't eat the lasagna."

Show kindness when you can. Express kindness where it fits. But if you cannot do either then it may be best to keep your mouth shut. One of my favorite short poems goes like this: "The kindest word ever said is the unkind word that was never said."

2. GROWING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS DEPENDS ON: CARING FOR THE NEEDY

Growing in righteousness depends on being able to control the tongue and growing in righteousness depends on caring for the needy. James writes:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress (27ab).

James reiterates what is found elsewhere in the Bible that true religion involves defending the

socially powerless (Ex 22:20-24; Ps 146:9; Is 1:17). Most orphans and widows in the first century lacked both financial support and legal rights. Therefore the phrase “orphans and widows” came to represent all groups open to exploitation who would thereby suffer “distress” usually in the form of abject poverty.

As Christians living in a highly affluent society we need to wake up to the fact that God claims to be the protector of such people:

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing (Deut 10:18 NIV).

And elsewhere God says:

“Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless” (Is 1:16-17 MESSAGE).

3. GROWING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS DEPENDS ON: CORRECTING ONE’S VALUES

Growing in righteousness depends on being able to control the tongue and care for the needy. Growing in righteousness also depends on correcting one’s values. As James puts it:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this...to keep oneself unstained by the world (27ac).

The word “world” in the Bible *can* refer to the created universe or even just the earth but more often it refers to that aspect of human society that lives in rebellion against God. It was Jesus’ prayer as recorded in John 17 that as we live *in* the world we are not to be *of* the world. We are not to take our values from the world but from God.

James re-affirms this by saying we are to keep ourselves “unstained by the world.” He is particularly concerned about showing partiality, that is, treating people according to their outward appearance, or the size of their bank account. He says:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (2:1-4).

Roman law favored the rich. A person from a lower class could not even bring an accusation let alone a law suit against someone of a higher class. But the Old Testament forbids such

discrimination (Lev 19:15). Based on this, Jewish law forbade making one party stand while the other sat in the case of a dispute. Later, it was required that both parties wear the same type of clothes, and if someone could not afford this, clothes were provided.

James' first readers should have followed this principle of non-discrimination, in dealing with disputes and in worship, but they did not. So in order to strengthen his argument he appeals to Jesus as "the Lord of glory."

Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? (2:1).

God is impartial (Deut. 10:17; Gal. 2:6). Faith in the One who perfectly incarnated such a God and is now the glorious resurrected Lord, is incompatible with showing partiality. We need to resist the pressure to conform to this world's values, particularly in regards to the value of human life.

CONCLUSION

Like all Books of Wisdom, the Letter of James provides practical guidance for applying faith in God to everyday reality. He is especially concerned about three issues that affect relationships: the power of the tongue, the exploitation of the vulnerable, and the danger of wealth. One way or another these are concerns with which we all struggle. James urges us to allow the Word of God to bring renewed conviction and change in these areas. In humility we can turn to God and find he is gracious beyond measure. Through Jesus Christ, "the Lord of Glory," we can be rightly related to God and express this relationship in positive ways toward others.