

Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church

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Bible Study, Wednesday, April 6, 2016

Survey of the Bible

Lesson 61: James

The Book of James

James is considered the first of what are known as the “general epistles” (although some argue that Hebrews is the first), which are epistles written to Christians in general and not to a particular church. It is written from a pastoral (or episcopal) perspective to instruct and encourage a dispersed people about how, in a practical way, for them to live out the faith that they profess to have. It consists of maxims and counsel for everyday living and witnessing.

Author

The author identifies himself as “James.” There are four different James’ mentioned in the New Testament:

1. James the father of one of the twelve disciples (Judas, not Iscariot). He is mentioned in Luke 6:16. This James is relatively obscure and unlikely the author
2. James, the son of Alphaeus – who was one of the twelve disciples (often called “James the Less”), and mentioned in Matthew 10:3. Not much is mentioned about this James either, and it is unlikely that he is the authoritative figure behind this epistle.
3. James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John (see Matthew 4:20, 10:2). This James was one of Jesus’ intimate disciples, but he was killed by 44 AD (Acts 12:2), so it is unlikely that he wrote the epistle.
4. James, the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55), the natural born son of Mary and Joseph, who ended up being one of the “pillars” in the church in Jerusalem. Tradition points to him as being the author. There are several parallels between the language in the letter drafted under his leadership in Acts 15:23-29 at the Jerusalem counsel and the epistle of James. Also the Jewish character of the epistle with its emphasis on the law, and its approximate quotations of the Sermon on the Mount align with what we know about this James (“James the Just”).

If we conclude that James the brother of Jesus wrote the epistle, we know that Jesus’ brothers did not accept the claims of Jesus until the Lord appeared to him after the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:7). However, he and his brothers were among those who awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Soon after he became a primary leader in the Jerusalem Church (the church of Jews before the gospel spread significantly to gentiles). Although based in Jerusalem, James is credited with having been instrumental in spreading the gospel to Jews in the diaspora. He generally continued to observe the Mosaic Law as a testimony to other Jews.

The Times and context of James

James is addressed “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad”, referring to Hebrew Christians outside of Palestine. The exclusion of any language referring to Gentiles, or the problems that Gentiles dealt with (idolatry, slavery, etc.), suggests that James may have been written prior to significant spreading of the gospel to Gentiles. Therefore it is thought that James may be the earliest writing of the New Testament, written perhaps between 46 AD and 49 AD). According to ancient Jewish historian Josephus, James was martyred in 62 AD.

Overview

James is the Proverbs of the New Testament because it is written in the “moralistic” style of wisdom literature. James was apparently profoundly influenced by the Old Testament and by the Sermon on the Mount. But James’s preaching against inequity and social injustice also makes him comparable to Amos. Although it is difficult to outline, the book seems to be encouraging Jewish believers who are growing weary of ill treatment from both within and outside of the Jewish community to see all of their experiences as part of the process of perfecting their faith. If they hold on to it and use it, it will enable them to deal with both good times and troubling times.

The first part of the epistle deals shows trials and temptations as means of perfecting the reader’s faith. The second part points out what a “working faith” looks like, and what it doesn’t look like. The final part encourages the readers to patiently endure, in light of the hope offered by the prospect of the returning Lord.

Outline

- I. Salutation (1:1)**
- II. Tests of Faith (1:1-1:18)**
 - A. The Purposes of Trials (1:1-1:12)
 - B. The Source of Temptations (1:13-1:18)
- III. The Characteristics of Real Faith (1:19-5:6)**
 - A. Real Faith DOES the Word (1:19-1:27)
 - B. Real Faith Eliminates Discrimination (2:1-2:13)
 1. Partiality (2:1-2:4)
 2. The Rich and The Poor (2:5-2:7)
 3. Obeying The Law Means Obeying on This Point (2:8-2:13)
 - C. Real Faith is Proved By Deeds (2:14-2:26)
 - D. Real Faith Controls The Tongue (3:1-3:12)
 - E. Real Faith Produces PRACTICAL Wisdom (3:13-3:18)
 - F. Real Faith Controls Ambitions Through Humility (4:1-4:12)
 - G. Real Faith Depends on God (4:13-5:6)
 1. Not on Personal Will (4:13-4:17)
 2. Not on Wealth and Arrogance (5:1-5:6)
- IV. The Victory of Faith (5:7-5:20)**
 - A. Produces Patience in Trials (5:7-5:11)
 - B. Produces Veracity of Words without Oaths (5:12)
 - C. Produces Power In Prayer (5:13-5:18)
 - D. Produces Restoration of Those Gone Astray (5:19-5:20)

Keys to Understanding James

- Throughout his epistle, James develops the theme of the characteristics of true faith. He effectively uses these characteristics as a series of tests to help his readers evaluate the quality of their relationship with Christ. Genuine faith will produce real changes in a person’s conduct and character, and the absence of change is a symptom of a dead faith, or the absence of faith.
- In spite of the apparent contradiction between Paul’s emphasis on “salvation by faith without works” and James’ emphasis on “proving faith BY works,” they are actually two different sides of the same coin. Paul is writing about justification before God, while James writes of the evidence of justification before men. A faith that produces no CHANGE is not saving faith. A person IS saved

(repositioned to God's kingdom) by faith alone (we don't earn it), but the EVIDENCE that a person HAS that faith is the transformation that occurs in their life. Without such transformation, it is questionable whether the person really had faith at all.

- TRUE BELIEF brings salvation (regeneration) to the spirit, and produces a desire to know God better.
- The quest to know God better drives a person into God's presence regularly, and thus through the Word THE MIND is transformed.
- A transformed mind produced a transformed HEART and WILL, and thus will transform BEHAVIOR.

Some Lessons from James

- Trials and tests that we go through as believers are the things that help us to see how genuine our faith really is. They can come in a couple of forms:
 - they can be from outside troubles/problems/drama that we go through with people or with circumstances
 - they can be from temptations to sin – to compromise (do or say something against) what we say what we believe to either satisfy our appetites or to ease our circumstancesEither way, they present an OPPORTUNITY. We take full advantage of that opportunity when we hold on to our faith claims in spite of them. We miss an opportunity for growth when we “let it slide” - or give into the temptation to react in the flesh. As Bryan Courtney Wilson says, the quality of our faith “is worth fighting for.” Hold on during times of trial or test.
- God is not the *source* of our trouble (Satan is) – God just finds a way to take what Satan does and use it *for* us and *against* him.
- God gives us two ears and one mouth for a reason (1:19). How often we go off on a tangent or tirade because we haven't fully *listened* and understood what is before us. It is always better to listen to the Holy Spirit while listening to any person and make sure that we are seeing and hearing things from God's perspective.
- Prayer and worship is not just about grabbing for blessings, but about transformation, healing, and spreading God's love. God is kind enough to bless us and prosper us, but that should not be the focus of our prayer life. We have plenty that our hearts need healing of.
- The TONGUE (what we say) is more important than we give it credit for. We need to make sure that comes out of our hearts *really* aligns with what is in our hearts, and make sure that what is in our hearts aligns with God's Word.
- Social Justice is precious to the heart of God, just as precious as personal holiness is. God is just as concerned about oppressed workers as God is about personal blessing or prosperity, or even about teen pregnancy, abortion, etc.
- *Favoritism* has no place in God's house, whether it be economic, racial, gender, political, or just social. God's house ought to be a place where everybody is welcome and everybody has equal access.
- We *become* Christians by believing the doctrines of atonement, The Resurrection, etc. We *show* that we are Christians by our love, and how that love is expressed through service and sacrifice. It is not something we demonstrate by carrying a big Bible, or by wearing a symbol, or even by observing certain rituals. *They will know that we are Christians by our love.*