

James: Faith and Wisdom
August 2, 2020

Following the theme of “Wisdom” we now come to the Epistle of James. It seems almost inevitable that we would end up here. James is a unique book. While it begins as if a letter, with a salutation, to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” The letter itself does not identify any particular crisis to which it is responding. It doesn’t mention any specific individuals to be greeted or shunned, as Paul’s letters often do. There is no closing as is usual for a letter. It does not contain any personal information about the author. Indeed, the name on the epistle, James (Equivalent to Hebrew Jacob) is among the most common of Jewish names. Which James? There are no words specifically from Jesus included. Everything in the letter is fully compatible with, and derives from, Judaism. “Indeed, the teaching of the epistle is so free from concrete application to any specific time or place that for the most part it is as fresh and as useful today as when it first was written; it is this very fact that gives James its enduring appeal.” (Burton Scott Easton, writing in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 1957, vol. 12, p3.)

I’d like to draw a parallel. The “Wisdom” books of the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible), for example Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, are likewise wisdom separated from specific context. The wisdom is “timeless.” That’s not quite entirely true. Language about manservants and maidservants, some agricultural references, and perhaps some other things don’t quite resonate today the way that would have over most of the last three millennia. But the wisdom found there is helpful and useful. In like manner, James gives us principles that are applicable and useful today.

What I would like to do in this supplement is give some added context to this letter from James. The Church has credited this letter to James the Just, the first century brother of Jesus, an important leader in the early Church. This is the same James that Paul disputes with in the Council in Jerusalem early in the Church’s history. (See Acts Chapter 15.) Indeed, James seems to be the one leader who had the last word. (v 19 ff.)

“Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

The letter doesn’t really have a unified structure; it consists of units of discourse without each part depending on another, much like other Wisdom writings. Most of the individual units are of a form called a “diatribe.” A diatribe seeks to copy the back and

forth between the speaker and his supposed opponent. The speaker is proving his point, but interrupts to give his opponent's arguments and then refute them, often in depreciatory terms. The writer is seeking to get the reader to agree with him. Paul uses the "diatribe" form in Romans 3: 1-8 and in James we particularly find it in 2: 14-26 (comment derived from Easton, op. cit. p. 4.). The use of this diatribe form suggests that even though the wisdom being expounded is Jewish, the writer is living in a Greek world, writing to Greek speakers, and is himself fluent in Greek, and literary Greek at that. We understand from the writings of Josephus that James, the brother of Jesus, was martyred sometime between 60-62 A.D. The best guess, then, is that a Jewish Christian follower of James, the Lord's brother, is writing (perhaps in Alexandria after the destruction of Jerusalem) to address controversies over the "faith versus works" issue in the early Church.

The Book of James is often seen as the Jewish Christian reaction against the Gospel as Paul was articulating it to the Gentiles. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians:

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. (Galatians 2:15-16)

Paul has much more to say than just this, but that captures his basic good news: faith in Jesus is sufficient; you do not need to become obedient to the Law. For Jewish Christians, this was troubling. Jewish Christianity took for granted that followers should be "zealous for the law" and not only the written law, but also the ceremonial law and the customs of the Jews, as well. Can Paul be inciting people to licentiousness? To disregard all that God has given in the Ten Commandments, the words and other laws given by Moses, and the laws by which the Jews have lived since then in obedience to God?

So, in the presence of such a controversy, how is the controversy to be resolved. By the Authorities, of course. And for the early Church, who were the Authorities? There seems to have been a Council of Apostles in Jerusalem which decided such things. In Acts 11 we can read how the apostle Peter reported to "The apostles and believers" in Judea. He told them about how he came to baptize Cornelius, the Roman centurion (and "God fearer") into the fellowship of the Way. They too had become believers in Jesus Christ. He had witnessed their receiving the Holy Spirit. At the end of Peter's explanation:

When they heard this they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:18)

Some years later, in response to dissention at Antioch, Paul and Barnabus went to Jerusalem to resolve the question concerning Gentile believers, “Is it necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.” We read in Acts 15:6, “**The apostles and elders met together to consider this matter.**” So by this time there is a governing body of sorts, composed of apostles and elders, apparently presided over by James, Jesus’s brother. He gave the final judgment reported earlier, that Gentiles were **not** asked to obey all of the law, but to refrain from practices that the Jewish Christians would find particularly offensive. Even so, Paul continued to be troubled by “Judaizers” who said that to be Christian, one had to become Jewish, specifically, to be circumcised. The letter to the Galatians seems to have been written immediately after this council in Jerusalem, about 50 A.D.

So, what changed? Paul continued his missionary journeys, writing to his churches, and ultimately ended up in Rome where, with Peter, he is believed to have been martyred in about 62 A.D. But Paul’s letters continued to circulate, and even be collected together and copied. Mark began writing his account, based largely on what he recalled Peter saying. Then, a few years later, the Jews in Palestine revolted in 66 A.D. Thus began the “First Jewish War.” The Jews revolted against oppressive Roman policies. After initial Jewish success, the might of the Roman empire was brought to bear, and Jerusalem was placed under siege. Jerusalem was captured and destroyed in 70 A.D. and the remaining survivors taken into slavery. The last stronghold at Masada was captured in 73 A.D. With this war the Church in Jerusalem was destroyed, and with it that one authoritative council. For a while church leaders (bishops) in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus and Rome all had a degree of authority, before predominant authority ultimately came to Rome by the Fourth Century. Meanwhile the Jews were now pretty much all in the “diaspora” (though some did remain in Palestine). Jerusalem no longer existed, being renamed Aelia Capitolina. A temple to the Roman god Jupiter was built over the remains of the Temple. (There was later a second Jewish revolt against Roman authority in 132-134 A.D. These wars were a disaster for Judaism and the Jewish people. They became a scattered people with majority status nowhere, until the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948.)

With the destruction of the Jerusalem Church, the disappearance of the governing council, and the deaths of many Jewish Christians who were predominantly in Judea and Galilee, Gentiles came to be a majority of believers. This happened in the interval of time between the writings of Paul (and Mark), and the writings of John, and, most likely also, this letter of James. James, the author of the letter, was presumably is writing with the viewpoint and presumed authority of James the Just of Jerusalem. But he no longer is

in position to declare a judgment; he must persuade. So, James seeks to persuade Christians, now mostly Gentiles, to conform to essential principles of behavior. These are at the heart of a Jewish way of understanding God's will for human life. He does this by writing of these principles as Wisdom, rather than requiring them as Law.

In fact, the Church did accept the Jewish Law as the ethical foundation upon which Christianity is built. (There was a time not long ago when the Ten Commandments would be displayed in courtrooms throughout this country, as to proclaim that our civic Law is consistent with these foundational Commandments.) Recall that in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus said, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”** (Matt. 5:17). For early Christians “The Bible” was the Jewish Bible (Greek translation).

The lesson writer made a very good choice for our “verse to remember.” This really is James's point in the whole book. Put faith into action! Faith without works is dead (as he will say in 2:26 – next week's lesson).

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. (James 1:22)

James might seem to be contradicting what Paul was proclaiming to the Gentiles in Galatians (**“a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ”**). There are some subtleties to this though. James says, **“doers of the word.”** Not, “doers of the Law,” as a Jew might say to another Jew. By the times James was written, it was accepted that Gentiles were not required to obey all of the Jewish Law. James accepts that too. Whereas, in Paul's day, certain Jewish Christians were visiting Paul's churches, specifically those in Galatia, proclaiming that believers must fully become Jews. James uses “the word” in a manner that seems to mean the gospel message. Perhaps meaning it in the same manner as “The Word” in John's gospel. He's saying it is not enough just to have faith.

It is interesting that Martin Luther called James an “epistle of straw” (as below) *“In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”* (LW 35:362)

<https://calvinistinternational.com/2013/06/13/luther-and-the-epistle-of-straw/>

(This source is worth reading! It's a short take on Luther's view of James.)

Yet, the modern Church, especially Presbyterians, very much revere James. Our lesson writer devotes five lessons to the book, far beyond any other source, in this quarter's readings. That for a book only five chapters long. Rev. Zanicky probably preaches from James as often as from any other book, perhaps excepting the gospels. So, why this vast difference in degree of respect given this writing? I believe it goes back to the "works versus faith" issue.

Martin Luther was a poor monk, who tried to live a holy life, performing various acts of penitence, without finding relief. When he found faith, he realized that all of his works could not save him. It's a similar journey to that of Paul, who found that all of his learning and righteousness as a Pharisee did not bring him life, the way his encounter with and faith in Jesus did. A declaration of faith was sufficient. Consider the thief on the cross. He had no "works." Luke tells us of the second thief, after confessing his sinfulness:

**Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."
He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42,42)**

For those who have nothing, faith is sufficient. But to those who have resources, more can be expected; they need to live out this faith that they have in the many ways Jesus illustrates in his parables and teaching. Paul does not contradict this.

By our day, in this country, the "Mainline" protestant denominations became the church of the wealthiest of society: the bankers, the lawyers, the political movers and shakers, the wealthy businessmen. This position of power reached its peak perhaps in the 1950's. Think about the membership of the Church in that day, and compare it to the Church in our present day. To those in power, and wielding resources, the message of James is needed and important.

We will have plenty of additional opportunity to look at James and these issues in the weeks ahead.

Prayer: Saving God, give us the lively minds of enthusiastic students and grace with each other as our conversations unfold. We ask in the name of the Great Teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.