

SERIES ON JAMES

Wisdom in Speech & Action

James 1:19-27; Pat Cameron; September 12, 2010

This morning, we continue with a 2 ½ month series on the book of James. It seems like a long amount of time to spend so such a small book--it has only 5 chapters.

Last week, Jerry began our series on the book of James by looking at Chapter 1, verses 1-11, and discussed the following:

- 1) the genre of the book (it's called an epistle but reads like a book from the wisdom tradition)
- 2) the outline of the book
- 3) its major themes: trials and temptations, wisdom, and riches and poverty
- 4) the authorship of the book (possibly James, the brother of Jesus), and
- 5) the audience: Jews and Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine

I want to make a couple of comments regarding authorship before moving on to the passage that Vangie read this morning. As Jerry said last week, there is substantial evidence suggesting that James, the brother of Jesus, may have been the author of the book of James. This evidence, however, is not conclusive. Some scholars believe that the author was likely *not* James, but that the book was named *for* James. Reasons for doubting that James was the author include the style of language used in the book-- possibly suggesting an author who lived later than James-- and the lack of some of the doctrinal issues in which James, a leader in the early church, would surely have been involved.

Today, we have a tremendous problem with plagiarism: authors, including perhaps a majority of students at all levels, who claim to have written what they've copied from other writers. In the ancient world, there was the opposite: authors attributing what they had written to someone else. This was not considered a problem, though, as it was done to honor the person for whom the writing was named. It also served to elevate the status of the writing by associating it with a person of high regard—and certainly James had such a status.

Whoever the author may have been, he was a master at crafting his literary work. He introduces the book's themes of trials and temptations, wisdom, and riches and poverty; then repeats these themes in the same order; and finally, repeats these themes for a third time—but this time in reverse order, and with more examples and more detail. Today's passage comes from James' second statement of these themes. Having restated his perspectives on the trials and temptations of Christians, the author is now restating his second theme: wisdom.

Some action-oriented Christians believe that the book of James is the most important book in the New Testament outside the Gospels, because they see it is a bold manifesto for Christian action. But other Christians see James as less important than, or even inferior to, the more theologically sophisticated New Testament books like Romans or Galatians or Hebrews. Martin Luther, an early instigator of the Protestant Reformation, regarded the book as advocating "works righteousness" rather than justification by faith in Christ alone. Luther called James an "epistle of straw" and argued that it should be eliminated from the New Testament.

Is it true that the book of James rejects what the rest of the NT claims: that salvation is through faith in Christ alone? Does it substitute instead the view that salvation comes through good works?

"...let everyone be quick to listen," the author of James admonishes in v. 19. This is wisdom teaching. Proverbs 18:15 says "...the ear of the wise seeks knowledge." But three verses down, in v. 22, it becomes clear that in James, "listening" is closely connected with *acting*: "Be *doers* of the word, and not merely *hearers*...." By verse 25, James dismisses hearing altogether, challenging believers to "... become "not hearers who forget but doers who act."

Going up to v. 19 again, James says, "...be slow to speak, slow to anger. " These words also reflect the wisdom tradition. Ecclesiastes 5: 2 says, "...God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few." When James says "be slow to speak" he implies that what we *say* is less important than what we *listen to* and *act upon*. This view is reinforced in verse 26, where James says that Christians who don't "bridle their tongues" practice worthless religion.

James' teaching about anger is characteristic of wisdom teaching. Ecclesiastes 7:9 says, "Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools." In verses 20 and 21, James tells us why anger is a bad thing: it generates action, but not the kind of action that produces God's righteousness. In contrast, anger leads to "sordidness and rank growth of wickedness." Christians should rid themselves of this kind of inappropriate and harmful behavior.

The end of v. 22 advises Christians to welcome "...the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." This seems to imply that James is saying that the word of Jesus Christ is an inner reality, planted within the human soul. This is not inconsistent with the consensus of NT theology. But, for James, that inner word is of no use without an outer expression. The next verse, to which I've already referred, connects "word" with action: "Be *doers of the word*, and not merely hearers."

Verses 23-25 contrast Christians-- who gaze at themselves in the mirror and then, when they stop, forget what they looked like-- and Christians who instead, "look into the perfect law, the law of liberty." When James refers to "law," he is not referring to the Jewish Law, as Paul often did. Rather, this reference to the "perfect law" is the gospel. But "looking" at this law, for James is looking on the run. Looking, like hearing, is connected with doing. "...those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty...persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act."

The author clearly indicates his view that there is a close connection between salvation and good works. At the end of v. 25 James says that Christians are blessed. He doesn't say they are blessed because of what they believe, but because of what they *do*. "They will be blessed in their *doing*."

But the clearest indication of the author's emphasis on Christian action comes in the last verse, v. 27. "Pure and undefiled religion is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Being unstained from the world" takes us back to "sordidness and wickedness" that comes from attitudes and actions such as anger. To be "sordid" is to be dirty, filthy, and grimy. "Wickedness" connotes acts of evil, iniquity, sin.. These are the kinds of stains Christians should avoid when they act. Christians are to practice "pure and undefiled religion."

Widows and orphans represent the most vulnerable people in the author's society, because they had no household to support them. Perhaps the modern-day equivalents of "widows and orphans" are immigrants who have left their homes, as well as those born and raised in the United States who have become homeless.

Note that James doesn't say that religion *includes* caring for orphans and widows. James says religion *is* caring for orphans and widows. Such acts are what characterize and define religion. In our context, this would suggest that what it means to be religious, what it means to be Christian are actions such as caring the homeless in our cities and along our borders.

It would be a mischaracterization of the NT to claim that most of it advocates a salvation through Christ that is devoid of Christian action. No NT writer would deny that faith in Christ leads to Christian service.

But in today's passage from the book of James, it seems that Christian action doesn't come *from* faith in Christ, but rather, it is an integral part of salvation in Christ. In fact, today's passage seems to suggest that Christian action is the sum total of what it means to be a Christian.

Sounds like works righteousness to me. Why are we spending so much time on this book?

Critics of Christianity often complain that Christians spend far too much energy quarreling over Christian doctrine, rather than working together to serve in Christ's name. Mahatma Gandhi is reported to have said, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

If we want to be like Jesus, we must live like Jesus. Today's reading from the book of James is a helpful resource to remind us that just talking and hearing about Jesus is not enough. To know Jesus in our hearts is to follow him in our lives. That's a message that bears repeating, over and over and over again. Will 2 ½ months to study the book of James be long enough?