

Study/Series: New Testament Overviews

James

I. Introduction.

A. Theme of James: Faith tested.

B. Introductory Notes. There are different ways to approach James; i.e., different themes to pursue or to see in it. E.g., Carol Ruvolo, an author of women's studies of various NT books, followed the theme of wisdom in her study of James. James is considered to be the NT book of wisdom, in the same vein as the OT wisdom literature: Job; Pss.; Prov.; Eccl.; SS. Looked at in that light, it deals with the application of Biblical faith and ethics to the everyday life of the Christian. Luther called James "a right strawy epistle." He meant an epistle made of straw, like a straw man—a fake masquerading as the real thing. At first, he didn't think it belonged in the Bible, but later he may have changed his mind, although he always had difficulty with it. He misunderstood and thought James presented a doctrine of justification that was at odds with Paul, i.e., a doctrine of justification by works. James doesn't do that, but we'll see what he does mean in chapter 2. Our approach is to pursue the theme, Faith Tested. For the most part, we'll follow the theme and outline prepared by Dr. Sidney Dyer, Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

II. Faith Tested by Proper Perspectives. Chapter 1:2 - 2:13.

A. The Proper Perspective Toward Trials. 1:2-8. It's not just that faith is tested by trials, which it is, but that one who has saving faith wants to know what perspective toward trials God wants His people to adopt and develop. Testing, in the way James speaks, is not the kind of test to see if you have faith, but the kind of testing that refines and strengthens faith, and causes growth in faith's application of the Bible to life—i.e., wisdom—and growth in holiness. The proper perspective? "Consider it all joy..."

- B. The Proper Perspective Toward Social Standing. 1:9-11. While this is an accurate enough summary of this unit of text, this idea is not exhausted in James in just this unit of text. It appears again at the beginning of ch. 2, where Dr. Dyer uses a different category. Nevertheless, this passage focuses more on proper perspective even than the obedient response in the context of the church, and what the wrong response implies about one's attitude toward God's law and how such a response violates God's law. The illustration James uses is definitive in showing us why we should have the perspective toward social standings for which he calls.
- C. The Proper Perspective Toward Temptation. 1:12-17. This is one of the most helpful passages when we catch on to its meaning and purpose and put it to work. The proper perspective includes the realization that though God is sovereign and tests us with trials (1:2-8), God does not tempt us to sin, nor is responsible for our sins. "Trial" in vs. 2, and "tempt" or "temptation" in vs. 13 are the same Greek word. But unlike "trial," which is its clear meaning in the context of 1:2-8, "temptation," which is its clear negative meaning in the context of 1:12-17, temptation is something for which the sinner himself is ultimately responsible. At the same time, it is clear by good and necessary consequence, without direct mention, that no man, including the believer, can say, "The devil made me do it." It also teaches us about the dynamic of temptation and its connection to sin in a way that helps us be more watchful and prayerful against entering into temptation, and defusing, short-circuiting, or halting it before it leads to sin. Sin is not the good thing or perfect gift from above.
- D. The Proper Perspective Toward the Word. 1:18-27. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."
- E. The Proper Perspective Toward People. 2:1-13. This again deals with social standings, but is not as much the perspective on that alone. It is more so the perspective on what the obedient response should be in the context of the church, and what the wrong response to social standing implies about a wrong perspective toward the law of God.
- III. Faith Tested by Practice. Chapter 2:13-26. By "practice" is meant the practice of life that faith must and always does produce. Another valid evaluation is "faith proved by love and good works."

A. The Hypothetical Examples. 2:13-16. By these James teaches that “justify” and “justification” in Greek have a demonstrative use as well as the declarative use that Paul uses. So, James does not contradict Paul or teach salvation by works. Rather, he teaches that good works are evidence of faith, and they demonstrate that the faith one says he has is real, saving faith. Saving faith will always produce good works, so good works are the outwardly visible evidence of saving faith. James complements Paul; he doesn’t contradict Paul.

B. The OT Examples. 2:17-25.

1. Abraham. Cp. Rom. 4 and its use of the same Gen. 17 passage that James uses. This illustrates the different but complementary uses of “justify.” This really confused Luther.

But the fact that God used the same example, Abraham, and the same passage for both implies by good and necessary consequence that the two passages cannot contradict each other.

2. Rahab.

IV. Faith Tested by Pitfalls. Chapters 3:1 - 5:6. We can’t look at this as though it is desirable to fall into the sins/pitfalls in order to refine our faith. God will do that, sovereignly overruling our evil for His good purpose. But we must try to avoid them because our faith will be refined all the quicker by obedience in the face of temptations.

A. The Uncontrolled Tongue. 3:1-12. Faith in Christ should engender care for the words we use. It begins with teachers of God’s word, because there are no words more important than those that present and teach the true religion, by which God regenerates hearts and creates true faith (1 Pet. 1:23-25; Rom. 10:17). Scripture vehemently condemns false teachers. Here, it warns against incompetent teachers, particularly ordained ones. Consider also how much Scripture has to say about the words of all Christians. It is one of the three basic areas of ethics and sanctification: thoughts, words, and deeds (cf. Prov.; Eph. 4:29; etc.). The warning here focuses on how damaging ungodly words can be, how sinful and indicative of iniquity, and for the unbeliever, as much a ticket to hell as the thoughts and deeds. The uncontrolled tongue is as though it came straight from hell. How

inconsistent it is for the Christian to use ungodly words, cursing and blessing then coming from the same saved mouth and mind.

B. The Lack of Wisdom/Contrast with Earthly Wisdom. 3:13-18.

1. Godly wisdom. Vs. 13. Godly wisdom is shown by good behavior, which is constituted by godly deeds in gentleness.
2. Attributes of earthly “wisdom.” Vss. 14-16. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. This kind of so-called wisdom is not heavenly, but earthly. It is not the kind that should come from the regenerate spiritual man, but from the natural man. It is demonic. Jealousy and ambition bring disorder and every evil thing, and should *never* be seen in the church. The church is not an enterprise with a corporate ladder to climb in self-service, but is the place where humility, serving others, and order should dwell.
3. Attributes of godly wisdom. Vss. 17-18.

C. Quarrels and Conflicts. Chapter 4:1-10.

1. Source of Christian conflicts. Vs. 1. Desire to serve and satisfy our own pleasures, according to ungodly “wisdom,” rather than each other according to godly wisdom. It is no wonder that this disorder and the warning against it come right after the passage on earthly “wisdom” of jealousy and ambition. Don’t both of those spring from the pleasures that wage war in our members, and the desire to satisfy and gratify our own pleasures?
2. Both jealousy and ambition are actions that spring from envy and the failure to pray aright according to God’s will. Vss. 2-3.
3. Friendship with the world. Vss. 4-5. It is unfaithfulness to God, and hostility toward God. You belong to Him, with His Spirit indwelling you. He earnestly desires that you remain close to Him, responsive to the Holy Spirit, and not grieving the Spirit.
4. Call to repentance. Vss. 6-10. It comes with God’s promise of grace to those who are humble before Him.

D. Slander. Chapter 4:11-12. It is tantamount to judging a brother by one’s own law, ignoring and

therefore speaking against God's law. Note that again James addresses how we speak, this time about a brother rather than to a brother. Note that, again, godly wisdom springs and flows from true saving faith, has much to do with how we treat others, and is a logical product of our relationship to God. This is why the New Testament does not repeat Commandments 1-4; it presupposes that if you are committed by faith to keeping Commandments 5-10, you are committed by faith to keeping 1-4, and you have the saving relationship to God that gives that commitment.

E. Self-Confidence. Chapter 4:13-17. Rather than total dependence on God and submission to His providence, especially when it changes our plans.

F. Social Injustice. Chapter 5:1-6. Dr. Dyer called this Dishonesty with Riches, and that certainly appears here. But this passage seems to reflect a broader issue, particularly since James's NT wisdom literature has had so much to tell us about doing "justly" within the church toward others. Remember, this book is written to Christians and how they comport themselves, not only to demonstrate our faith, but also to refine it. So, as we are to treat others in godly, wise ways in our doings in the church, so also in our doings in relationship to the world, and our weekly employments and recreations. This reminds us of Titus 3:1-2, especially of Isa. 58:1-12; and of Paul's warnings about the dangers of riches and how Christians are to handle riches in 1 Tim. 6.

V. Faith Tested by Patience. Chapter 5:7-12.

A. Patience for the Lord's Return. 5:7-9.

B. Patience under Oppression. 5:10-12.

VI. Faith Tested by Prayer. Chapter 5:13-18.

A. Prayer in Affliction. 5:13.

B. Prayer for the Sick. 5:14-18.

VII. Conclusion. Chapter 5:19-20. Encouragement to turn an erring brother whose faith has not been proven to be genuine.