

The book of James

The Book of James has been a difficult epistle to fully understand.

“Connections between different parts of the Epistle are indeed not easy to establish...” (p.10 Tyndale New Testament Commentary series by R.V.G. Tasker 1975 printing. TNTC will be used for additional quotes from this commentary)

Catholics have used it as an authoritative hammer for the doctrine for the sacrament of extreme unction. Protestants have been wary of this epistle because of Luther’s devaluation of it and have placed it in a sub-Christian category.

“Whenever faith does not issue in love, and dogma, however orthodox, is unrelated to life; whenever Christians are tempted to settle down to a self-centered religion, and become oblivious of the social and material needs of others; or whenever they deny by their manner of living the creed they profess, and seem more anxious to be friends of the world than friends of God, then the Epistle of James has something to say to them which they disregard at their peril.” (ibid. p.10)

Justification by faith is our foundation, but there is a “complementary truth” (Soren Kierkegaard) that connects living hands and feet to this message of divine grace. James addresses this when he says, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?” in chapter 2:14 and “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (Jas. 1:27)

We use the principle of “Scripture interprets Scripture” to understand the Bible. Take a look at the foundation upon which Christianity is built and how we can understand the book of James:

I. Justification by grace

Eph. 2:8-10

Cf. 3rd Article of the Creed and its meaning

What is the origin of our faith and our good works?

II. Works flow from grace.

Matt. 5:14-16 and 6:1-4 - What is the tricky balancing act?

The following verses are from Small Catechism ('86) #163 and help explain why and how we do good works.

Gal. 5:13

Heb. 11:6

John 15:5

Matt. 15:9

John 14:15

1 Cor. 10:31

III. The book of James and the rest of the New Testament.

- A. A brief history of canon: The New Testament contains writings from the four Evangelists (Luke also wrote Acts). Thirteen other books, actually epistles or letters, were written to a specific person, city, or nation. The Apostle Paul wrote these thirteen letters, which were to be circulated among the intended people and are called encyclicals. Seven other Epistles are known as the “General” or “Catholic” Epistles, which are to be shared collectively among believers. The book of James is considered a General Epistle.

1516 Erasmus criticized the style of the letter because it lacked *maiestatem illam et gravitatem apostolicam* (majesty and dignity of the apostolate), and that the language was not so Hebraic as would naturally be expected in a bishop of Jerusalem.

1522 Luther listed Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation at the end of his New Testament to form a kind of supplement

1539 the Great Bible in English published the order of books in conformity to that of the Latin Vulgate and placed James as we currently have it.

Quotes by Luther and Tyndale:

“In fine, Saint John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, Saint Paul’s Epistles, especially to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Saint Peter’s first Epistle, - these are the books which show thee Christ, and teach thee everything that is needful and blessed for thee to know even though thou never see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore is Saint James’s Epistle a right strawy Epistle in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it.”

(TNTC p.14 Martin Luther’s introduction to his translation of N.T.)

“Though this Epistle was rejected in old time and not considered by many to be the Epistle of a true apostle, and though also it does not lay the foundation of the faith of Christ, but speaks of a general faith in God, neither preaching His death and resurrection, nor the mercy that is laid up in store for us in Him, or the everlasting covenant made for us by His blood, which is the office and duty of a true apostle, as Christ says ‘You testify of Me:’ yet, because it sets up no human doctrine, but calls upon men to keep the law of God, and makes love which is without partiality the fulfilling of the law, as Christ and all the apostles did, and has in reference to this many good and Godly sentences in it; and has also nothing that is not agreeable to the rest of the Scriptures, if it be considered impartially, I think it ought rightly to be regarded as Holy Scripture.” (TNTC p.14f. Tyndale in his prologue to James)

See also The Lutheran Study Bible (TLSB) p.2130

B. Who wrote this epistle? James 1:1

TLSB p.2132 “Challenges for Readers...Authorship and Context”

One of the delays for including the epistle in the official canon, was the question of whether the author was James the brother of our Lord. (TNTC p.19)

In verse one the writer refers to himself as “James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”

Jude 1 also refers to himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” This addition recognizes James as more important in the Christian community. (TNTC p.39)

To whom is James writing?

What people are mentioned in these passages?

John 7:35

Acts 11:19

1 Pet. 1:1

Studying the text of James – Chapter 1

I. Dealing with life as a Christian. James 1:2-4

v.2 To what trials might James be referring and what have you heard other Christians have faced?

What kinds of trials have you faced?

Note: Trials are not to be confused as temptations as some translations have it.

Luke 8:13, 15

Luke 14:25-35 Count the _____

What reaction does this instruction cause in you?

When have you experienced growth in your faith and why?

What is James revealing as an identifying mark of a Christian?

How could "Patience" be expressed in an active form?

James 1:9-12 What is being contrasted?

James 1:5-8 "If any of you lacks wisdom..."

James directs us to pray for wisdom. What will be the best way to hear God's answer?

What additional insight is found in Ecc. 5:8-20?

What does Solomon say about proverbs in Prov. 1:1-7?

Cf. v.2 TLSB ftnt.

James 1:13-18 The source of Temptation and Good Gifts

- Temptation

Cf. The Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer (TLSB xxxviii)

Prov. 1:20-33 Wisdom is personified in these verses. In other words, wisdom is presented as someone speaking to us.

- Good and Perfect Gifts

What are the most valuable gifts?

See TLSB ftnt. for Prov. 2:5 re: knowledge

Notice how we are given spiritual birth.

Notice 1:8; and the first verse chapters 2-7 in Proverbs. Read the footnote for Prov. 4:1.

See what John 3:3-8; 15:16 say about becoming a child of God and believer.

- God will provide the wisdom, if we will spend the time listening to _____.

James 1:19-27 Hearing and Doing the Word

Share your thoughts on how well this takes place for you. Then read Phil. 4:6-9.

What does a Christian look like?

_____ to _____

_____ to _____

_____ to _____

_____ away....

The “implanted word” is explained in James 1:21 TLSB ftnt. How does this understanding help focus on who is responsible for our faith and good works?

How is a Christian often deceived? Vv.22-23

James 1:22-23 TLSB ftnt. provides an accurate understanding of the word

James 1:23-24 TLSB ftnt.

What is the perfect law?

Gal. 5:13-14

1 Pet. 2:16-17

James talks about being blessed. How are we blessed?

Psalm 1:1-2

Luke 11:28

Religion is dangerous if it is not the right one.

How is religion described in simple terms in James 1:26-27?

v.27 ftnt

How do we keep ourselves unstained from the world?

Summary 1:19-27

James 2:1-13

In what areas do we show favoritism (or discrimination)?

v.1

What influences our favoritism toward people?

- Ex. 23:2-3
- Lev. 19:15
- Deut. 1:16-17

What does God's Word say or promote?

- Acts 10:34-35 speaks of how God treats different ethnic groups
- Ephesians 6:7-9 [economic or social status]
- Colossians 3:25

vv.2-4 A simple illustration.

vv.5-7 Ironically, we give honor to those who may later turn against us and even persecute us.

vv.8-11 How does one part affect the whole?

- Matt. 25:34-40 The masks of God = opportunities that we miss to love our neighbor.

- A single window pane with a decorative grid.

vv.12-13 God is the judge and what is His desire?

vv.14-26 Faith and Deeds

We cannot have _____ without the _____

v.22

v.26

[TL5B ?]

Chapter 3

In a small group discuss examples of how the tongue is used carelessly.

When has the tongue started a “fire?”

When is it difficult for you to control the tongue?

Discuss the use of the tongue for Confession and Absolution.

In James 3:1-6, notice the examples James uses to contrast a small item that can have a big effect.

v.3

v.4

v.5

In what way would you agree with the comparison made of the tongue in verse 6?

What different images does James use in verses 7-8?

For what purposes did God intend for us to use our tongue according to verses 9-12? Can it be used effectively in two different ways?

James 3:13-18

Two kinds of wisdom

1) _____ and _____ ambition result in...

What are the sources for this wisdom?

2) Wisdom “from above” produces what in us?

Discuss which wisdom we see in the Church.

Describe how we can see the wisdom from above.

James 4

From where does most of our conflict originate?

Read James 4:1-3

Rom. 7:21-25

Gal. 5:17

1 Pet. 2:11

Interesting that it lists “kill” before “covet.” It would seem the reverse order would be chronological. Think about and summarize the story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite. What did God say to David in 2 Samuel 12:7-10?

What do we learn about prayer from verses 2-3?

1 John 5:14-15

TLSB ftnt 4:2 *you do not ask*

TLSB ftnt 4:3

Read James 4:4-6

The 1st Commandment is foundational to life.

When a person does this: _____,

he gets more of what: _____.

When a person does this: _____,

he gets more of what: _____.

Read 4:7-10

Submit – define this word and identify who is responsible for the action

How does this word fit with God’s desire to have individuals respond to His love?

v. 10 What does God desire for us? Cf. TLSB ftnt. v.7

Read James 4:11-12 the TLSB ftnts.

4:11

4:12

4:1-12.