

James

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Notes

I studied James with the Ross' BS group in first term 2013. We used the Matthias Media booklet but I added quite a few more interesting questions and often quoted from John Dickson's commentary. Most of these additions worked well so I decided to write a BS booklet of my own to incorporate these things.

My sources were: the Reading the Bible Today Commentary Series James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson, the Matthias Media Interactive Bible Study booklet on James The Implanted Word by Phillip D. Jensen and Kirsten Birkett, the St Aquila Press Bible Study booklet James – believe and behave by David Hewetson.

Ed O'Connor, March 2013

Study 1, James 1:1-18, Trials

Introduction

The famous sixteenth century Reformer, Martin Luther, the man at the foundation of the Protestant church, described the letter of James as *ein rechte stroern Epistel*, 'a right epistle of straw'. In the famous Luther Bible, published throughout Europe in 1522, Luther arranged to have James placed at the back of the volume without a page reference in the Table of Contents (though, in later editions, he thought better of this idea). . .

Luther's concerns over James have been expressed in less extreme ways by many over the years. Compare the number of evangelical commentaries on this epistle with the number written on any one of the Apostle Paul's letters. I estimate the figure is about 1:3. . .

James does not provide a comprehensive theological account of our faith as Paul does in, say, Romans. Nor does he give us a riveting historical account of the faith as does Luke in the book of Acts. He does, however, offer one of the most compelling portraits of Christian living anywhere in the Bible. In this sense, James is anything but an 'epistle of straw'. And, as we shall see, there is a sense in which James has a deeper affinity with the traditions of Jesus than does any book of the Bible outside the four Gospels.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson pp 1-3.

Getting started

1. (a) Describe a time when you were fired up with ideas and possible courses of action.

(b) How did you keep track of those ideas?

(c) What eventually happened with those ideas?

Bible

2. James' first chapter introduces us to many of his ideas on which he expands later in his letter. Read chapter 1 noting James' main ideas then read the rest of the letter noting where these ideas are developed and note any new themes that pop up.

3. Read James 1:1-18.
- (a) Which phrases seem contradictory?
 - (b) What are the wrong ways to respond to trials?
 - (c) What are the right ways to respond to trials?
 - (d) What are the results of responding this way?

According to **verse 4**, perseverance 'must finish its work so that you may be *mature and complete*'. The word 'mature' is the Greek term *teleios* meaning 'perfect'. The term reappears in James' discussion of the tongue where the NIV renders it 'perfect': 'If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man' (3:2). While the English term 'perfect' has connotations of scoring 10/10 or of being sinless, the Greek term in biblical usage has more to do with fulfilling a goal or reaching a desired end than it does the absence of any blemish. Hence, the three expressions at the end of verse 4 are probably to be read as a piece: so that you may be (i) *mature* and (ii) *complete*, (iii) *not lacking anything*. The point, then, is that the trials experienced by Christians can, and should, be viewed in a broader perspective, as part of the journey toward being made whole. And, if Christian wholeness is an outcome believers value, they will be able to consider trials, in all their sad reality, as 'pure joy'.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p18.

The Lord's unreserved generosity toward his children does not extend to doubters. What does James mean by this? The English words '**believe**' and '**doubt**' are mainly cognitive terms. To 'believe' often means little more than to assent to the truth of something; to 'doubt' means to question the truth of something. In biblical usage, however, the words 'believe' and 'doubt' refer not to the presence and absence of mere 'assent' but to the presence and absence of *trust* or *devotion*. To believe in God, or to have 'faith' in him ('belief' and 'faith' are the same word in Greek: *pistis*), is not merely to *acknowledge* God's existence; it is to *entrust* oneself to him. To 'doubt' God is to *refuse to entrust* oneself to him. James is not saying one must be confident of the outcome of the request before God will grant it. Verse 6 reads literally: 'Let him ask *in faith*, not doubting.' The point is, when one asks God for wisdom—for knowledge of his ways in this world—one must do so in an attitude of sincere devotion to the Lord.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p20.

4. In James 1:1-18, what is God like (vv 5, 13, 17, 18)?
5. What were some of the trials that James' readers were facing?
1:9-11

2:1-7

Study 2, James 1:19-2:26, Faith

Getting started

1. What is one superstition you have or that you've heard other people have?
2. What is superstition?
3. What is the difference between superstition and faith?

Bible

4. Read James 1.
(a) What should our attitude be towards God's word?

(b) What is God's word?

(c) What is meant by "the word" in James 1 (see vv 18, 21, 22, 23-25)?

There was only one 'word of truth' in the possession of all Christian communities in the middle of the first century: the collection of traditions about the ministry and teaching of Jesus, what scholars call the 'Jesus tradition'. The Jesus tradition was memorised and recounted throughout the churches and later compiled in what we call the four Gospels, all of which were written after the letter of James. These early oral traditions about the Messiah, particularly those recounting Jesus' teaching, are what James means by the 'word of truth' and the 'perfect law'.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 32.

5. Read James 1:22-2:13.
(a) What is said about the law (1:25, 2:12)?

(b) What is the "law that gives freedom"?

But why would James call this body of Jesus-traditions a 'law', a term usually associated with the ancient Jewish Torah. The answer is simple: according to the early Christians, Jesus was the fulfilment of the Torah (Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:27; John 5:46; Rom 10:4). He was therefore himself the *new law* (Mark 10:1-12; John 6:32-35; 8:5-11). Like James, the Apostle Paul was happy to speak of the path of Jesus as the '*law of Christ*' (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2). This law, of course, frees us from the judgment of the law of Moses and enables us to please our God, which is why it may be called the law that 'gives freedom' (1:25).

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 32.

6. How is this law summed up (Jas 2:8, Mark 12:28-31)?

7. How is showing favouritism contradictory to this?

8. What should our attitude be towards the rich and the poor (see also 1:9-11)?

9. One of the reasons James wrote this letter was to correct the misunderstanding some people had about faith. So James looks at their definition of faith and shows what is wrong with it.
Read James 2:14-26.
 (a) What is the definition of "faith" in 2:18-19?

 (b) What is wrong with this definition according to vv 14, 17, 26?

 (c) What is the point of the illustration in vv 15-16?

 (d) How does James describe the faith of
 - (a) Abraham (vv 21-22, Gen 22)?
 - (b) Rahab (v25, Joshua 2)?

To finish

10. How would you know if someone was a Christian or not?

11. Would you ever need to know if a particular person was a Christian or not? Why/why not?

Study 3, James 3:1-12, Speech

Getting started

1. Think of different things that might motivate you e.g. love, fear, guilt, gratitude, duty, money, passion, pride, status or revenge. Think of a recent task that you were given. What motivated you to complete that task?
2. Out of all the different things that might motivate you which one would drive you the hardest?

Bible

3. Read James 3:1-12.
'Teachers' in early Christianity performed a role critical to the survival of the church. In a period of low literacy (10- 15%), teachers were the ones entrusted with memorising and passing on the traditions about Jesus as laid down by the original apostles. Before these traditions were codified in what we call the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament, a believer's only reliable access to what Jesus and the apostles said and did was through the teachers.
From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 62.
4. What do horses, ships, forest fires and the human body have in common?
5. What do beasts, birds, reptiles, sea creatures and the human tongue not have in common?
6. If no one can tame the tongue do you think verse 10 presents an impossible demand?
Why/why not?
7. What is the point of the illustrations in vv 11-12?

8. Read James 3:6-18.
(a) How is true wisdom shown?

(b) Compare Jesus' teaching in Matt 12:33-37. How does it throw light on this passage?

To finish

9. (a) Read James 2:12-13 and 4:11-12. How will this motivate you to seek to control your speech?

(b) Can you think of a better motivation for controlling our speech?

(c) Does the gospel act as motivation to better control our speech? How?

Study 4, James 3:13-4:12, Wisdom

Getting started

1. Think of someone you would describe as wise. What makes them so in your eyes?

Bible

2. Read James 3:13-4:3.
How is wisdom revealed?
3. (a) What qualities are produced from “the wisdom that comes from heaven” (v 17)?

(b) What results from “the wisdom that comes from heaven”?
4. (a) What qualities are produced from the wisdom that does not come from heaven (v 15)?

(b) What results from that kind of wisdom?
5. Read James 4:1-10.
What do their fights and ineffective prayers have in common?
6. The word translated ‘desires’ in v 1 in the NIV is the same Greek word as the word translated ‘pleasures’ in v 3. The ESV translates both words as ‘passions’.
What does it mean to be motivated by our desires/pleasures/passions?

7. Why would James describe this as adultery?

“The world” v 4. There is much in the world that is beautiful, beneficial and pleasing to God, and there is a strong biblical tradition affirming this (Gen 1:31; 1 Tim 6:17). The Bible is equally clear in condemning any world-system which pursues wealth for pleasure at the expense of relationships. Choosing to befriend *that* 'world', says James, is an act of infidelity toward God: it turns us into an 'adulterous people' and an 'enemy of God'. The prophets of Israel likewise accused God's people of spiritual adultery (Jer 9:2; Eze 6:9; Hos 1:2). James' readers will have felt the force of the allusion. The pursuit of wealth and pleasure at the expense of relationships is anathema to our Creator.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 82.

8. In vv 6-10 (a) what advice does James give?

(b) what is promised to us?

The devil. The leading sentence of this paragraph [in v 7] stands as a heading over the statements which follow. Submitting ourselves to God, then, is a multifaceted act. First, it involves resisting the devil, the *diabolos*, or 'diabolical one'. This relates to the world-system described in the previous paragraphs. God created the world for the enjoyment of *relationships*—the true currency of creation. To flirt with a world-system which perverts this intention— one that pursues wealth and pleasure at the *expense* of relationships—is to offer allegiance to the diabolical one. As stated in connection with James 3:15, the church must remember that the devil is seen not only in the occult but also, and perhaps especially, in a lifestyle that values the dollar more than our neighbour. Resist the devil, says James, 'and he will flee'.

The word 'resist' (*anthistemi*) comes from the root to *stand*. It means to make a stand against something or someone. James is not so much talking about resisting temptations; he is calling for a new resolve to live in opposition to the ways of Satan.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 84.

9. In vv 11-12, how is slander an act of judgement against your neighbour?

To finish

10. (a) How do you grow in wisdom?

(b) Is it the same as growing in godliness? Why/why not?

(c) Do rules help you grow in wisdom? Why/why not?

Study 5, James 4:13-5:11, Wealth and Waiting

Getting started

1. What are you doing tomorrow?

Read James 4:13-15.

Bible

2. Read James 4:13-17.
Who needs to pay attention (v 13)?

No one in antiquity will have missed the relevance of these words. In a period of massive imperial expansion and increasingly easy travel (made possible by the famous Roman roads), the vast wealth of the Roman empire began to trickle down the social ladder and into the broader economy. The result was that, in the first century AD, materialism, decadence and financial corruption had become rife. Lucan, the Roman rhetorician and poet (and James' contemporary), wrote of Roman wealth: 'Fortune introduced excess of wealth, and morals collapsed before prosperity; the spoils of war encouraged extravagance ... public office was stolen through bribery' (Lucan 1.160ff). At about the time James wrote his epistle, millions of denarii a year (a denarius was a day's wages) was being spent by wealthy citizens on luxuries from India, China and Arabia—spices, jewelry, silk, perfume and so on.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 92.

3. From v 14 how is their behaviour inconsistent with the truth?
4. What should be their attitude the future?
5. Read James 5:1-6.
Who needs to pay attention (v 1)?

It is essential to recognise that James' style in this paragraph has much in common with a Jewish literary form known as the **prophetic lament**. Readers of modern media know full well how to interpret the various genres present in, say, our newspapers. We do not need a style-guide in order to recognise and interpret the editorial, the letters section, the cartoons, a satirical piece or the TV guide. The societies of biblical times had their own genres and the Bible itself contains examples of most of them: history, poetry, parable, aphorism, hymn, apocalyptic and epistle. One such ancient genre was the prophetic lament. Here, the prophet denounces an oppressor *not* as a warning to the one addressed but as a comfort to the oppressed (who overhear the denunciation). . . .

It is designed not as a warning to rich oppressors within the church (of which there were probably none) but as a comfort to the oppressed themselves (of which there were probably quite a few). The theme of divine judgment, then, as so often in the Bible, functions in this passage as a pledge to the wounded that God knows their pain and will one day bring the healing of his powerful justice. Wrongs will be righted; fortunes will be reversed.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson pp 95, 97.

6. Read James 5:7-11.
Who is addressed in vv 7 and 10.
7. How are they reacting to their situation?
8. What should their basic attitude be?
9. What examples does James give to illustrate this attitude?
10. What does the future hold for them?
11. How is the coming of the Lord related to patience and grumbling?

At its core, the theme of **God's judgement** is not simply a theological scare-tactic designed to make the non-religious more religious. Judgement is the pledge of the loving God to oppressed humanity that he hears their cry for justice and will one day bring his justice to bear on every act of tyranny.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 102.

To finish

12. Is there any “carry over” between this world and the next (see Matt 25:14-30)?

Study 6, James 5:12-20, Sin and Sickness

Getting started

1. Have you ever been to a healing service? What was it like?

Bible

2. Read James 5:12.

By James' day an elaborate system of **oath-swearing** had developed in which truthfulness could be graded according to the type of oath given. Swearing by Jerusalem or by the temple, for instance, was regarded as a *non-binding* oath. On the other hand, swearing by the gold of the temple or by some of the utensils used in the temple was considered fully binding. Other oaths involved swearing by 'heaven' or by 'earth', as James indicates here. . . .

The result of this system was that low level oaths, such as ones invoking Jerusalem, could be used to avoid telling the truth. It is in this context that Jesus rejected the first century oath-system entirely, claiming in Matthew 5:37 that it had its origins in the 'devil', the father of lies. James reaffirms his brother's teaching knowing full well that many in his audience had been raised with the Jewish rules governing oaths. All that is permitted for believers, says James (following Jesus), is a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson pp 105-106.

3. Read James 5:13-20.

From v 13 (a) What is the appropriate response in trouble?

(b) What is the appropriate response in happiness?

(c) What makes both these responses difficult?

4. Read James 5:14.

Has you ever done this? Why/why not?

5. What odd things do you notice in v 14?

6. Read James 5:15.

(a) What do you think is "the prayer offered in faith" (see James 2:14-20)?

(b) The second half of v 15 is about sin and forgiveness. Is James suggesting a connection between sin and sickness? If so, what is the connection (see Mark 2:5, John 5:14, 9:1-3, 1 Cor 11:27-32)?

How are **sin and healing** connected in this passage? While many ancient cultures frequently connected sickness with wrongdoing, the Bible does not share this mechanistic, karmic view of reality. Indeed, the Old Testament Book of Job roundly rejects the common sin-sickness equation. Nevertheless, from a very different set of assumptions the Scriptures do teach that illness can on occasion be related to disobedience. For instance, when the wealthy Christians of Corinth turned the Lord's Supper into a drunken banquet from which the poor were excluded [1 Cor 11:29-30]. . . .

Flagrant disobedience of God, such as that in Corinth and amongst some in James' audience, *may* result in sickness. This will not be a karmic reaping of what one sows but God's fatherly discipline intended to humble the wayward believer. The 'if' of verse 15, then, is important. James is not saying that some people sin and others do not. He is rather saying that if the illness in question is a result of the sufferer's sin, the request for healing will function as an act of repentance and so will bring forgiveness. Quite unlike the pagan culture surrounding him, James does not *assume* that the sickness comes from sin; he simply regards it as a possibility, one which can be resolved through confession and prayer.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson pp 111-112.

7. Critically read the following paragraph:

Ah, you ask the burning question. How do I know if my sickness is a result of sin, and not just the general sickness of the world? This is a good question. The godly person who falls sick *will* ask first—is this a judgement on me? Sickness should be a cause for examining the conscience. When you find sin, and especially if you find particular unrepented sin, you should pray for forgiveness. If the sickness *was* a punishment for sin, James promises us you will be healed.

From The Implanted Word by Phillip D. Jensen and Kirsten Birkett p 56.

Can you see any problems with the ideas in the paragraph above?

8. Read James 5:16.

(a) How does the scene change with this verse?

(b) What sins could James be referring to (see earlier in James' letter)?

(c) In view of your answer to 7, how could we apply this teaching to our 21st century churches?

James emphasises in verse 16 that it is **the prayer of the 'righteous' person** that is powerful and effective (for healing). Frequently in the New Testament the term 'righteous' is an exclusively *theological* tag, describing those who are *in the right* with God purely on account of God's covenant grace (e.g. Rom 1:17; 5:19). Just as frequently, however, the Bible employs what you might call a *descriptive* usage of the term 'righteous'. Here, the word describes someone who devotedly (but not unfailingly) walks in the paths of God (Matthew 1:19; Luke 1:6; 2:25; 23:50; Acts 10:22; Titus 1:8; 1 Pet 3:12; 4:18; 1 John 3:7, 12). There is no suggestion here that the 'righteous' person is free from sin; the term simply describes the believer's commitment to God's ways. This, of course, includes repentance when one sins. This descriptive usage of 'righteous' is not separate from the theological usage. Within biblical logic, the person who has been declared right with God (through Christ) will (through the Spirit) walk in the ways of God. The point is: in James 5:16 the prayer which is 'powerful and effective', the one which is willingly heard by the Lord, is that offered by a person devoted to the paths of God. In this way, the prayer of the 'righteous' is virtually synonymous with the prayer 'offered in faith' (verse 15).

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson pp 112-113.

9. Read James 5:17-18.
What does Elijah have to do with sin/sickness/healing?

By Elijah's prayer, a drought came to Israel as God's punishment for Israel's sin. By his prayer again, rain came as a sign of Israel being restored to relationship with God. Elijah's ministry was precisely what James 5:19-20 speaks of—to bring back the sinful nation and cover a multitude of sins, thereby saving people.

From The Implanted Word by Phillip D. Jensen and Kirsten Birkett p 55.

James recalls a story from Elijah's life well known to his audience (1 Kings 17-18) and offers it as proof that a normal human being (as distinct from, say, an angelic being) can be involved in abnormal events in God's world. Ordinary people devoted to the path of the Almighty can witness extraordinary things when they pray. The reference to the breaking of a drought and the production of crops is apt for a discussion of healing, for it reminds us of God's ability to renew his creation, whether the dry earth or the frail human body.

From James – the wisdom of the brother of Jesus by John Dickson p 113.

10. Read James 5:19-20.
(a) What does it mean to “wander from the truth”?

(b) Which sins are bad enough that they constitute “wandering from the truth”?

To finish

11. (a) Where do you draw the line between “normal” sins which we all commit some of the time and sins that are bad enough that they constitute “wandering from the truth”?

(b) How do we bring someone back if he/she is “wandering from the truth”?