

The Epistle of James

James Gunn

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The Epistle of James --Part 1

The Epistle of James

Part 1

James Gunn

An Expository Study

In spite of our admiration for Martin Luther, we cannot agree with his remarks about the Epistle of James; he called it “an epistle of straw.” He also felt that there was a conflict between the Apostle Paul and James. Luther’s deliverance from the ignorance and bondage of Romanism resulted from his acceptance of the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith apart from works. Consequently, any suggestion of salvation by works to Luther was unbiblical. His understanding of the Epistle of James was very unfortunate; nevertheless, it indicates that there are difficult passages in these short chapters which demand spiritual and mental concentration.

James, like some of the prophets during Old Testament times, found most of his illustrations in nature. He wrote of winds, fire, water, fountains, ships, beasts, birds, trees, and even more complex matters in nature. James was more of a naturalist than he was a theologian.

While we may think of his epistle as the most Jewish of all in our New Testament, its major theme is practical, very practical Christianity. It should also be understood that James possessed a keen sense of rectitude and equity, and this led him to denounce any social injustice, especially as he detected this among Christians.

Today there are few chapters of the New Testament as neglected as the five chapters of the Epistle of James. May we in humility of heart and with reliance upon the Holy Spirit of God engage in an expository study of these neglected chapters.

James

Inasmuch as there were, in those early apostolic years, three men associated with the Lord Jesus who bore the name James, we must find out if possible which one of these wrote this epistle. There was James, the son of Zebedee (Matthew 10:2), and James, the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3). Both of these men were disciples of the Lord and their names appear in the lists of the Twelve. And, of course, there was "James, the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19).

James, the son of Zebedee, was beheaded by the wicked Herod Agrippa 1 quite early in the Church dispensation (Acts 12:1-3). James, the son of Alphaeus, must have been a shy, backward man. His name is not associated with any gospel event. He made very little impression upon the inspired narrative of the life of Christ. It is impossible to imagine that this James was the writer of such a forceful, authoritative epistle. These conclusions leave us no alternative but to accept James, the Lord's brother, as the author of this epistle.

Let us trace some of the history of this man. He is mentioned along with his brothers and sisters in Matthew 13:55-56. When the Lord Jesus was teaching in a synagogue near His home, questions were asked: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brethren James and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?"

Here are definitely mentioned all the members of the family with the exception of Joseph, Mary's husband. Mary probably had been widowed before this event.

At the Feast of Tabernacles a few months before the death of our Lord, we read, "Neither did His brethren believe on Him" (John 7:5). It seems incredible that those who had been born of the same mother and raised in the same home did not discern in Him the true Messiah of Israel, the Saviour of the world.

Calvary must have been a lonely place for Mary. None of her children were with her; none of the boys, none of the girls. What a divided family! Poor Mary! In that dark hour she was abandoned by all her own. No wonder the Lord entrusted her to John, His cousin by nature.

The next scene in which the "Holy Family" plays a part is found in Acts 1:14. After the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, the saints were gathered in an upper room, and we read, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren." What a change has been effected in the hearts of Mary's children! All are now around their mother. What a comfort to her the presence and intimacy of her own must have been!

Is it possible for us to discover what accomplished this great change? Perhaps the answer is to be found in 1 Corinthians 15:7. In seeking to establish the fact of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul says, "After that, He was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all He was seen of me also, as one born out of due time."

James, through the unveiling of the risen and triumphant Christ, was completely, transformed, and

apparently through him all the other members of the family. Henceforth, James was probably the greatest leader of the early Church in Jerusalem.

As we see James through Paul's eyes (Galatians 2:9-16), and hear him speak at the Church Counsel at Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21), and notice the superior place he occupies among the elders of the Jewish Church, it is not at all difficult to believe that we have found the author of the Epistle of James.

The Time of Writing

According to the point of time indicated in Acts 11:27-30, it would appear that the Church in Antioch was formed some fourteen years after Pentecost. It was during this time that the gospel spread from the Hebrew world to the Hellenistic world and finally to the Gentile world. The predominantly Gentile Church formed in Antioch of Syria eventually became the center of world-wide missionary effort.

During these fourteen years the Christians were mostly Jewish in origin, from the twelve tribes in the land. They still attended the synagogue and temple (Acts 3:1-11; 9:20; 13:5; 14:1-17; 17:10; etc.) and held Jewish ritual in high regard (Acts 21:17-26). All this was so evident to the Gentile authorities that they considered Christianity as a new sect of Judaism. There was not then the complete severance of Christianity from Judaism that became very obvious later on. The content of the Epistle of James indicates that the Lord's brother, actually half-brother, wrote his message to the people of God living during this transitory period. When this setting of the Epistle of James is taken into consideration, its contents become much more understandable.

The Recipients

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1). Obviously, James did not consider any of the tribes of Israel as lost. He apparently considered the Jews of his day as representing all Israel.

Jeremiah wrote in such a manner as to manifest that in the restoration of God’s people from the seventy years’ captivity in Babylon, the northern kingdom, as well as the southern kingdom of Judah, would be returned to the Land of Promise (Jeremiah 29:10; 3-31). It was such statements in Jeremiah’s prophecy that convinced Daniel that the seventy years of divine discipline were at an end (Daniel 9:2). In his intercession Daniel included all Israel that were near and that were afar off (Daniel 9:7).

The contingent that returned with Ezra from the captivity was not only made up of the men from Judah and Benjamin but also from Levi, priests and Levites. In the long list of those who returned, some from Bethel and Ai (Ezra 2:28) — cities of the northern kingdom — are enrolled. At the time of the great revival in the days of Hezekiah, people came from the northern tribes in large numbers and many of them remained with Judah (2 Chronicles 30-31). Asher was known as a separate tribe in New Testament times (Luke 2:36-38). James assumed that many from all the tribes of Israel had accepted Christ as Messiah and Saviour as he addressed himself to them.

An Analysis

The message of James is not presented in a systematic structure. In these chapters there is no lengthy argumentation, as you find in the writings of the Apostle Paul. The many parts of the epistle are not linked together with adverbs such as “furthermore,” “nevertheless,” etc. James does not develop a subject from its simplest form to its most complex; rather, he writes briefly on many different themes and subjects. This he does in a treachent, concise manner. Consequently, his work cannot be readily analysed as, for example, most of the writings of the apostle to the uncircumcision. Notwithstanding, here is an outline of the contents of the Epistle of James which may prove helpful to some.

Chapter One

1. 1. Comfort for the tried and tempted (vv. 1-15)
2. The nature of God (vv. 16-17)
3. The Word of God (vv. 18-27)

Chapter Two

1. Partiality and Prejudice (vv. 1-13)
2. Faith and Works (vv. 14-26)

Chapter Three

1. The nobility of the tongue and the indictment against the tongue (vv. 1-12)
2. Wisdom and Peace (vv. 13-18)

Chapter Four

1. Selfishness and Conflict (vv. 1-12)
2. The Brevity of Life and the Will of God (vv. 13-17)

Chapter Five

1. Divine Retribution and Divine Recompence (vv. 1-7)
2. The Example of Job and the Exercise of the Christian (Vv. 8-9)
3. Prayer and Spiritual Prosperity (vv. 10-20)

The Epistle of James --Part 2

The Epistle of James

Part 2

James Gunn

An Expository Study

Comfort for the Tried and Tempted (1:1-15)

There are only two direct references to the Lord Jesus in this Epistle, but they reveal the very high esteem in which James held the Lord.

First, it is noticeable that James refers to the Lord Jesus with His full name and title: "The Lord Jesus Christ." James recognized that Christ was Sovereign, Saviour and Messiah-King. Perhaps there is here a rebuke of the very informal way we speak of the Lord at times.

James also implied that there is essential equality between the Father and the Son. He speaks of being a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He thus honors and serves the Son even as he honors and serves the Father (John 5:23).

The appellation "servant," by which James describes himself, means "a bond slave," a voluntary bond slave. The Apostle Paul may speak of him as "the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19), but James himself in humility and submission considers that he is only a "bond slave," a voluntary bond slave of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The second direct reference that James makes to the Lord is found in chapter two, verse one. There he speaks of our all-glorious Lord. By leaving out the italics, we

read the true meaning of his statement: "Have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory, with respect of persons." What a change in the heart of the author! At the Feast of Tabernacles before the crucifixion, we read, "Neither did His brethren believe on Him" (John 7:5). Now, probably years later, James cannot extol the Lord too much. To his description, we might say, "Amen, and Amen." Perhaps the recollections of his former unbelief impelled him to elevate the Lord Jesus to the highest possible place while he himself took the lowest. What an example for all to follow!

Divers Temptations

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations."

It would seem necessary in order to understand this introductory paragraph properly that we, first of all, ascertain what is meant by the word "temptation" as it is used in verse two and also in verses 13 and 14. In Genesis 22:1, we read "that God did tempt Abraham." Here in this paragraph, James says, "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man." We must therefore discover the meaning of both the verb and noun forms of this word, "Temptation."

From the Dictionary of New Testament Words we learn that actually this word has a double meaning. First, it means to try, to test, to assay, and to prove. Without doubt this is the meaning in which it is used in verses two and three. Christians are tested or assayed by many different trials ("divers temptations"). This is the sense in which the word is used in Exodus 15:25, where it is translated "prove." "There He (God) made for them

(Israel) a statute and an ordinance, and there He proved them" (KJV).

In verses 13-14, James is not speaking of a test applied from the exterior; he is speaking of an inducement to do evil which, of course, arises within. It is an enticement arising in wicked and sinful appetites. As James himself says, "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (v. 14).

Brethren in Christ

It is interesting to notice how James addresses his readers: "My brethren." How one of the older commentators can only see in this an address to his Jewish compatriots is very disappointing. There is no doubt, as has already been intimated, that James was writing primarily to Jews, most of whom were Hellenists for they were of the Dispersion. Nevertheless, the connotation of this entire epistle leads to the conclusion that the author was addressing Christian Jews, persons who had an active faith in the One who justifies (2:13-26). Could any appeal be more Christian than the verse we have been looking at: "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons" (2:1)?

Although James, from the biblical description of him, was inclined to be somewhat austere, he appreciated the spiritual and eternal relationship that existed among the people of God. He used the appellation "brethren" some fifteen times in this short epistle, and on a few occasions he used "beloved brethren." Once he used the appellation "sister." James rejoiced in this as did the Apostle Paul who wrote, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the

saints, and of the household (family) of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

James looked upon all his brethren in Christ as being tested by the Lord through many different circumstances. The original word says that the brethren “fall” into temptation. The verb “to fall” implies that these tests of faith and character completely surround the individual believer, and, of course, they came quite unexpected. Believers, James exhorts, are to rejoice when suddenly they find themselves surrounded by diversified trials.

There seems to be a play upon a word here. James says, “To the twelve tribes scattered abroad, greeting.” To send such greeting is to wish those to whom you send your letter all joy. In every circumstance they are to rejoice in the Lord. Now he writes, “Count it all joy.” Joy in every circumstance may be, and should be, the experience of the believer in Christ. This joy does not arise in circumstances but in the Lord. Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians covers the whole matter, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).

Spiritual Development

James is not only concerned about an emotional response in trials and testings; he is anxious that the tried one mature in Christian experience. Probably out of some personal experience, he writes, “Knowing this, that the trying (the testing) of faith worketh patience. There certainly is no disagreement here between Paul and James. Paul wrote to the saints at Rome, “We glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh

patience" (Romans 5:3); that is, endurance without complaining results from severe testing and tribulation.

The trial of faith worketh out, accomplisheth, patience. Here we have a similar idea as that expressed in Philippians 2:12, where Paul exhorts the believers saying, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." There is something to be achieved in spiritual life. In a more modern manner we might write that the testing of faith achieves power in a steady and firm endurance, and such endurance eventually accomplishes maturity. Here James pictures the believer as perfect, having received a complete allotment of all that he needs. There is an intimation here of a Christian who lacks nothing, but let us examine carefully the next paragraph.

A Frequent Deficiency

"That ye may be perfect and entire, wanting (Lacking) nothing. If any of you lack (are wanting in) wisdom, let him ask of God."

It is while trying to achieve spiritual maturity that we become conscious of the graces and virtues we lack. Such awareness should drive us to our knees in prayer. Wisdom, so it has been said, is mental excellence in its highest and fullest sense. This is unconditionally distributed by the Lord among all who make request of Him.

It is impossible to read these words of James without thinking of Solomon and his request: "O Lord my God... Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people ... that I may discern between good and bad... And God said unto him, Because thou hast

asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life, neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies, but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment... I have given thee a wise and understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:7-12).

The Proverbs of Solomon are full of wisdom. They form one of the proofs of God's grace in giving liberally, and upbraiding not. Although Solomon received so generously, the divine source is not in anywise depleted.

The Lord encourages His people to make specific petitions to Him. When they come He does not reproach them. In thus getting to know God through His blessed Word, we should exercise in Him implicit confidence.

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

James not only calls for a positive confidence in God, but he warns the believer against any hesitation. Dr. Alford quotes an excellent illustration of the man who wavers or "staggers" (as in the R.V.): "Sometimes he is cast on the shore of faith and hope, sometimes he is rolled back into the depth of distrust; now he is borne up into the height of worldly pride; now he is mingled with the lowest sands of desperation and trouble." Let not such an one think that God will grant him what he may ask. He is too much like a man with two minds; he is unstable, unreliable.

The Poor and the Rich

James here introduces the extremes of social affluence, the poor and the rich. It seems obvious that both are brethren in Christ. The Christian with little material

wealth is to rejoice, for in Christ he has been exalted, and in Christ God has given him richly to enjoy all things (1 Timothy 6:17).

The rich brother is to rejoice for the grace given him to humble himself under the mighty hand of God. This is the preliminary step to promotion from the Lord.

How vividly James describes human beauty, health and success. Man may boast in these, but at their best they are like the grass; they develop, flower, wither, fall and perish. Such is humanity.

James now sums up what he has said about all the poor and rich among the people of God. Furthermore, he pronounces a blessing upon all who have endured the testing permitted by the Lord and have won His approval. There is no joy in succumbing to trial or in escaping from trial. There is a stephanos crown of life promised to all approved by trial.

Beloved Brethren

James 1:13-27

It must have been an encouragement to the saints of the dispersion to know that they were beloved brethren to James. While centuries separate us from those early scenes, for we are now near the end of the dispensation, the end of the Church era, we claim a place not in the heart of an apostle but in the heart of God. We are sure that we are beloved of Him. We too may enjoy the benediction of the Apostle Paul: "To all that are ... beloved of God, called saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7).

May there be a definite response on our part; may we love Him who first loved us.

Beloved Brethren Err Not (vv. 13-16)

The words of James, "Do not err, my beloved brethren," might better be rendered, "Do not be deceived."

Whether this word of caution belongs to the statement which precedes it, or to the material which follows, may be debatable, but undoubtedly no harm will be done if it were considered in connection with both. We should not be deceived about God, neither His holiness or His benevolence.

Are we correct in assuming from verse 13 that there were some in those early days who blamed God for tempting them to do evil? The idea of temptation in verses 13 to 15 is altogether different to that which is in verses 2 to 8. There we saw that it meant to prove, to test. Here it means to be induced to do wrong. It really means to entice to sin.

Certain ancient pagans believed that God created man with two spirits, one spirit to do good and another spirit to do evil. Man, therefore, was constantly in distress as he was torn between these. That ancient philosophy taught that God created evil and the desire to do evil, as well as good and the desire to do good. How contrary to Scripture such reasoning is! God created man in innocence and with a free will. The wrong use of His will brought sin and ruin upon himself and all his progeny. The Word of God is clear and plain, "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man." Temptation arises within man: "Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed." Notwithstanding, Satan does exercise an influence. He

is called the tempter (Matthew 4:3). He sought to entice the Lord Jesus. Every effort he attempted against the Lord was rebuffed. These Satanic attacks demonstrated the excellencies of the Lord Jesus in His perfect humanity.

The Apostle Paul was much concerned about his children in the faith. He wrote to the Thessalonians: "For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labor been in vain" (1 Thessalonians 3:5). He wrote sincerely to the Corinthians: "I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

We who belong to the Lord should note well what the Word of God has to say concerning our tendency to do evil and the great external power that would through sinful impulses attempt our spiritual ruin. Down through the centuries comes the warning, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren."

The Epistle of James --Part 3

The Epistle of James

Part 3

James Gunn

Wherefore My Beloved Brethren... Be Swift to Hear (vv. 17-20)

The Lord does not tempt, but in the very opposite attitude He manifests His benevolence.

The Spirit of God here gives a remarkable moral portrait of our heavenly Father:

1. He is "the Father of lights." God is the paternal source of all light. He is the Creator of the heavenly illuminators: "God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: He made the stars also" (Genesis 1:16).

"God," remarks Bishop Wordsworth, "is the Father of all lights—the light of the natural world the sun, the moon and the stars shining in the heavens; the light of reason and conscience; the light of His Law; the light of prophecy shining in a dark place; the light of the gospel shining throughout the world; the light of apostles, confessors, martyrs,... preaching the gospel to all nations; the light of the Holy Spirit shining in our hearts; the light of the heavenly city; God is Father of them all. He is the everlasting Father of the everlasting Son, who is the light of the world."

"With Him is no variableness": Both the sun and the moon are variable, according to their position in the heavens and the condition of the atmosphere. The

strength and the influence of these great lights change, but Jehovah knows no change. There is no variation in the person of God nor in His attributes.

Here the Spirit of God puts even greater emphasis upon the immutability of God. In Him there is no shadow cast by turning. James here uses an astronomical idea, a parallax. Heavenly bodies to man on earth seem to change. The sun and the moon eclipse one another, but they do not change their position. Man's position is constantly changing as the earth revolves. "God is alike incapable of change in His own nature and incapable of being changed by the action of others" (Mayor).

What a heavenly Father we have! Mighty in His creation and ever changeless in Himself.

We are now given to understand the relationship of the divine family. The Lord has begotten us again according to His own will and by His own instrument, the Word of Truth. As the old creation was brought into existence by the Word of God (John 1:3-10), even so, is the new creation. We are born again, "not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever" (1 Peter 1:23).

Furthermore, the new birth results in our being as firstfruits to God. In Israel all firstborn of man and of beast were to be wholly for God. Under the Law Israel had to "set apart unto the Lord all that openeth the matrix, and every firstling that cometh of a beast which thou hest, the males shall be the Lord's. And every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; and if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break his neck; and all firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem" (Exodus 13:12-13).

Every believer, as a firstborn one who is written in heaven (Hebrews 12:13), should dedicate all his personality, time, wealth, etc. to God. All are the firstfruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23).

To the casual reader verse 19 may seem to have little or no connection with the assertions regarding the new birth, but most will understand its relationship to “the Word of Truth.” If we have been saved by the power of the divine Word, we certainly should be ready to hear. If we initially received life through the power of the Word of God, we should know that the out-living of that life depends upon the self-same Word. We should be attentive to hear, and to hear in silence. Calvin said, “No one can be a true disciple of God, except he hear Him in silence.”

“The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God”. In this there is a great contrast between God and man. Through the indwelling Spirit God imparts to His own the strength to reproduce the practical righteousness that God demands (Romans 8:4). May we learn to walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

There may be times when we feel like Jonah, “I do well to be angry” (Jonah 4:9). We may even call our anger “righteous indignation.” Even when we feel justified in our wrath, we need to remember the exhortation, “Be ye angry and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath” (Ephesians 4:26).

All anger is not sin, for the Lord Jesus manifested this strong emotion (Mark 3:5). He was angry because of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Yet we need to realize that anger is a dangerous and harmful attitude which does not result in the righteousness of God.

The Spirit of God pursues the contention that the Word of God has a real bearing upon the life of the child of God. He presents here a picture taken from the activities of daily life. He exhorts that all must lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness. The believer is to strip himself of the deeds of the old man. In writing to the Colossians the Apostle Paul reminds them that they had put off the old man (Colossians 3:9); that is, that they had broken relationship with the old Adamic nature. He, therefore, exhorts that now they are to put off the deeds and tendencies of the old nature: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, etc. (Colossians 3:8).

The believer has entered into an entirely new life; therefore, he no longer is to appear as he once did, but to strip off these things, as a soiled and undesirable garment. Filthiness is, of course, dirt in its worse form and the superfluity of naughtiness indicates the excess of malice and evil intentions that may be in the heart against others. This action is to prepare the Christian to receive with humility the implanted Word.

It seems more understandable to speak of the implanted Word rather than the engrafted Word. The inspired Word is planted in the heart by the divine Spirit. It is deeply rooted as seed that will germinate and develop.

The implanted Word may not only reach and save the unregenerate, but it is the constant means of deliverance for the Christian from the traps and gins that in his pathway are set by Satan.

The Word of God (vv. 21-25).

Even a cursory survey of the Epistle of James reveals that the author was a very practical person. We are not

only to receive the Word of God and let it be deeply rooted in our personalities, but we ourselves are to be doers of that very Word. It is possible to be self-deceived and to place more importance upon the hearing than upon the doing. Christianity is very practical; it demands a reflection of its purity and power in the life of the child of God.

There are many similes of the Word of God in the Bible, each one emphasizing some feature of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is as a fire and a hammer, for it has power to crush (Jeremiah 23:29). As a sword it possesses a mighty defence (Ephesians 6:17). As incorruptible seed, it possesses life (1 Peter 1:23). For our guidance it is as a lamp (Psalm 119: 105). It is sweet like honey and like milk it nourishes (Ezekiel 1:1-3; 1 Peter 2:1). Moreover, the Word of God is likened to a mirror into which we may look.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we are told that through this divine mirror we see the perfections and the glory of the Lord Jesus, and the more we look at that reflection of His beauty, the more we become like Him.

In contrast, James tells us that through the same mirror we may see our own imperfections. A passing glance may reveal the need of cleansing, but it may result in negligence (vv. 23-24). A more intensive look with obedience results in a blessing upon such a person (w. 25).

In the mirror of the Word we see what we are, the imparted preciousness of Christ as well as all the moral deficiencies. In the same mirror we see the glories of the Risen Christ, the image which the Lord would have us share, as His influence changes us from glory to glory.

Pure Religion (vv. 26-27).

James had exhorted all men to be swift to hear and slow to speak (19). He had expanded this element in his word of caution, "be swift to hear," to hear the Word of God particularly. Now he would attempt to restrain that unruly member, the tongue. He will have more to say about this later, but here he would curb all religious talk and pride. Obviously, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

These words of admonition are not for the hypocrite but for the self-deceived. Conformity to outward services and church formalities is not necessarily the indication of deep spirituality. One has written, "A better sign of true religion is gentleness of the tongue."

Pure religion is benevolent, it considers the loneliness and the material needs of fatherless children and the anxiety and poverty of widows. Pure religion seeks to understand those in affliction. With an understanding of these, the truly religious man is positive; he becomes a doer of the Word.

Another proof of a truly religious man may seem negative; it is a refraining to become involved in the godlessness and gracelessness of the world. A spiritual person seeks to live blamelessly before God. He realizes that God is constantly appraising the behavior of His children. The Apostle Peter writes, "If ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear," that is, reverential fear. (1 Peter 1:17).

to be continued

The Epistle of James --Part 4

The Epistle of James

Part 4

James Gunn

An Expository Study

Pure Religion James 1:27-2:26

Pure religion is genuine, active Christianity. It is the practical expression of the life implanted within the soul by the divine spirit. Through philanthropy and other activities it sacrifices itself and whatever it may possess. It lives and serves for the benefit of others.

Furthermore, this same pure religion, while being very active, keeps itself sanctified, completely apart from the pollution that is in this world.

James says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

The author of this epistle had a very keen appreciation of the oneness of the Body of Christ. He not only recognized, but apparently enjoyed the intimate and indissoluble relationship that each believer bears to all others believers. The Apostle Paul has stated this so clearly, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19).

This chapter divides itself into two parts: the first deals with the believer's attitude toward the Word of God, and the value of "faith" and "works."

A true expression of the wonderful life that the believer has received is sincere, transparent and unclouded by either partiality or prejudice. To illustrate this point James makes reference to visitors who had come to the assembly at Jerusalem.

The word assembly in verse two is literally "synagogue." This helps to date the epistle; the Church was still in a transitional period. There had not yet been a complete severance of the Christians from Judaism; that eventually did develop. The world in those early years looked upon Christianity as a Jewish sect.

It would be quite wrong for us to assume that these visitors to the assembly were all Christians. According to the context here, they would appear to be the very opposite. Irrespective of what their status might be, the attitude toward them should have been without respect of persons. In writing to Timothy, Paul forcefully charged, "That thou observe these things without preferring one before another, do nothing by partiality" (1 Timothy 5:21).

In his illustration the rich man pictured by James must have been in reality a man of the world. The evidence of his affluence is seen in the manner of his dress, and the poise with which he moved indicated that he claimed certain privileges.

The poor man not only had no material wealth, but only for a moment he stepped out of obscurity. Humanity being what it is, it is natural to differentiate against the poor and treat with favour the rich. Our attitude in

public might quite easily betray our spiritual condition. The Apostle Paul wrote to Corinth, "He that is spiritual judgeth (discerneth) all things" (1 Corinthians 2:15), but a little later he had to charge the whole assembly, saying, "Are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Corinthians 3:3).

One is here reminded of the words of the Lord Jesus, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23). Materialism is a definite obstruction in the pathway of salvation and faith.

Both men, rich and poor alike, should have been made equally welcome; both probably needed God's salvation. If both eventually were saved they would enjoy an equal relationship to all the people of God. In Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ" (Galatians 3:28).

While we have seen that James only mentions his illustrious half—brother twice, nevertheless, he made three or four allusions to Him throughout the epistle. There is a very significant allusion in chapter 2:7: "Do not they (men of the world) blaspheme that worthy name by which ye are called." In the allusion there is a delicate reference to the noble name, Christ.

Jacob, when about to die, asked for the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, that he might bless them. To Joseph, Jacob said, "As Rueben and Simeon, they shall be mine" (Genesis 48:5). With his hands on the heads of the two boys, he said, "Let my name be named on them" (Genesis 48:16). They were now Jacob's in a very real sense. In like manner, the name of Christ has been called upon the Christian.

Men of the world might bring slander upon the honourable name that is called upon each believer, but it is his duty to extol that wonderful name. The fact that the believer is called Christian indicates that he belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the opening of the epistle (1:1), James acknowledges the supreme lordship of the One with whom he had been raised, the One whose lordship he had denied. Now thoroughly converted, he asserts that he is a voluntary bondsman of that same Lord Jesus Christ.

In his second reference to his divine brother (2:1), James speaks of Him as the “Lord Jesus Christ of glory.” He assures us that his faith, his confidence, was firmly anchored in that blessed One, James implied that the spiritual relationship to Christ was more important than any human relationship which he might bear.

Faith and Works James 2:10-26

In his exposition of the Word of God, James uses the appellation “law.” He thereby intimates his complete submission to the authority of the Word of God, and his belief in the divine oneness of the Old Testament Scriptures. We noticed in chapter 1:25 that he speaks of the “Perfect Law of Liberty.” What strange paradoxical language — “liberty” and “law.” Are these not contradictory terms? In this context they are not. Christian liberty both then and now is controlled liberty. The freedom that we have in Christ is not a licence to act in self-will (1 Corinthians 10:23); it is perfect liberty to fulfill the will of God in our daily lives.

Another unusual term used by James in this connection is “The Royal Law” (2:8). This regal term may suggest,

first of all, the source of this “Law,” the Word of God, and, secondly, final object. It was written by the King eternal, immortal, incorruptible, invisible, the only wise God” (1 Timothy 1:17), for those who by the redemptive work of Christ have been made “unto our God kings and priests” (Revelation 5:10). May we also regard the Word of God as did James: regal, authoritative and important. May in our hearts there ever be a prompt obedience to its many precepts.

At the beginning of his statement regarding partiality and prejudice, James demonstrates how inappropriate such an attitude is in our relationship to the Lord Jesus, the anchorage of our faith. It is absolutely incongruous with the perfections of His divine character: “My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (James 2:1, RSV). Now at the end of his statement, he says, “If ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.”

This reference to the law by James does not surprise us; to him the law was the inerrant Word of God. It merited a proper, prompt and humble response on the part of all Christians; anything otherwise is sin. What an excellent illustration this provides of submission to the entire Word of God: “He that keepeth the whole law, and yet offends in one point, he is guilty of all.” Such carelessness will result in appropriate chastisement. As the breaking of one link in a chain may render the chain useless, even so the violation of but one precept of the Word of God may minimize the power of God in our lives. Such disregard for the will of God may result in severe consequences. With man one sin may appear a small aggravation in contrast to several, but whether

one or many, all are an offence to God. Only sincere and frank confession before God can assure the believer of divine forgiveness and restoration to fellowship with the Lord (1 John 1:9).

The moral law, according to James, was a perfect standard of behaviour. While it never was a means of salvation nor the power of sanctification, it does provide a rule of conduct. Nine of the ten commandments of the decalogue are repeated in the epistles of the New Testament and are applied by the Holy Spirit to believers.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the true character of faith, the faith that saves (2:14).

Unfortunately, many follow the thinking of Luther. The great Reformer saw only a contrast between “faith” and “works.” It did not occur to him that works in the Epistle of James could be the complement of faith in the Epistle to the Romans. Luther thought only of a conflict between Paul and James. This could not possibly be. Paul was not even a Christian at the time James wrote his epistle. There is no conflict among the men who were inspired to write for us the Holy Scriptures.

Some following Luther argue that Paul wrote of justification by faith before God; whereas, James wrote of justification by works before men. A thoughtful examination of the works of the two Old Testament characters used by James as illustrations will reveal how incorrect such a deduction is.

Take Abraham for instance. Was the offering up of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22) before God or man? How could he possibly be justified before men? There were no men present. Abraham had said to the

young men, "Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder and worship."

Abraham renamed Mount Moriah to agree with the whole circumstance of his act of worship, "Jehovah Jireh," the Lord will see and provide. Only God saw the worshipful act of his friend Abraham, and only the Lord made a response. Men had absolutely no part in this divine test upon the patriarch.

"Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she received the messengers, and sent them out another way?" Poor Rahab was not justified before men by her effort, she was condemned before men. She risked her life to help the spies, and told lies to shelter them and herself. As far as the red cord that hung in her window was concerned, it could not have been seen by the inhabitants of Jericho; it faced the opposite direction in order to be seen by the invading army. She knew that she and her family were safe; her faith was anchored in the promises of the two messengers from Joshua.

"Faith" and "works" suggest faith in action, or as it is sometimes called, "operative faith." Faith that is latent and dormant is useless, it accomplishes nothing. True operative faith reaches out to its object, it thus becomes active: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

There is a mere intellectual faith. We read, "The devils believe and tremble" but, of course, they do not trust. Real faith is a movement of trust going out to, and laying hold of, the object of its confidence. This is well illustrated by the case of Moses as he led Israel in the wilderness of Sin to the bed rock. In compliance with the

word of God, in faith Moses smote the rock, and the Lord fulfilled His promise and gave the water (Exodus 17).

The Epistle of James --Part 5

The Epistle of James

Part 5

James Gunn

Scripture Reading: James 3:1-18

James claims in verse one to be a teacher (master). He therefore intimates that he understands the responsibility of such an important service among the people of God. He herein warns any who would assume to such ministry, for in any failure in the performance, the judgment will be severe. James does not state whether the condemnation is from God or man. Any fault in teaching will usually provoke human censure. Furthermore, teaching that is not Scriptural, according to the Word of God, may prove harmful. Any deviation may suffer the condemnation of the Lord.

It appears as if Hymenaeus and Alexander were assuming to be teachers. Their digression from the truth resulted in very stern censure and discipline by the Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:20).

No one should presume upon the grace and kindness of the Lord and attempt to serve in a sphere for which he has not been equipped and called.

Through His triumph on the cross, when the Lord led captivity captive (The captivity in which Satan held us before Calvary) has been broken and we have been released. Satan is now in captivity. See Judges 5:12 and Psalm 68. He, the Lord Jesus, gave gifts unto men: "Some apostles; and some prophets; and some pastors

and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). The two gifts “pastors and teachers” as they appear in the text imply that one individual may receive more than one gift. According to Romans 12:7, the gift of teaching may be received alone, separate from any other.

The Tongue

James directs attention to the instrument used by teachers in communicating knowledge. This instrument is used, generally speaking, by all humanity. All should, therefore, give heed to the striking similes used to reveal the activities of the tongue. These similes certainly insist upon the rigid control of the tongue.

These similes are seven in number: the horse, the ship, the fire, beasts, an unruly evil, a fountain and trees. One or two of these similes denote that the tongue may be used with dignity and blessing. Take for example the horse and the ship. There is no animal as noble as the horse, and no object as stately as a sailing ship. Consequently we believe that the tongue is capable of using noble, charming, gracious and beneficial language.

How noble, how stately, President Abraham Lincoln appeared and sounded when after the civil war he delivered his memorable, eloquent address at Gettysburg. In like manner, men still talk of how Winston Churchill mobilized the English language to strengthen Britain and defeat Hitler. The tongue is capable of either impelling or compelling an audience to do good or evil.

Nothing, simply nothing, could be more gracious and beneficial than the proclamation of the gospel. The

Apostle Paul applies the words of Isaiah to this very ministry: "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things" (Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15).

From some of the other similes we understand that the tongue may be cruel, damaging and even destroying what is good and what is even excellent. How cautiously we approach the wild beast and the reptile. In fact, we keep them in heavy iron cages lest they harm us. Wolff in his exposition of the Epistle of James quotes Dr. Plummer as saying, "The tongue combines the ferocity of the tiger, the mockery of the ape with the subtlety and venom of the serpent."

We all realize that fire is a splendid servant, but a tyrant as a master. Isaiah asserts, "For wickedness burneth as the fire: it shall devour the briers and thorns, and shall kindle in the thickets of the forest, and they shall mount up like lifting up of the fire: no man shall spare his brother" (Isaiah 9:18).

James, the naturalist, would impose strict control upon the tongue. The child of God, a partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), left in this world as an ambassador (2 Corinthians 5:20), should control his speech so that "with one mind and one mouth he may glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6).

The fountain (spring) is a simile that should well be pondered: "So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh." Wolff says, "Such monstrosities do not exist in nature, but abound in the moral sphere." The remarks made by James indicate that the same tongue may speak bitterness, strife, lies or wisdom, knowledge and truth. He sums up the practical aspect of the believer's life by

implying not only the control of the tongue but the control of the whole life. "Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation (manner of living) his works with meekness of wisdom."

In speaking of control, the fiery, powerful horse needs a bit in its mouth and a bridle on its head; only then can its movements be controlled. Without these the will of the master may not be obeyed.

The pilot on the ship insists that the rudder be maintained in proper condition, otherwise the decisions of the captain cannot be executed through the control of the ship. "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man and able to bridle the whole body."

The Wisdom

James in all probability was still thinking of the teacher when he began to write about the need of special wisdom. He writes that a teacher among God's people should know how to curb his tongue and to use it in a noble, gracious, kindly manner; furthermore, the teacher must be blessed with heavenly wisdom. The Christian who is spiritually wise and endowed with knowledge will demonstrate these splendid qualities through his personal conduct. He will humbly engage in good works, and although satisfied with some achievement, he will remain in a meek and prudent attitude.

This spiritual wisdom stands in vivid contrast to carnal wisdom which is earthly, sensual and devilish. The wisdom that is developed here is called by the world sagacity, business shrewdness and diplomacy. This is all

natural. The Word of God says, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Jude speaks of men in their apostasy as "being sensual, having not the Spirit" (Jude 19). A third characteristic is added to this description—devilish. This seems to indicate the source of false wisdom. "Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field" (Genesis 3:1). Satan embodied himself in this once beautiful creature. He, Satan, brought the curse not only upon himself but upon the very form in which he appeared in Eden: "The condemnation of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6).

Spiritual wisdom is from above (from Heaven). Its true source is our Lord Jesus "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3).

The heavenly wisdom is "pure." The word pure used here is "chaste." It means that which is undefiled, non-contaminated. Furthermore, it is "peaceable." This probably denotes that such wonderful qualities are not only non-quarrelsome in themselves, but that they attempt to establish peace. One of the beatitudes reads, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9). Our Lord Jesus, of course, is the divine example. He made peace (Ephesians 2:15-17).

The unusual attitude denoted in the word "gentle" might be that of moderation. Today men and women are demanding their rights in many spheres of life; the gentle person is conscious of his rights but is moderate in any claims that he might make: "Let your moderation be known unto all men; the Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:5).

The idea behind the statement, “and easy to be intreated,” suggests that the spiritually wise man may change his mind. He may be convinced of what is inferior and may readily accept Scriptural proofs of what is better. The Apostle Paul knew that there were men who were “unreasonable” (2 Thessalonians 3:2). They in their obstinacy rejected all evidence in order to maintain their own evil way. No manner of persuasion would change their stubborn hearts.

The final characteristic in this description is the very essence of Christian living: “Full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” The believer’s life should not be a barren desert; it should be a well cultivated garden in which the fruit of the Spirit grows: “Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23). The lives of the Corinthians were barren; they were carnal and walked as men (1 Corinthians 3:1-5). Partiality had wrought havoc among them in their church relationships. Some were partial to Paul, some to Apollos, and some to Peter (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). What a pity!

In Conclusion

May we with a strong urge by the divine Spirit, reject the so-called wisdom of men (1 Corinthians 2:6-7), and allow the wisdom which is from above to produce in us the excellent features of a true spiritual life.

The Epistle of James --Part 6

The Epistle of James

Part 6

James Gunn

Acknowledging the Will of God (4:13-17)

God is sovereign and works all things after the counsel of His own will (Eph. 1:11). Throughout the New Testament He has given an understanding of what might be called His general will for all His people. His specific will for the individual believer may be ascertained through the reading of His Holy Word, through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, through circumstances and through the peace of Christ which arbitrates in the heart (Col. 3:15).

The Christian is exhorted not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of his mind that he may know what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2). Notwithstanding the provision the Lord has made for His own, James, the Lord's brother, has to rebuke his fellow-Christians for their ignoring of the complete submission to their Heavenly Father's will. They ought to say, "If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (4:15), but many of them never do.

How easy it is to make plans. We prepare our schedule for tomorrow. We decide on a move to another city. In that new area we shall engage in merchandising, and there devise means for our success. How presumptuous we are! We forget the limitations of our own humanity.

We act and think as if we were infinite when there are continuous evidences of our fragility all around us.

Not only do we not know what shall be on the morrow, we also fail to consider how brief and frail our life here really is; it is most uncertain. Death could very quickly end or radically change it. The return of our Lord could quickly end our stay here.

When King Hezekiah received the message from God, "Set thine house in order for thou shalt die, and not live" (Isa. 38:1), he became suddenly impressed by the brevity of human life on earth. The similes he employs suggest the temporary nature of human life. He likened it to a shelter built to protect the shepherd from the hot rays of the sun; the branches and leaves of which would soon dry, wither and blow away.

Hezekiah also likens life to a bolt of cloth which, when it is finished, and nothing more is to be added, it is cut off from the loom, severed from the speedy movements of the shuttle: it is fully and finally ended.

"What is your life?" asks James. He then answers his own question: "It is even as a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." God spoke words of warning to his ancient people, saying, "Thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life" (Deut. 28:66). How exceedingly true!

To every personal plan or purpose we ought to add this proviso, "If the Lord will." The word "ought" which the translators have added to verse 15 in order to make it more readable actually expresses a duty; it intimates the rightness of adding this clause as a spiritual obligation. We must acknowledge that only if the Lord will we shall

be able to work and to accomplish our own proposals. Life and its expenditure is wholly according to the divine will, and this whether we realize it or not.

Proud man boasts in the schemes he arranges. In his own estimation they are superior. He lauds himself in his designs and organizations, as well as in his successes. James has already affirmed: "God resiteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble" (4:6).

Spurgeon said, "None have more pride than those who dream that they have none. You may labour against vainglory till you conceive that you are humble and the fond conceit of your humility will prove to be pride in full bloom."

The last verse of chapter four in all probability is a summary of all that James has been saying. Christians are to live humbly and in the will of God. They are not to speak evil one of another. They are not to judge one another. Consequently, they must ever remember that he that knoweth to do good but fails to so do, commits sin.

Unconsecrated Wealth (5:1-6)

It is not wrong to be wealthy. To possess material riches is not sinful. There are numerous wealthy persons mentioned in a commendatory way in the New Testament.

The saying that our Lord, although He died as a felon, He was buried as a king, is true only because of the intervention of two apparently rich secret disciples, a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph (Matt. 27:57-60) and Nicodemus, the Dean of the Rabbis in Jerusalem (John 19:38-42).

Barnabas, the Son of Consolation in the early church, was rich. True, he should not have acquired so much material wealth for he was a Levite (Deut. 18:1; Jos. 13:14). Nevertheless, in the New Testament his wealth is not condemned; in fact, it became a blessing in the church.

Philemon, to whom Paul sent a personal letter, apparently was an extraordinary Christian with material possessions. The church in the city of Colosse met in his hospitable home. Paul's address to Philemon is a lovely informal letter to a brother of some means who had a domestic and social problem. His slave had stolen from him and had run away. Such a problem would arise only where there was enough money to possess slaves. Again, the means possessed by Philemon are not condemned; much rather he is highly commended: "I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus" (Philm. 4-6).

The Apostle Paul instructs Timothy to "charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate" (1 Tim. 6:17-18). It has been frequently said, "It takes a steady hand to carry a full cup."

James apparently has in mind those to whom the Apostle Paul wrote his forceful warning: "They that will be rich

fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:9-10). James certainly indicates some of the evils of riches.

Greed is a grave evil: "Ye have heaped treasures together for (in) the last days (5:3). Covetousness is idolatry (Col. 3:5). The Lord detects when the heart has been diverted to other objects rather than to Himself. Such is fallen nature, it is never satisfied with what it possesses; it ever reaches out for more and more.

Fraud: In order to attain to more money, the heart becomes deceitful and dishonest. It takes what justly belongs to another. As Christians some fail to fulfil what might be expected from them by their employers.

The change in the preposition in verse three from "for" to "in," needless to say, is important. "In the last days" reveals the increased struggle between capital and labor at the close of this dispensation of the grace of God. "Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back, crieth." How very sad, when a child of God becomes involved in such disputes.

Oppression: The acquiring of wealth sometimes does result in the assuming of certain arbitrary powers. Occasionally the rich become intolerant, harsh and domineering. Let all such remember, "The cries of them which have reaped (that is without adequate payment) are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth." Who is the Lord of Sabaoth? This precious lofty title is the only one of the titles of Jehovah that passes from the Old Testament into the New. It occurs also in Romans 9:29.

This title, unlike so many of the titles of Jehovah, does not appear in the Pentateuch. We do not find it until the days of David. He used it quite frequently in his Psalms. When David went down into the valley to meet Goliath, he said to the giant, "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear and with a shield; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts (the Lord of Sabaoth), the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou has defied" (1 Sam. 17:45). Here we have a key to the significance of this title. God is ever the defender of His people. He is Sovereign over all celestial hosts, as well as over all the redeemed, and is ever ready to defend those that trust in Him.

The rich who arrogate power to themselves, and therewith oppress the poor, need to remind themselves that the Lord of Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts, hears and heeds the cry of distress arising from His own.

Luxury is a besetting sin among those with material possessions. They live in pleasure and affluence and frequently ignore the needs of some who are designated as "just" in their employment. These might even die from their lack of interest and support. The rich may gorge themselves and forget all others. All need to remember that the Lord of Sabaoth still lives.

Spurgeon might well be again quoted: "Oh, brethren, it is sickening work to think of your cushioned seats, your chants, your anthems, your choirs, your organs, your gowns, and your bands; I know not what besides, all made to be instruments of religious luxury, if not of pious dissipation, while we need far more to be stirred up and incited to holy ardor for the propagation of the truth as it is in Jesus."