

What Does the Bible Say About . . .?

February 25, 2008

The Epistle of James – part II

- I. Introduction
 - A. Announcements
 1. Open with prayer
 2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions helpful for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
 3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
 4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
 5. Need volunteers to read passages listed in **bold**.
 - B. Does anyone have any questions/topics for us to consider for next time?
- II. Review and Introduction
 - A. Last time we began our study of the New Testament book of *James* by looking at some background information and it's structure. (Please keep in front of you the outline we looked at last time.)
 1. Remember what we said about the structure of *James*, that it was like climbing a mountain, and the peak, at the center, is where the main point or theme can be found.
 2. **So to review, what is the main point we found last time in *James*? What does he want so very much for us to understand? (Control of the tongue, what we say.)**
 3. The book of *James* is a lot about always speaking as a Christian. But it's not only about our talk.
 - B. **Let's read James 3:1-12.**
 1. **What is it about our tongue/talk that is so significant? Why does James make this his most important point?** (Hint: v. 5 and v. 8)
 2. He's saying that controlling our tongues is one of the hardest things to do.
 3. Because of that, controlling our tongues is presented as a kind of ultimate test for our faith.
 4. **But what is it about our tongues/what we say that needs to be controlled? Is it simply that we should keep our mouths shut? Or is there something else about what we say that is the problem?** Look in this central passage for an answer. (Hint: vv. 9-10)
 5. There are also two brief illustrations in vv. 11-12. **How do they relate to the point about the tongue?** (Both make point about consistency.)
 6. What *James* wants us to focus on is to strive to have a faith that is consistent. God wants us to be more than "Sunday morning Christians."
 - C. Whenever we study the Bible, the repetition of a particular word or phrase in a passage of Scripture gives us insight into what is being emphasized. However, sometimes our

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English translations disguise the word that would have jumped out at the original Greek-fluent readers. That is the case here as one Greek word is translated in different ways in our English text.

1. The word we are looking for is *πειρασμος* (*peirasmos*: pay-ras-mos). It can be translated as “trial,” “temptation,” or “test.”
2. It is the same word we find in the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into *peirasmos*.” That’s why some English versions of the prayer say “lead us not into temptation” and others say “lead us not into the time of trial.”
3. **What do you see that connects the two English meanings?** (e.g., we are tested by temptations)
 - a. Think of the time when Jesus was in the wilderness being *tempted* by the devil. It was the same word *peirasmos* again.
 - b. Jesus was being both tempted and tested. It was a time of trial in both senses of the word. (Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11)

D. James uses this word (*peirasmos*) seven times in this introductory section.

1. We find it right away in the startling opening in 1:2. (More on this amazing claim later.)
2. **Do any of your Bible translations have our key word again in v. 3?** It’s actually not the same word in the original Greek, but it does carry the same idea. It means “that which tests;” it’s the act of testing rather than the test itself.
3. But *peirasmos* (in various forms) is back again a little further down. Look in v. 12, 13 (four times), and 14. **What do you find there? Which times seem more like “test” and which seems more like “temptation?”**

E. We will dig deeper into this in our next study, but for now we do want to notice the pattern of repetition of this key word. The repetition tells us what to look for as we read through *James*.

1. It sets up the structure of the whole book. Clearly, there is going to be a test!
2. In fact, there are a series of tests, and how we do on them indicates the consistency or inconsistency of our faith.
3. In *James*, God asks us to test our faith and to find where it is strong and where it is weak, where it is consistent and where it wavers.
4. God wants us to shore up our faith in the weak places and make it stronger, more mature, a **consistent** Christian faith.

III. Let’s back up now to take a deeper look at the first section of *James* and it’s reflection at the end. In our outline it will be sections A and A’: James 1:2-8 and James 5:7-20

A. This is the first test of the consistency of our faith.

1. Let’s divide ourselves into two groups, one taking chapter 1 and the other chapter 5. Then we will compare the passages.
2. (Each group works separately to answer following questions.)

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3. **What is the test or trial in each? What is the challenge to our faith?** (Focus for now on 7-12 in ch. 5) (Trials of various kinds. Adversity.)
 4. **What should our response be?** (In ch. 1 endure, be patient; in ch. 5: examples of patience, endurance) **Do you see the some of the connections between these passages?**
 5. (Groups rejoin.)
- B. Perhaps the hardest part of ch. 1 is being told to “consider it nothing but **joy**” (NRSV) when things are terrible.
1. It’s kind of a shocking thing to hear, isn’t it? But to be fair to James, Jesus said something very similar in the beatitudes. **Matthew 5:11-12**
 - a. Colossians 1:10-12a (endurance, patience, and joy)
 - b. Romans 12:12 (joy, patience, faith)
 2. **Have you ever known someone who was all smiles and apparent happiness while things were falling apart all around them? What did you think of that?**
 3. Neither James nor Jesus are telling us to put on a false front. There is a real difference between a pasted-on-smile kind of joy and an inner-calm kind of joy.
 4. The parallel passage in chapter 5 can give us some insight on this. Look at the example of the farmer in chapter 5:7.
 - a. **How do you think the farmer feels at harvest time?** (Joy if the crop is good!) Every culture in the world has some sort of celebration connected to harvest time. It’s a time of thankfulness and joy.
 - b. **But how about before then? What would you think of a farmer who was all smiles during a drought in July? Or celebrated during a locust swarm in August?**
 - c. **What kind of a response *would* you expect from the farmer then?**
 - d. Farmers don’t know how the year will turn out for the crops. **But what if the farmer did know—beyond any doubt—that there would be a great harvest in September no matter what? How would that farmer’s attitude during the summer drought or locusts be different?** (Not all smiles during hard summer events, but not panicked, calm, assurance.)
 - e. **What would have made the difference for our farmer’s attitude?** (Confidence in the final outcome) That is what we call faith.
 - f. “Faith,” it says in Hebrews 11:1, “is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.”
- C. Remember Jesus’ time of intense prayer at Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. **Mk 14:32-36** **How would you describe what Jesus was feeling then? Was it joy? Yet what was his conclusion?** (Your will be done.)
1. Admittedly, that doesn’t sound at all like joy, but read **Hebrews 12:1-2**. (“for the joy that was set before him”) This helps us to understand how Jesus managed to come to the conclusion he did back in Gethsemane.

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2. Unlike the farmers who don't know how things will turn out, Jesus did know. **How did that make a difference for him?** (Focused on future result)
 3. When Jesus said, "Thy will be done," it wasn't just hopeless resignation; it was recognizing the *joy* that was waiting for him just on the other side of the cross.
 4. That same focus can also make a difference for us. Let's look again in Hebrews at **Heb. 10:32-36** (joy in adversity)
 5. This is what it means in *James* to **consider** it nothing but joy. It is taking the longer view and remembering what is waiting for those who trust God.
 6. People with an inconsistent faith have attitudes that ebb and flow. As *James* says in 1:6, they are like waves tossed back and forth by the winds.
 - a. Are things going well? Then they have joy: "Jesus loves me and all is right with the world."
 - b. Are things going badly right now? Then they despair: "God has forgotten me and there is no hope."
 - c. But if we have a consistent faith, our attitudes will also be more consistent.
 7. They will be based on what we know God has promised. **What is that foundational promise that gives us such a hope?** *James* tells us in one little phrase: **James 5:8**. (Lord's coming is near.)
 8. **Why is knowing Jesus will return important?** (Time of resurrection and fulfillment of God's Kingdom and eternal life/joy.)
 9. That's what we hold onto. That promise from God is the source of our joy.
 - a. That is why when we get cancer, or we lose a job, or there's yet another snowstorm, we don't despair.
 - b. We can be patient and endure with an inner joy—because we know the Lord will come for us. We know that Jesus has prepared a place for us. (John 14:1-3)
- D. That consistent attitude also applies to our prayers. Let's look at the prayers of faith described in *James* 1:5-8 and *James* 5:13-18.
1. In the first passage, there is a specific prayer mentioned. **What is it?** (Prayer for wisdom)
 2. **Remember from our study in *James* last time what is wisdom?** (Faith in God.) So praying for wisdom is praying for . . . faith.
 3. **What is God's response to prayers for the wisdom of faith?** (v. 5 God gives generously.)
 4. **What would the result of that generosity be for us?** (Growing faith & confidence in God) The more we pray, the more our faith will grow!
 5. **But what is the warning that we are given?** (Not doubting, not double-minded)
 6. So this wisdom of faith is not just for any kind of faith. It's for a faith that is consistent. What we pray, we must believe. Prayers that we don't believe God will answer, God will not answer.

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7. You see, it's back to the tongue again. What we *say* in our prayers, we must *believe* in our hearts. There should be consistency of what we say to God and what we believe of God.
- E. In our second passage (James 5:13-18), we have two different subject of prayer as our examples. **What are they?** (For healing and for forgiveness)
1. **Looking at v. 16, what connection is there between the two?** (Confession important for healing.)
 2. **Given the context, does this healing seem to be for the body or the spirit?** (More likely, the body, but both are possible.)
 3. Now, it doesn't say that unconfessed sin is the cause of all illness. **But can you think of circumstances where unconfessed sin causes or adds to some kinds of illness?** (e.g., mental illness, emotional distress, etc.)
 4. And this is not a promise either that if we confess our sins we will be made well. We know this not just by experience, but also because of our context. The topic of *James* is not about how to become healed. **What is the real topic?** (Consistency.)
- F. And in fact we find the issue of consistency of faith raised again here in v. 13. A consistent faith does not depend upon our circumstances of the moment.
- a. **What are we to do if we are sick?** (Pray) We express our faith in God.
 - b. **And what are we to do if we are happy?** (Sing praises) It's the same; we express our faith in God.
2. Do you see how our *ascendio* outline helps us here?
 - a. In chapter 1, it is explicitly stated that the topic is consistency of faith.
 - b. In chapter 5, it isn't immediately clear—until we look at it in connection with its parallel in chapter 1.
 - c. You see, here in chapter 5, instead of being given *instructions*, we are given *examples* of how we can express our faith. The point is the same in both cases: Whether we are happy or sad, we turn to God in faith. It's a consistent faith.
 3. There's something else about this prayer for healing that is often confusing for many people—including many commentary writers. The confusion centers around the anointing with oil (olive oil, not something from a well in Saudi Arabia!)
- G. We'll have to take a little side trip here to deal with the confusion about the meaning or purpose of using the olive oil on those who are sick.
1. **Anyone have some thoughts or ideas on that?**
 2. There are usually two main views of what the anointing with oil is all about: (1) that the oil is a kind of medicine, and (2) that the oil is part of a religious sacrament.

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3. There are many examples in the Bible of olive oil being used medicinally. For instance, look at the story of the Good Samaritan: **Luke 10:30-34** (also Isaiah 1:6, e.g.)
 4. But it could also be a sacramental activity. Look at James 5:14. **How is the anointing is done?** (“in the name of the Lord.”) There is some kind of religious connection.
 5. Compare this with what Jesus says in **Matthew 28:19**. Here are our instructions for the sacrament of baptism. **Do you see the similarities with the anointing with oil?** In fact the Roman Catholics do regard this as a sacrament—a physical rite that has religious, spiritual significance.
 6. Both of these views (medicinal & sacramental) have merit. In fact there is a passage in the gospels that is remarkably like this one in *James*.
 - a. **Mark 6:7, 12-13** (disciples anoint sick and heal them.)
 - b. As in *James*, this could be medicinal or sacramental or both.
- H. But by looking at the structure of *James*, we find something else important that is key to the meaning of the anointing with oil.
1. **What are we told about our prayers in 1:2-8?** (Pray with consistent faith.)
 2. **What does that have to do with prayers for the sick in 5:13-14?** (Pray with faith.)
 3. According to the parallel passage in James 1:2, when we face trials—even illness—we are to “consider it nothing but joy” Once again, what we are told explicitly in chapter 1, is *implicit* in chapter 5 (i.e., it’s there if we know what we are looking for).
 4. By reading these two passages together, it becomes clear that anointing with oil is not just about medicine or sacrament; it’s about *joy*.
 5. We find reference to the connection between the oil and joy in **Hebrews 1:9**, which quotes Psalm 45:6-7 (“oil of gladness.”)
 - a. **Psalm 133:1-2** (like oil on Aaron’s beard)
 - b. **Isaiah 61:1-3a** (oil of gladness)
 - c. Psalm 23:5, 92:10, 104:15; Proverbs 27:9; Ecclesiastes 9:7-9
 6. There’s a logic to this, too, if we mentally put ourselves into the world of ancient Israel.
 - a. Israel is in a hot, dry climate. It doesn’t take long for skin and hair to get a very dry, weathered look.
 - b. So the practice developed (at least among those who could afford it) of using a bit of olive oil to freshen up their appearance.
 - c. They would look better, healthier. (Ezekiel 16:8-12; God speaks of Jerusalem as like a woman being adorned with fine clothes, jewelry, and *oil*.)
- I. **Have you ever known someone who, when they were even a little bit sick, liked to wring as much sympathy as possible out of others? How would they do that?** (e.g., hair uncombed, clothes rumpled, face unwashed, try to sound as miserable as they could.)

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1. Jesus said that was what the Pharisees would do when they were fasting, so everyone would know how hard it was and what a sacrifice they were making. So he told his followers not to do that. **Matthew 6:16-18** (when fasting, anoint head [with oil] and wash face)
 2. This is also the point about joy in *James*: when you are feeling sick, put on the oil just like when we are feeling well and want to look your best.
 - a. Don't focus on getting sympathy; focus on believing that sooner or later, in this life or the next, God will heal us.
 - b. Even when facing the trials of illness, *James* teaches us, count it all joy.
- J. Well that was supposedly a side trip to talk about the oil, but it has led us right back to this prayer for healing. **Is this passage in James 5 promising us that if we confess, pray, and are anointed with oil that we will be healed?** (No.)
1. This passage has been misused many times—often with the best of intentions—to the great discouragement of people who have prayed long and hard for healing.
 - a. (I, myself, have been told by a number of good people that if I only had a strong enough faith, I could pray and be healed from my polio.)
 - b. It's a cruel promise, and one that the Bible does not make.
 2. Remember the point about anointing with oil and about considering it all joy? Our faith is to be consistent no matter what circumstances we face—for good or bad.
 3. **And in 1:5-8, what was the point about prayer?** (Consistent, believe God.)
 4. Look also at the example we are given from the Old Testament (**James 5:17-18**). During the years-long drought in Israel, it is certain that many people must have prayed for rain. **And Elijah was a person just like anyone else, so what was different about his prayers?** (He was consistent in his prayers, even when there was no cloud in the sky, i.e., no apparent hope. 1st Kings 18:41-46)
 5. We tend to read into this passage (*eisegesis*) what we want to see. But 5:15 does not say, "The prayer of faith **WILL** save the sick." It says, "The **PRAYER OF FAITH** will save the sick."
 6. This passage is not a promise of healing any more than the parallel passage in chapter 1 is a promise that we won't have to "endure trials of any kind." It is a call to believe God no matter what the trial or illness may be.
- K. Even when there is no evidence, and no apparent hope, a faithful, mature Christian knows that God can and could heal.
1. The consistent Christian prepares for that blessing with hope and prayer and a faith that God's promise of joy is unshakeable.
 2. This is what we say, and this is what we believe, and this is how we live.

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IV. Summary

- A. Have we answered today's questions satisfactorily? Are there still questions on this topic we need to discuss more? What questions for next time?
- B. Next meeting: 4th Monday, March 24, 2008. 7:00 p.m.
- C. Closing prayer
- D. **Archives of class notes can be found online at: www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa**