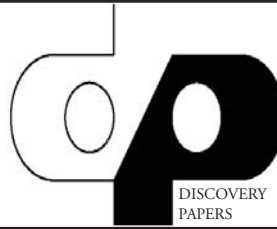


OLD FAMILY RECIPES

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 101017

James 1:1

1st Message

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October 17, 2010

We live in a time when words and actions are increasingly unrelated to one another. Election strategists boast of their skill in distorting the truth. Resumes are padded. The entertainment industry creates evermore elaborate fantasies displacing the real world. Virtual identities supersede flesh and blood experience. In short, fantasy, distortion, and falsehood are commonplace.

And the people of God are supposed to be different, but are we? Are our passions matched by our behavior? Is what we claim backed up by what we do? These are important questions for us. Hypocrisy and shallow discipleship do greater harm, turning unbelievers away from the gospel, than the proclamations of celebrity atheists.

Beyond negative influence on others, our own consciences accuse us. Jesus asked his first disciples a simple question, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord’, and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). He asks this question of disciples today. How long will we acknowledge His glory, receive His forgiveness, and delight in His love without bending our knee and beginning to live out our salvation?

We need the help of brothers and sisters in Christ who will both encourage and challenge us. We also need a teacher: someone who will ‘tell it like it is,’ in the old phrase from the sixties. James is such a teacher and this series of messages will give attention to the New Testament letter that bears his name.

David Roper, once a pastor here at PBC, has written a commentary on James. In the introduction David says that James is his *mensch* and quotes a Yiddish dictionary to define this word:

Someone who is true, sensible, and wise enough to be no longer naive, but not cynical, a person who gives advice for our benefit rather than for his or her own. A mensch acts not out of fear, or out of desire to make a good impression, but out of a strong inner

conviction of who he or she is and what he or she stands for.”¹

Written by such a man, the letter ‘James’ is practical, earthy and straightforward.

My mother is often in my thoughts now. I am very fortunate to have two wonderful parents—both nearing ninety. Because of a severe stroke in August, my mother (“someone who is true, sensible, and wise ... with a strong inner conviction of who she is and what she stands for”) has diminished capacity to concentrate and speak clearly. What hasn’t changed, though, is her heart—Spirit-shaped attitudes and character: graciousness, gentleness, kindness, a sense of humor. Remembering as far back as I can, I am aware that my mother’s *mensch*-like personality shaped me. She’s always had strong convictions and lived by them. When we were young she protected her brood and directed all four of her children to live full and honorable lives.

I’ve been re-reading a cook book (with life advice) that my mother wrote. It’s a funny cook book because she’s a funny person. Some excerpts:

*The flatter a sweet onion is, the sweeter it is.
Who knew?*

Always buy apples with shiny skins. An apple with dull skin is a dull apple.

Insist on good quality. Do not use wimpy raisin bread.

Use common sense when planning what you will serve and eat and ignore the unasked for advice that comes at you from all sides these days. Why should some neighbor, friend, anonymous internet source, or politician know more about what your family should eat than you do? You have good judgment; use it.

James speaks with a similar voice—providing clear direction and expecting a response.

In this study we are going to study the first verse of James' letter—and also acquaint ourselves with the document as a whole:

James 1:1

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

James initial declaration is, “I am a servant.” The word *doulos* in Greek, actually means slave. “I am a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s a simple introduction, without elaboration—though James played a prominent role in leading the church in its earliest days in Jerusalem and might have listed some of his accomplishments. Further, he was the younger brother of Jesus (the son of Joseph and Mary), yet he doesn’t claim authority that comes from that special relationship to Jesus.

So what are James’ qualifications? First, he was saved from his own brokenness. Jesus’ mother and siblings thought Jesus was crazy and tried to restrain him during his time of public ministry. (Mark 3:21) John 7:9 says flatly that Jesus’ brothers did not believe him. It is not hard to imagine that James resented his ‘perfect’ older brother.

But the resurrection changed everything. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul tells of post-resurrection appearances, noting some groups of people to whom Jesus appeared and three individuals who met with the risen Lord. Each of these three—Peter (Cephas), the denier; Paul, the persecutor; and James, the disbeliever—had a particular form of failure that Jesus came to heal.

James teaches with authority because he “once was lost” and was rescued by the saving love of Jesus.

Second, James spoke as one who lived by his own creed. He was widely admired, even by those who did not share

his faith in Jesus. Josephus called him James the Just. One of his nicknames was ‘camel knees’—he spent so much time in prayer on his knees that they were misshapen and calloused like a camel’s. He called for serious discipleship on the part of his readers and held himself to the same standard.

Third and finally, James’ instruction has authority because he wrote for the benefit of others, not for the sake of his own reputation. James calls his readers to discipleship in order to honor Christ and so they will have the joy of their own growth and maturity.

Returning to verse one we observe that the letter’s recipients are “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” The phrase ‘twelve tribes’ reminds us of Israel and is used here as a metaphor. He is talking about all Christians now, not just Jewish believers. The church is the scattered people of God as Israel was. We are called to live lives dispersed among non-believers, lives that have authenticity in which we adorn what we say by what we do, encouraging one another and blessing outsiders who don’t yet know the Lord.

Turning from author and recipients, what can we say about the book? There’s nothing faddish in James’ teaching. It is rooted in Judaism, and connects the lordship of Christ with the traditions and hopes of Israel. Being one of the earliest New Testament documents it does not address the joining together of Jew and Gentile since few Gentiles were part of the congregations to whom James wrote.

James is not filled with transcendent theology, in fact it’s pretty absent of transcendent theology. There’s no reference to creation or the fall; there’s no reference to the cross of Jesus, his resurrection, his return in glory, new heavens and earth. The text is not lyrical and is not a source of inspiration for enduring music of faith. Not too many gripping memory verses. It was one of the last books to be verified as “God-breathed” and suitable for inclusion in the New Testament canon. Martin Luther (at least for a time) found it lacking. This letter is easy to overlook, a bit of an ugly duckling. But it is also relentless, pressing a crucial question: is our faith evident in our lives?

There are recurring themes we'll meet in the course of our attending to this book. I want to highlight six of them now.

1. Be doers of word not hearers only. Language alone is not enough. Looking at oneself in a mirror does no good if we turn away and forget what we saw. Does our awareness of truth shape our thoughts and actions?

2. Welcome hardship with joy. Burdens, sorrow and pain are universal human experiences. Followers of Christ know that faith grows when it is tested and welcome adversity, certain that God is at work.

3. Do not show favoritism. One of the striking things about Jesus' life is that he treated everybody the same: scribes, prostitutes, tax collectors, nobles, soldiers, Samaritans, lepers ... he had no regard for the category or background of anyone who approached him. He treated them the same. He spoke the truth in love. Is our church free of favoritism regarding wealth, age, gender, ethnicity, etc.? James takes this question very seriously.

4. Bridle your tongue. Our speech can be destructive of others (lies, manipulation, slander) or it can praise God. Eventually who we are on the inside will come out in our words.

5. Be patient. We want change in ourselves and our circumstances to be instantaneous. God prepares us for what is best and bids us wait for him to act.

6. Confess your sin and pray for one another. We grow together or not at all. Confessing failure and praying for one another is the way to healing.

J.R.R. Tolkein was a man of deep Christian faith. His masterwork, *The Lord of the Rings*, is filled with reference to Christian themes—the climactic clash of good and evil, the reality of traitors and the grace of loyal companions, power that resides in the humility, losing one's life to save it—in an imagined place called Middle-Earth.

We meet figures of great stature who fill us with admiration: Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel, even Frodo. And

there are servants of evil with similar awful stature: Sauron, Saruman, the Nazgul.

Sam Gamgee is important because he is different from all these. He has no magic. At the end of the tale he did not depart for the next world (the Grey Havens) as Frodo did. He is introduced as a hobbit of the Shire and the story ends with Sam returned to his home, married and raising hobbit children.

Sam did not participate in the 'councils of the wise'. He was a cook, a scout, a gardener, the guy who took an extra watch at night so his friend could sleep. He put the heaviest pack on his shoulder. His values were simple and earthy: a servant's heart, steadfastness, loyalty, integrity, empathy. And his values shaped his actions.

Sam's simple nobility shines with great beauty at the climax of the story (evidence of Tolkien's genius). Frodo, the ring bearer, had come to the end of his terrible journey—the summit of Mt. Doom. Yet, within sight of the goal, Frodo's burden became too much for him and he collapsed. Sam declared simply, "I cannot carry it for you, but I can carry you." And he put his friend on his shoulders and he carried him to the top where the ring could be thrown into fire and destroyed. Sam Gamgee illustrates the kind of discipleship that is so important to James—simple and thorough faith forging an honorable life.

James, the slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations,

Greetings.

This sentence begins a document with a message we need to hear. We are going to be questioned in matters of everyday righteousness, called to live our faith 'where the rubber meets the road.' In an age of expanding media and endless analysis James' emphasis is refreshing.

Jesus question resonates, "Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?" May our study of James help us honor Jesus with both our words and our actions.

NOTES

¹David Roper, *Growing Slowly Wise, Building a Faith that Works*.
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