



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Reflecting on James

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Introduction

1. You probably received a letter last week (it may have been email); if not, think of a time when you did. Depending on its content and writer, you might have read some sections more closely. You would approach it one way if it was a business or legal letter, a different way if it contained a criticism, and yet another way if it was complimentary or a love letter.
2. But, my guess is that you first read it through to get the whole message. Even if you analyzed its parts, you did that in light of its larger picture.
3. You probably see where this is going. The first Christians, receiving a letter from an influential leader like James, would have done the same thing we do (though most would have heard it read; cf. Col. 4:16). They would not have begun by poring over its parts. Even if they had, they would probably have read it again later in its entirety so they could reflect on its larger message.
4. Having worked through the parts of James, we're ready for something like that re-reading. But, here, we will focus on two sections that especially highlight the major things we need to hear as we reflect on its entirety (1:2-18; 3:13-4:10).

Body

I. Some General Observations.

A. James is especially concerned with how believers face trials.

1. He is realistic: it's *when* (ὅταν, *hotan*), not if trials come (1:2).
2. But, he also speaks more broadly: trials are not just neutral troubles, but include the temptation to and doing of sin, either our own (1:13-15) or others (1:9-11 [cf. 5:1-6]; 3:14, 16; 4:1-2).

B. He is concerned with trials because of the threat they pose to committed faith.

1. Trials should help develop the steadfastness that leads to mature faith (1:2-4).
2. But, they can cause wavering faith, exposing double-mindedness (1:6-8; 4:8).

3. When handled badly, trials lead to behaviors opposite of what should typify faith (1:13-15; 3:14, 16; 4:1-4).

C. We are convinced that James is not mainly about trials, or even practical behavior, or in a sense, even faith; it is about the *commitment* that leads to the faith where one lives righteously and meets trials (both neutral and sinister) without wavering.

II. Two Ways – Choose One.

A. Twice, James used the word, “double-minded” (δίψυχος, *dipsuchos*, 1:8; 4:8).¹

1. The rabbis had talked about “the two tendencies” that characterize humans, one evil and one good, a discussion some think explains James’s usage.²
2. He accepts that we can be pulled toward evil (cf. “desire,” ἐπιθυμία [*epithumia*] in 1:14, 15, and the cognate verb in 4:2), but is not echoing the rabbis.
3. That said, there is no doubt that James envisioned two ways, devoted either to God because of “the implanted word” (1:21) or to the world and its ways.

B. James 4:4 is therefore a summary statement of the letter’s theme and point.

1. James stresses the one choice that determines whether we are following God without wavering.
2. But, 4:4 is not an isolated statement, as our representative passages illustrate.
 - a) In the immediate context of 4:4:
 - (1) The fights and quarrels plaguing them happened because they were seeking worldly things (4:1-3).
 - (2) The question in 4:5 implies they had not yielded completely to God.
 - (3) The warning about pride (4:6) and the commands to draw near, cleanse their hands, and purify their hearts (4:7-8) highlight the difference.
 - (4) The call to mourning, repentance, and humility (4:9-10) does the same.
 - b) The thoughts in 4:1-10 apply the ideas introduced in the section on wisdom (3:13-18).
 - (1) Wisdom is about “meekness,” submission (3:13).
 - (2) The behaviors of the unwise show devotion to this world (3:14, 16).
 - (3) The nature of “anti-wisdom” is the opposite of God-devotion (3:15).
 - (4) Conversely, the behaviors and nature of “the wisdom from above” (itself a telling phrase) are traits that display such devotion (3:17-18).
 - c) In chapter 1, we see the same choice.
 - (1) Wisdom is introduced as the way to confront trials (1:5).

¹ These are the only uses of this word in the New Testament.

² See Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 73. The theme of the two ways is prominent in the history of Judaism, from the Old Testament (see Deut. 11:26; 30:15; Jer. 21:8; Psa. 1; Prov. 2:1-4), through the intertestamental and Qumran writings (Sirach 21:10; *Testament of Asher* 1.3-5; 2 *Enoch* 30.15; 1QS [Manual of Discipline] 3.14-4.26), in the ministry of Jesus (Matt. 7:13-14; Luke 13:23-24), and then in the rabbinic writings (Mishnah *Aboth* 2.9) (see Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*, 148-149).

- (2) The expectation is that one will respond to God who gives without reservation by being completely unreserved in submitting (1:5-8).
- (3) In contrast to one who will receive the crown of life is the person who blames instead of obeying God and allows personal desires to take precedence over the way of God (1:13-15).
- d) It is in light of those things that we must see two other sections of James 1.
 - (1) James reminds his readers that God gives good gifts (1:17), his sentiment (if not the exact terms) echoing 1:5.
 - (a) This is in contrast to being deceived (*πλανᾶω, planaō*) (1:16; cf. 5:20).
 - (b) It motivates the submission implied in 1:18 (and developed in 1:19-21).
 - (2) In 1:9-11, the choice is also in play.
 - (a) In light of the whole letter (2:1ff.; 4:13-5:6), the problem with the rich man was not that he had things, but that he was devoted to them; but things never lasts (1:11).³
 - (b) The solution is to surrender as the poor man did (1:9-10).
- C. This is ultimately what James is about: will we make an unwavering choice to follow God – regardless of what it costs in terms of worldly things – or will we seek to have both equally?⁴

III. An Urgent Manner/Matter.

- A. One other characteristic of James shows us how serious he is about this choice.
 - 1. As Douglas Moo reminds us, James uses “more imperative verbs per word . . . than in any other NT book,”⁵ 55 in 108 verses.
 - 2. Twenty-one are in the two texts focused on above (1:2-18; 3:13-4:10).
 - a) James begins the letter with a command (1:2).
 - b) Each sub-section in 1:2-18 begins with a command (1:2, 5, 9, 13, 16).
 - c) Thirteen are in 3:13-4:10, revolving around the absolute choice we’ve discussed; ten are in 4:7-10, and five are in 4:9-10.
- B. James’s urgency demands that we ask: are we urgent about following God’s way or casual with the life of faith as one of our important things, but not most important?

³ The temptation to favor the rich in the assembly (2:1-13), to overlook the needy (2:14-17) (the specific example of profession without works in 2:18-26), the source of quarrels (4:1-3), doing business as if God did not matter (4:13-17), as well as the implied temptation to cave in to the rich landowners instead of waiting for the Lord (5:1-11) is rooted in the choice.

⁴ It is of interest that this epistle never envisions anyone among its readers who was not at least nominally involved with the faith community.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 249.

Conclusion

1. In his famous story about the man who threw his seed on four kinds of soil, Jesus taught about four kinds of hearers (Matt. 13:3-9). Some reject his word outright, the hard path from which the birds take the seeds. Some are rocky soil, giving the seed a temporary home, but never really letting it take root. Some are willing to receive the seed and even follow through, but ultimately the world's concerns ("thorns") keep it from growing. Only a few let the seed sink deeply, allow it to be nurtured, and see a bountiful harvest.

2. In his book *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God*, Francis Chan reflects on that parable and offers this word of caution: "Do not assume you are the good soil."

I think most American churchgoers are the soil that chokes the seed because of all the thorns. Thorns are anything that distracts us from God. When we want God and a bunch of other stuff, then that means we have thorns in our soil. A relationship with God simply cannot grow when money, sins, activities, favorite sports teams, addictions, or commitments are piled on top of it.⁶

3. James wrote to another group of church people in danger of being overwhelmed by the thorns. Had he written in 2008, he might have said it like Chan did. What he did say is powerful enough:

You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. . . . So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world (4:4, 7-8, NLT).

4. Consider two questions as we conclude: Is your loyalty to God absolute or divided? If divided, what will you do to make it absolute?

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⁶ Francis Chan, with Danae Yankoski, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 67. Emphasis in the first quotation is Chan's.