

James-by Nathan White

Chapter 1

The book of James is a letter written to Jewish Christians struggling with how they are to live in light of their faith in Christ. Certain themes are present throughout the letter, but it does not seem to follow a clear organizational structure. As a result, a book that is full of rich, wise, practical application of our faith can be easily misunderstood by modern readers. From the very start of his letter, James makes clear that his hope is that the faith of his readers will bear fruit in their lives and that they will grow into mature believers (v. 1-8). We also see the first instance of James leveling the field between rich and poor believers, laying the groundwork for his attack on favoritism later in the book (9-11). The theme of steadfastness in trials features heavily as an undertone throughout James, which makes sense when we consider his audience, and finds its roots in the first chapter as well (12-15). Finally, in this opening chapter, James introduces the theme of speech (v. 19, 26) and presents what might be considered a one-line overview of the main theme of his letter: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only." (v. 22).

Chapter 2

A significant portion of James 2 is dedicated to addressing the sin of partiality and how regularly giving into such a temptation displays a serious misunderstanding of the Kingdom of God (v. 5) as well as a disregard for love of neighbor, which Christ himself taught was inseparable from love of God (v. 8). He goes on to connect this issue to very heart of the argument he's making throughout the book: that our faith should affect the way we live. Verse 24 of this chapter has created a great deal of confusion for modern readers who read it as an opposition to the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. However, this is not the case. Abraham, the example James uses, is said to have been justified before he ever actually does anything. The works which James then commends are the result of Abraham's faith. James is not attacking salvation by faith alone. Rather, he is attacking the misapplication of that doctrine which would say that how we live does not matter. Such a "faith," as James says, is dead. It is no faith at all.

Chapter 3

In chapter 3, James returns to the theme of our speech. He uses multiple, powerful analogies to display the dangers of reckless speech. Like a bit in a horse's mouth or a rudder on a ship, our tongues are relatively small things that can steer us in terrible directions if we are not careful in how we use them. James even goes so far as to warn that careless speech can set the entire course of a person's life on fire, which is a vivid metaphor teaching us of the great dangers found in using our words wickedly. The way we speak reveals our hearts, and if our hearts have been made new by the work of the Holy Spirit, then our words should reflect that as well. James then returns to the theme of wisdom that he first introduced in 1:5. Again, he makes the point that, as with faith, if we possess wisdom from God, then our conduct should reflect it. Frighteningly, James tells his readers that any form of wisdom that is employed for the sake of jealousy or selfish ambition is not from God, but is actually demonic (v. 15).

Chapter 4

James continues to speak against the dangers of selfish ambition and jealousy among professing believers. In their desire for worldly power, safety, or riches, they harm one another and put themselves at enmity with God (v. 4). Humility is integral to the Christian life, and we must put our pride to death by drawing near to God and humbly submitting to him (v. 8, 10). This call to humility and strong language against pride only make sense in light of the gospel. Christ has done everything necessary to reconcile us to God, loving us when we still hated him. Because of the person and work of Christ, we have been recipients of more than we could ever

repay and have been forgiven of more than we will ever have to forgive. Pride is incompatible with such a message. This is the very reason that James goes on to condemn boasting in what we will accomplish in the future. His readers have taken arrogance beyond boasting in what they have done, to being presumptuous enough to boast in what they will do (v. 13-16).

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with a section pronouncing a condemnation on the rich who have acted in unjust ways that combines the previously explored themes of favoritism and selfish ambition. Disregard for those in positions of need and a life built entirely on the pursuit of one's own power often go together. James has strong words for such people, warning them that the cries of their victims have "reached the ears of the Lord of hosts." Such a grave assurance should terrify the unjust and comfort those who have been treated unjustly. James moves toward the end of his letter with one last admonition to be patient in suffering, knowing that there will be a day of judgment. Remembering the coming Day of the Lord leads the proud and self-indulgent to repentance and encourage the humble and repentant to steadfastness. James calls his readers to pray fervently and confess their sins, moving toward a strangely abrupt ending. Though the letter ends suddenly, the last two verses aptly summarize what James himself was trying to do throughout this book.

Reflecting on James-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in James. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish James before we move forward?

"Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many." Proverbs 4.10