

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 3

THE INTRODUCTION TO LIVING OUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

- I. The letter then proceeds onto a discussion of how sin develops.
 - A. Having said that temptation does not come from God, the letter then traces the progress of evil from desire to sin to death.
 - B. This progress roughly parallels in opposite direction the two earlier passages that traced trials to perseverance to perfection (see verses 2-3) and trials to proof of perseverance to the crown of life (see verse 12.)
 1. The progress is also portrayed as an evil generation, from conception in desire (here portrayed in feminine form) to the birth of sin and then its maturity in death. There is a dramatic contrast between the desire who is the mother of sin and death (called in wisdom literature Folly) and the matron Wisdom who welcomes children to the house of life. See Prov. 1:20-23, 7:1-27; 9:1-18; Sir. 1:15, 4:11-19.
 2. Jesus likewise drew such contrasts between the children of light and children of darkness. See Luke 16:8, 13; John 1:12-13, 8:39-47
 - C. The beginning of temptation is desire (in this case wrongful desire,) which lures and entices a person. See Sir. 6:2-4. St. James uses language from hunting and fishing to portray the person lured into a trap of the hunter, the devil. See Duet. 7:16; Josh. 23:13; Ps. 18:6, 124:7; 1 Ti. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:6.
 - D. Sin thus is portrayed as a child that, if allowed will grow into death. See Rom. 6:15-23.
 1. At one level, the letter is saying (as St. Paul did) that, as sin grows it dominates the person and leads to death. St. Paul does have a slightly different perspective on the law (by which he means the codes given by God), saying that before Christ they paradoxically led to greater sin because people who received the law could not keep it.

However, the increase in sin makes the reign of sin and death more obvious and thus leads people to recognize their need for Christ. See Rom. 4:13-25 5:12-21, 5:13-25; Gal. 3:19-22.

2. At another level, the letter may be referring to the progress from venial to mortal sin. See 1 John 5:16-17.

3. Physical death is one punishment for sin. See Gen. 3:17-19; Ezek. 18:4; Catechism of the Catholic Church 400. But here, sin is presented as leading to an even deeper death, the death of goodness, when allowed to grow to maturity. See John 5:24; 1 John 1:3, 5:16; Rev. 2:11, 13. St. James will later describe final destruction as death. See James 5:20.

II. The letter then reverses the imagery again and speaks of how we are called to become a new creation freed from this death.

a. As with St. Paul, there is a call for liberation from sin and death. See Rom. 6:15-23, 7:6, 25.

B. James points out that, as St. Paul did, that all goodness comes from God, presumably in contrast to the deceit that one can do good apart from Him, or without Him. See Council of Trent, Decree on Justification Ch. V.

a. Many commentators believe that the letter is quoting a poem, but the source has not been found.

b. Overall, the passage reflects the vine image that Jesus used at the Last Supper, which shows that all life comes from Him. See John 15:1-10.

c. The passage points out that not only every gift itself, but also the very act of giving comes from above, from the realms of light above the sinfulness of this world.

C. The letter then points to the heavens, referring to God as "the Father of lights."

1. Jews were already calling God Father, and Christians were well used to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. See Ps. 29:1, Job 1:6, 2 Sam. 7, Hosea 11:1, Wisdom 3:18; Matt. 6:9, 14, 28:19; Mark 11:26, Luke 11:2-14; John 5:17-37; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6.

2. This passage adds the phrase "Father of lights." At one level, that phrase could refer to God as the Father of the heights of creation, i.e., the sun, the moon and the stars. See Gen. 1:14-18, Ps. 136:7-9; Jer. 4:23, 31:35, Sir. 43:1-12. Those lights shining on in the world also reflect the fact that God is our light showing us the truth and the way of life. See, e.g., Ps. 27:1, John 1:3-5, 3:19-21, 8:12-20, 9:1-5, 39; Eph. 5:8; 1 John 1:5-7. At a deeper level, the passage is referring to those realms of the sun and the stars to give the reader an image of a realm beyond sin and death, without shadow or change, and give a sense of God's gifts coming from that glorious realm.

D. The letter then says that God has given us birth through the word of truth (as contrasted to the birth of sin through desire) to be a firstfruits of the new creation.

1. The word of truth here is presented as the mother of the faithful. God created through the word. See Gen. 1, Is. 55:11. In Psalm 119, the word, the law, and the teachings of the Lord are all praised together as the source of all life and true joy. See also Ps. 1, 19. The prophets consistently receive the word of the Lord and proclaim it, not only in the sense of announcing God's will, but even in the sense of sending forth God's power through the word. See, e.g., Is. 55:6-11; Jer. 1:9-10; Ez. 36-37; Mic. 1:1, 4:2. St. Paul likewise refers to the word of truth as creating new and fruitful life in the faithful. See Col. 1:5; Eph. 1:13.

2. Here, the word is presented as the source of this new creation, as bringing about these initial Christians as the firstfruits. St. Paul likewise speaks of Christians as the firstfruits of a new creation. See 1 Cor. 15:20, 16:15; Rom. 8:23; see also Rev. 14:4. Firstfruits were originally the offering that the Jews would bring to God from their harvests, given to God in sacrifice and thus opening the way to greater blessings. See Ex. 23:16, 19,

34:26; Duet. 26:10. The idea is that early Christians are a first offering to God, the beginning of a greater harvest.

III. The letter then turns to the living out of this grace that God has given us.

- A. This part begins with a comment on listening carefully, rather than speaking or reacting rashly. This advice reflects common advice in the Jewish wisdom literature. See, e.g., Prov. 1:8, 10:19, 15:1, 29:20; Sir. 4:29, 5:12-15, 6:33-35, 20:5-8; Eccl. 7:8-9. The focus is especially on restraining anger, which is contrary to the righteousness of God.
1. The righteousness of God may punish sin, but in a fashion that seeks the reconciliation of the sinner with God. This notion of God seeking out that reform, rather than destruction, is especially a theme of the Book of Wisdom, which Jesus then develops in His teaching, especially in the Sermon on the Mount and many of the parables. See Wis. 11:17-12:22; Matt. 5:21-26, 7:1-5; Luke 15:1-32, 18:9-14.
 2. Thus, anger that is directed in an impulsive, destructive manner is contrary to this righteousness.
- B. The letter then calls for a cleansing that leads to receptiveness to God's word. There is the image of clearing a field of weeds and filth so that the word of God can be implanted and grow, see Mark 4:1-9, or perhaps of receiving clean clothes of righteousness, rather than filthy garments of sin that, see Rom. 13:12-14; Zech. 3:3-5. In any case, there is a notion that one must in a sense clean house that one's soul is fit to receive God. See Col. 3:8, 1 Pet. 2:1-3.
- C. The meekness here is docility to the word of God, to the calling of God. See Matt. 5:5.
- There is certainly a contrast to the anger that is opposed to the righteousness of God. See 1 Cor. 4:21; Gal. 5:23, 6:1. But the virtue (often associated with the poor) is a positive one, implying an openness to the will of

God in all circumstances, thus making one's faith as stable as the land. See Ps. 25:9, 37:11, 149:4; Zeph. 2:3. Moses thus becomes the model of such meekness for he was fully open to God's will. See Num. 12:3

- D. The letter then indicates the active aspects of the faith, calling upon Christians to live out our faith in deeds, contrasting merely hearing with hearing and acting.
1. This passage builds upon the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which compares one who hears, but does not act to one who builds upon sand. See Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49.
 2. Here, the initial comparison is of the one who hears but does not act to one who merely looks in a mirror; his faith is as ephereal as his image.
 - a. A mirror in those days was generally made of bronze and thus reflected images hazily. See 1 Cor. 13:12
 - b. Here, if a man does not act upon the law, he sees only his natural image (not the image of himself reborn in the word of God,) and that only imperfectly and only for a time. The idea is that one who does not act sees very little and loses even that which he does see. Cf. Matt. 25:29.
 3. In contrast with the one who does not act upon the law, one who does act upon the law peers into the perfect law of freedom and remembers it.
 - a. There is no opposition between law and liberty, for as described here the law of God is not merely a set of rules, but the very order of the universe. See, e.g. Ps. 19, 119; Is. 51:4 ff. The first five books of the Old Testament, which is the center of the Hebrew Scriptures, is called the Torah, or the law.
 - b. Here the promise is that one who acts upon the law receives insight, vision into this order, into this perfect law and thus is able to act in perfect freedom, participating in the creative goodness of God. See Rom. 7:22-23, 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18. This creative goodness is expressed in the two greatest commandments of love of God and neighbor, which Jesus describes as the core of the law and the prophets, who spoke the word of God. See Matt. 22:37-40. Jesus promises us that if we hear the word of God and act upon it we become members of His family, sharing in His glory. See Luke 8:19-21.

E. St. James hammers away at the point that living out ones faith is essential, saying that no one should consider himself religious, or believe that his religion has any value if he does not control his desires and act in a fashion that shows forth the love of God. He rapidly goes through three points that he will pick up on elsewhere.

1. First he focuses on bridling the tongue, as one would bridle a horse or other animal to keep it under control. In the Old Testament, typically the image of bridling an animal was used to describe how God forces His enemies back from their destruction, or how He disciplines the unwilling. See 2 Kings 19:28; Ps. 32:9; Prov. 26:3, Is. 30:28, 37:29. (Psalm 39 describes the psalmist bridling his tongue to avoid complaining.) Here, the image is thus of overcoming an opponent, i.e., the tendency for speech to run wild. The letter will return to this theme in chapter 3.

2. The letter then goes onto to describe pure religion as both positively caring for those in distress and negatively as being unstained by the world.
 - a. The widows and orphans would have been those most commonly in need, and thus caring for them the prime example of charity. See, e.g., Duet. 27:19; Ps. 68:6, 146:9; Sir. 4:10; Matt. 25:25:31-46; Acts 6:1. The letter will return to this theme at greater length in chapters 2 and 5.

 - b. The letter then summarizes the avoidance of sin by saying that religion involves being "unstained by the world." Although the world was created good and meant to be saved by God, see, e.g., John 3:6, the world is also fallen and thus a temptation to sin. See John 15:18-25:18-25. The image presented here is of the sins of the world staining the purity of the faith, the glory given by God at baptism. Rev. 3:4. One notion of purity reflects the ritual ideas of sacrifice, that one offering the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself had to be pure. See, e.g., Num. 8:21, 19:12, 20, 31:19; Neh. 12:30. And, if physical purity was needed for the old physical sacrifices, all the more must a Christian be pure to offer himself as a sacrifice. Another notion is that purity of heart allows that vision of the law that gives us glory. See Ps. 24:4; Matt. 5:8.

