

The Letter of James

A Better Way of Living

Answers/ Reflection for Session Three: The content and style of the Letter

My list of contents: your list will likely be quite different, but that's fine, it's for your use.

- 1:1 Greeting
- 1:1-12 Growth through testing
- 1:13-18 The source of temptation
- 1:19-27 Using the word of God to mature spiritually
- 2:1-13 The evils of prejudice and the importance of love
- 2:14-26 Faith plus deeds, supported by Scripture
- 3:1-12 Control of the tongue
- 3:13-18 Wisdom from heaven and earthly misconceptions
- 4:1-12 Submit to God and be loyal to him.
- 4:13-17 Live in the present moment.
- 5:1-6 Warning to the rich
- 5:7-11 Patience in suffering
- 5:12 Let your word be your bond
- 5:13-18 Pray with faith
- 5:19-20 Support each other

"The law that gives freedom" in 2:12 is Christ's law of mercy, which frees people from the penalty of sin. Paul calls it the law of Christ in I Corinthians 9:21.

Stephen Startup has suggested that it could be reminiscent of Jesus saying in John 8:31-32, *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"*.

A list of similes and metaphors: there are more this is just a selection

- 1:6 Doubts as unstable as waves
- 1:11 A rich man fading like a flower
- 1:14 Evil desires personified to entice people
- 1:15 Desires conceiving and giving birth
- 1:18 People being first fruits
- 1:26 Reigning in the tongue
- 3:3-6 The tongue like bits, rudders and the small spark that starts a fire
- 3:11-12 Words like spring water and various fruits.
- 3:18 Words like seeds
- 4:14 Life like a mist
- 5:7 Being patient like farmers as they wait for crops to ripen and Spring rains to fall.

James' style is certainly colourful and his points come through vividly and, most importantly, memorably. I don't find this letter the easiest of reads, but there are aspects that I really like. What strikes the loudest cord are the similarities to Jesus own habit of using the natural world around his audience to emphasise his

teaching. This comes through so strongly in the similes and metaphors. I think Jesus uses all those I've selected above, except perhaps 'mist'. Does he use mist anywhere?

There are certainly differences. Jesus' found hyperbole a powerful tool. He could make the most absurd or exaggerated comparisons. Intending to make people laugh and so remember the point he was trying to get across to them. He used puns for the same reason, because they are fun and people laugh at them. I fear many have been lost in translation, but every now and then you will see a note at the foot of the page explaining the similarity in Aramaic of the words he has used.

James, on the other hand, comes across as mainly more serious, but still up for a laugh. Look at 2:19 I think that was written with a twinkle in his eye, but cleverly, because at the same time it hints at shades of meaning, when it comes to faith and believing, but more of that next week when we look at faith and deeds.

The Poetry and Wisdom Writings include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. These are the recognised five. Some schools of thought would also include Lamentations and even Ruth.

Wisdom as referred to in the Wisdom Writings developed from Solomon's wisdom. In 1 Kings 3:9 he asks God to give him "a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong." In 1 Kings 10 we read how the Queen of Sheba respected and admired Solomon's wisdom. This seemed to confirm his reputation as wise, although, of course, everything went sadly downhill later in his life.

James letter is designed to emulate Proverbs in that it is composed of short sayings expressing accepted truths and behaviour of the times. However, James follows Jesus' teachings, giving a new perspective and new 'truths', which break with the patriarchal ideas and introduce equality.

This style of short sayings was called 'stringing pearls' and was popular with Rabbis when they taught. It also gave rise to the saying: 'don't cast your pearls before swine', which is what Jesus was alluding to in Matthew 7:6.

In Proverbs 2:1-6 and James 1:2-7, both authors are saying we should ask God for wisdom, which is the knowledge and understanding of God. James also wants us to understand that Jesus has become for us wisdom from God. All the practical advice he gives is on how to try and live lives that reflect the perfect life lived by Christ, so that we too "may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything". Knowing Jesus is our key, he came as a human so that we could understand the mystery of God and gain wisdom.

It is interesting to read and compare what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:24 and 30 and Colossians 2:2-3.

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