

Covenant History Series
James—Religion that is Pure and undefiled Before God

Sunday, November 1, 2009

Introduction

James is the first of seven letters of the New Testament which have traditionally been called the "Catholic Epistles." Not catholic as in *Roman Catholic*, but small "c" catholic, in the sense of *general*. They're called "catholic" or "general" epistles because they are not addressed to specific congregations or individuals, but seem to have been written for a more general audience. The Catholic Epistles are: James, First and Second Peter, First, Second, and Third John, and Jude.

Date

James is a fascinating letter for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it's probably the very first portion of the New Testament to have been written. The best estimates place its writing in the early 40's...not 1940's, just 40's. This is just a dozen or so years after our Lord's ascension. This makes the book of special interest, I think, to see what the concerns were, what the issues were at that early period in the church.

Author

The author of the book is not James, the brother of John, who was one of the twelve, but that James who is referred to by Paul in his letter to the Galatians as the brother of our Lord.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:18-19).

Matthew mentions the fact that our Lord had several brothers (Matt. 13:55). John tells us that prior to Jesus' resurrection, his brothers didn't believe in him (Jn. 7:2-5). We find, however, that after his resurrection Jesus made a special appearance to James, who seems to have been the next eldest brother (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Not only did James and the other brothers of our Lord later come to believe, but they also were called to labor for the kingdom of God in a capacity similar to apostles (1 Cor. 9:3-5).

James had a place of eminence in the early church (Acts 12:12; 15:13; 21:17-18). From very early times he was called "James the Just," because of his piety.

Recipients

To whom did James address his letter? He tells us in verse one: "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1), that is, the twelve tribes who lived outside the land of Israel.

Explain...

Theme

We have called our message today “Religion that is Pure and Undefiled Before God.” The language comes from 1:26-27. This is the theme of the book. James says, “You want to know what true religion is? Let me tell you.” And he goes on to give us a scholastic definition of the articles of faith that must be believed in order to be saved? He gives us a scholarly dissertation on the *ordo salutis*. No! He gives us very practical instruction in godly behavior. He tells not so much what to believe as how to live. He’s taking for granted that the foundation has already been laid. He’s taking for granted that his audience is joined by faith to Jesus Christ; and he’s saying, “This is what faith in Jesus Christ *looks* like. This that I’m telling you is pure and undefiled religion before God.”

Now, let me just say a word or two about this word “religion.” It seems to me that all too often we have an unwarranted negative reaction to it. “Christianity is not a religion,” you hear people say. “It’s a relationship.” I saw a T-Shirt the other day that said, “It’s against my relationship to have a religion.”

But are religion and relationship really opposed to each other? Is it really a matter of either/or? Not at all. In fact, the word religion refers to a particular kind of relationship. The word comes from the Latin, *religare*, which means *to bind together*. The word has covenantal overtones. When a man and woman are united in a covenant of marriage, they are bound together, *tied together*. It’s a wonderful, happy, joyful, *bondage*. It’s almost as wonderful, happy, and joyful as being bound to God. That’s what religion means—a binding to God. It’s a beautiful picture.

And James says, “You want to know what it means to be bound to God, to be tied to him? Let me tell you.” And he’s not interested in abstract notions of religion, but gives us very practical instructions.

Is there Conflict between James and Paul?

It has often been supposed that Paul and James disagree with one another over the matter of justification by faith, with Paul affirming the doctrine and James denying it. Martin Luther was so troubled by James, and had so much difficulty reconciling it with the letters of Paul, that he called the letter of James “an epistle of straw,” and thought that it had mistakenly been received into the canon of Scripture. He admitted that there were some worthwhile things in the letter, but thought that he was fundamentally at odds with Paul on the matter of justification.

But this is not true at all. Paul and James agree each other. It’s Luther’s misunderstanding of James which is at odds with his somewhat lesser misunderstanding of Paul.

Brief Outline

- I. Address and greeting (1:1)
- II. When faith is tested (1:2-18)
- III. On hearing *and doing* the word (1:19-2:26)
- IV. Avoiding quarrels and fights (3:1-4:12)
- V. The sins of the rich (4:13-5:12)
- VI. Encouragement to pray (5:13-18)
- VII. Ministry to those who wander (5:19-20)