The Letter of James

The Epistle of James is intensely practical, referred to by some as “The Proverbs of the New Testament”. It is like a running commentary on the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the Sermon on the Mount. You can find at least ten examples where specific teachings of Jesus are amplified and applied by James.

Many scholars believe that the James who wrote this epistle was the earthly half-brother of Jesus Christ. He did not believe in Jesus while Jesus was having His three years of public ministry. After the resurrection, we are told that Jesus made a special appearance to Peter and James, this James, His earthly brother (I Corinthians 15:7).

It is intriguing to observe that after James was converted, he is almost immediately appointed to be one of the great leaders of the New Testament church. James is the one who presides over that council at Jerusalem described in Acts 15.

This is the James that the apostle Paul refers to in his letter to the Galatians when he writes that when he went up to Jerusalem, there were three men who seemed to be pillars in the Jerusalem church - John, Peter and this James.

Tradition tells us James was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and then clubbed to death by the high priest. When this happened, tradition says that the Jewish religious community revolted against the high priest and ran him out of office. When the Roman emperor, Titus, destroyed Jerusalem, in 70 A.D. many of the devout Jews, who did not become followers of Jesus, believed that it was a judgment of God upon the city for the martyrdom of this godly man, James.

Since James is a General Epistle, it comes at the end of the New Testament with the other General Epistles. Most scholars believe this book is the earliest of all the New Testament writings.

The Message of James

When you study the content of this epistle, you will see why some believe James was trying to bring balance to the teaching of the Apostle Paul. They tell us that Paul comes on real strong with his justification by faith and not by works. In the second chapter of this letter, James will tell us emphatically that we are not justified by faith alone, but by works also. But, even though this epistle of James comes at the end of the New Testament, Paul’s letters were written after the Epistle of James. Many scholars believe James wrote before there were any Gentiles in the church. That is why the Epistle of James seems so Jewish and almost legalistic.

Two Kinds of Temptation

In the first chapter of this epistle, we learn that James is a man who is not so much concerned with the surfaces of things (how things appear) but with the sources of things (how things really are). James is very much like Jesus in this regard. Jesus emphasized the inward man and the inward issues. Jesus also emphasized our attitude toward things and the motive that drives our actions. The essence of the Epistle of James parallels these values that Jesus emphasized in His teaching.

In his first chapter, James tells us about the sources and the sequences of our trials. In some translations, these trials are described as temptations. He will make a distinction later between these two kinds of temptation, but in this case he is referring to their trials of sufferings. In his opening words, James writes: "count it all joy" when you experience your trials. James tells us we should rejoice in our trials because: “The test of faith is
intended to lead us to the trust of faith. If we will allow the test of faith to lead us to the trust of faith, then we will experience the triumph of faith, which James calls ‘the crown of life’.

When you have a storm in your life, that trial will very often will bring you to the place where you just don’t know what to do. You realize that you need wisdom beyond yourself. James writes that we must let the test of faith lead us to the trust of faith. When we lack wisdom, we must ask God, Who will be delighted to share His wisdom with us.

The Anatomy of a Sin

James then profiles a kind of testing in which we should not rejoice. God is not the source of the temptation to sin. In the second half of the first chapter of his letter, James gives us what we might call “The Anatomy of a Sin”. As he emphatically teaches that the temptation to sin does not come from God, he informs us that this kind of temptation does not even come from the devil. The temptation to sin comes from within you and me. It works this way: The sequence is, first, there is something you see. Then there is lust, or a strong desire for what you saw. It is as if what you saw is a piece of metal and your lust is like a powerful magnet. If you do not do something to break up that magnetic field between your lust and that object of your lust, one day there will be the confrontation of temptation.

According to James, temptation is not sin. You have not sinned just because you have been tempted to sin. We are told that our Lord was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). It is not a sin to be tempted, but temptation very often leads to overt acts of sin. When we yield to temptation and actually sin, the consequences of sin is always death. (Romans 6:23)

The point to this anatomy of sin is; if you do not want to sin you must win your battle with sin at the levels of lust, before you face the confrontations of temptation. Jesus taught us to pray every day, “Lead us not into temptation.” (Matthew 6:13)

In Summary

In his first chapter, James is telling us how God can grow us spiritually in all our trials. James is also saying there is this other matter, the temptation to sin. God is not the source of the sequence of temptation that leads to sin and to death. There is nothing good about sin. A summary of the first chapter of James could be: tested to life, tempted to death and taught the difference.