

NT LESSON #42

PURE RELIGION

JAMES

By Ted L. Gibbons

The man responsible for the writing of the book of James is probably the brother of the Lord, who is mentioned first in the list of family members in Matt. 13:55, and is perhaps therefore the oldest. There is no definitive identification of James' position in the book itself, but of the four men called James in the New Testament, only this designation makes much sense. James the apostle was martyred in ad 44, too early for this writing, and the other two did not have the necessary stature among early Christians to have their writings included in the Bible..

Whoever he was, James speaks to our hearts and to our habits. The simplicity of his writings make the book a delight. It is easy to understand and easy to apply. You will not need locate your New Testament commentary or call your local top-level scription for clarification as you study this material. The deep, careful syllogisms of Paul, some of which baffled the early translators and which still baffle many readers are nowhere in evidence. There is hardly a verse in the book that is difficult to understand.

This book truly is description of a gospel of *works*. James is all about *doing* rather than about *knowing* or *understanding*. As you read and ponder, make a note in your scriptures of the things James suggests that you do, and pay special attention to those principles that are underlined by the Spirit as being of particular importance to you.

Note as you commence to read that James is writing to the “twelve tribes which are scattered abroad . . .” (James 1:1) Members of the Church have had great many discussions about the location of the lost tribes of Israel. No discussion is needed here except to point out where James thinks they are.

I. WE SHOULD ENDURE AFFLICTION PATIENTLY (James 1:1-4; 5:10,11)

So James writes to the tribes of Israel, and that is greeting enough for him. In the beginning of verse two, following his “greeting,” his message begins: “My brethren,

count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations . . .” (James 1:2) Note that the JST changes “divers temptations” to “many afflictions.” Is it possible or even reasonable to rejoice over many afflictions? James says it is and tells us why:

Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.” James 1:3,4)

The sequence of logic here is instructive: trials = patience = perfection. So, to turn a perfectly clear piece of gospel teaching into a piece of syllogistic reasoning, we should “count it all joy” when we have “many afflictions” because afflictions help us become perfect, which we all want to be anyway.

In chapter 5, James adds an addendum to this thought:

Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy. (James 5:10,11)

Elder Maxwell, expressed this principle as follows:

Can we expect to become like Him, given our imperfections, unless we can learn to accept and apply needed reproof and correction . . . ? How essential our capacity to receive correction and reproof is, for "he that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding." (Prov. 15:32) Deserved self-esteem depends upon our meekness.

In our personal development, the emery wheel of events can polish us, and the sandpaper of circumstances can smooth us. Too often, when so worked upon, we grow fearful instead of being trusting and submissive. But Peter overcame his fearfulness, and so can we. (Neal A. Maxwell, *Even As I Am*, p.63)

At another time, he elaborated:

In life, the sandpaper of circumstances often smooths our crustiness

and patiently polishes our rough edges. There is nothing pleasant about it, however. And the Lord will go to great lengths in order to teach us a particular lesson and to help us to overcome a particular weakness, especially if there is no other way. In such circumstances, it is quite useless for us mortals to try to do our own sums when it comes to suffering. We can't make it all add up because clearly we do not have all the numbers. Furthermore, none of us knows much about the algebra of affliction. The challenges that come are shaped to our needs and circumstances, sometimes in order to help our weaknesses become strengths. Job noted how tailored his challenges were, saying, "For the thing which I greatly feared has come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me." (Job 3:25.) Yet he prevailed so much so that he was held up as a model to the great latter-day prophet, Joseph Smith. (D&C 121.) Our triumph here could not be complete if we merely carried our fears and doubts into the next world. What came to Job was not a minor test with which he could have coped with one hand tied behind him. Rather, "his grief was very great." (Job 2:13.) (Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness*, p.67 - p.68)

II. WE SHOULD PRAY TO GOD IN FAITH (James 1:5-7; 4:8)

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

For let not that man think that he shall received any thing of the Lord. (James 1:5-7)

If the Father gives wisdom to all men liberally, and without reproach or censure (footnote 5d), and if we all lack wisdom, *which we do*, then this invitation of James ought to call thousands of us to our knees daily. But 30 years of experience with the youth of Zion and about 50 with my own shortcomings has convinced me that some Church members are not receiving *liberally*. They kneel, and they ask, but they do not receive *liberally*. The reason for this failure seems to be included in the instruction. "But let him ask in faith, *nothing wavering*." (*emphasis added*) Doubt seems to be the death of successful prayers. The question that comes to mind is this one: what sorts of things cause us to waver? What are the experiences, events, and

attitudes that cause me to falter in my faith or to doubt the Lord's willingness to respond freely? What episodes cause us to be "double minded" and "unstable"? (James 1:8)

I have a feeling that the word faith as it is used in verse 6 has much the same meaning as the phrases *real intent* and *sincere heart* from Moroni 10:4. We must ask with a commitment to go in whatever direction the answers to our prayers may take us. We must pray with the intent to obey.

Many years ago I shared the gospel with a couple from Puerto Rico. The wife receive a testimony during the first visit. The husband, however, had no such witness. He fasted and he prayed and he listened to the rest of the discussions over a period of several weeks, but no manifestations came. He said again and again to us that he did not know. Then, one Sunday, after a wonderful sacrament meeting, he walked to the front of the chapel and asked the Bishop to arrange for his baptism. The bishop, who was well aware of his previous reticence, called us forward and then asked what had happened. In the discussion that followed, we learned the following.

John had prayed for weeks for a testimony, but, he said, always with this thought in mind: *Once I know if it is true, then I will make a decision about what to do.* He was praying without real intent. He was, to use the words of James, "double minded." But during sacrament meeting he had felt something and speakers had spoken to his heart with answers to questions he had been discussing with his wife the evening before. He said that during the closing prayer of the meeting he had offered his own prayer: this one: *Lord, if you want me to be baptized, tell me now and I will get up and do it.* He said that before he could stand up, he knew. The answer came liberally because he had prayed with real intent.

Another example of this approach to prayer comes from a wonderful book called *Put Off Thy Shoes*:

It was family reunion time and they were heading for Utah from a small community in northeastern Arizona. As they passed through Flagstaff, they stopped at a department store to purchase some supplies. The father, acting on what he described later as a whim, decided to buy a pocket knife. He had never carried one, and had no need to do so now, but the inclination was there, and he made the purchase.

Many miles later on the reservation, and some distance from Cameron, the car

began suddenly to shudder and vibrate. They stopped and the father opened the hood where the problem seemed to originate. He was not a mechanical wizard. He could point out the engine, the radiator, and the battery, but that was about all. In fact, he carried no tools in the car because he would not know what to do with them if they were needed.

It was a sweltering day, the temperature near one hundred degrees. The car held the family; dad, mom, and six kids. He did not know what to do. Another attempt to drive the car simply reinforced their dilemma. Whatever was wrong was still wrong.

He explained the problem to the family. Diane was the first to suggest prayer. They all bowed their heads. No one remembers the words, nor any particular feeling during the prayer. But when it was over, the father walked once again to the front of the car and surveyed the engine compartment. An impression came then. "Cut that belt." And he knew which one.

He looked long at it. It connected two pulleys fastened to pieces of equipment whose purpose he could not conceive. As he regarded it, the impression persisted. He leaned through the open window of the car and told his wife what he was feeling.

There was simply no way to know in advance the consequences of the act. It was frightening. In the several minutes they had been stopped, only one car had passed, without slowing. If cutting the belt disabled the car completely, their situation would be terribly difficult.

It was the knife that gave him the courage to proceed. On any other trip, such an impression would have been meaningless. He would have had no way to cut the belt. He reflected a moment on the coincidence of the purchase of that knife and an impression to use it. Then he opened a blade and cut the belt. He started the engine; the shaking had ceased.

They stopped in Cameron thirty-five minutes later, and talked to a mechanic. The belt had something to do with the air conditioner. By cutting the belt, he had disconnected a worn out bearing. Without it, the trip might be a bit more uncomfortable, but the car would be fine. (Ted L. Gibbons, *Put Off Thy Shoes*, pp. Xxx

The significance of James 1:5,6 to the restoration cannot be overstated. The fore-knowledge of God is evident in the inspiration behind them. Somehow this passage on prayer, in a book containing hundreds of them, spoke to Joseph's heart with great power. Remember that he "reflected on it again and again." He must have weighed every word, every possible meaning, every nuance. Finally, he made his

way to the grove, convinced that what James had said was perfectly true, and saying by his walk there and his prayer there, “I believe the scriptures.”

In addition to this matter of real intent, many verses in the book of James suggest things that can estrange us from God and from his liberality. As you read, watch for the warnings and descriptions that will show you the path of obedience. For the truth is that our faith is only as strong as our obedience.

III. WE SHOULD CONTROL OUR TONGUES AND BE SLOW TO WRATH (James 1:19,20, 26; 3:2-18)

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath . . . (James 1:19)

James’ counsel in James 1:19 brings to mind the instruction in Ecclesiastes about the “sacrifice of fools.”

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give *the sacrifice of fools*: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. (Eccl. 5:1,2, *emphasis added*)

Especially in the “house of God” it would be important to listen rather than to speak. This would be true of most meetings held the houses of worship of the Church, whether temples or chapels. People who go to be taught and then spend their time speaking rather than listening are in reality offering a foolish sacrifice.

James also instructed us to “be . . . slow to wrath.” (James 1:19) This is more instruction designed to help us become Christlike:

The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. (Nahum 1:3, *emphasis added*)

The relationship of the requirements in James 1:19 seem to say clearly that our ears

will always get us into less trouble than our mouths will. How much contention could be eliminated if we in our families and communities were always more willing to listen than to speak. That one condition would delay the arrival of wrath in almost any conversation.

In October Conference of 1999, Elder Wood of the Seventy gave a talk entitled "The Tongue of Angels." He said of the matter of controlling the tongue:

I've been struck by the fact that when Isaiah received his charge from the Lord, he bemoaned that he was "a man of unclean lips" and dwelt "in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). This sin too had to be purged from Isaiah if he was to bear the word of the Lord. Is it any wonder that psalmists and prophets alike have beseeched the Lord to "set a watch" before their lips and guard the "door" of their lips (Ps. 141:3), to help them sin not with their tongue (see Ps. 39:1)?

James said (still dealing with this matter of perfection) that "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and also able to bridle the whole body." (James 3:2)

Elder George A. Smith spoke delightfully (as he always did) of this matter on October 9th, 1867. He said:

There is a spirit among some of our young men in different settlements to appear rough and reckless; they indulge in rowdyism and cultivate the savage side of human nature. We ought to use all the influence and power we possess to suppress this, and to stir up in the minds of our young and old the necessity of cultivating simple, plain, innocent, and genteel manners. There is an idea out that a man who has to go to the canyon cannot do it without swearing, or that when he gets to the mouth of the canyon he must throw off his religion and swear all the way up and back again. Any man who entertains such a sentiment should dispense with it at once, for he needs his religion more there than anywhere else. The roads are rough, and there is danger of him being tipped over and breaking his neck, or mashing up his wagon or his team, and he needs the influence of his religion as much under such circumstances as under any others. The Elders of Israel should avoid indulging in rough language under all circumstances. Most men, if they thought there was a probability of them dying by some sudden accident, would begin to think about praying. When a man is more exposed to danger than at any other time I am sure he needs his

religion, for if he should have a log roll over him, and be sent into eternity with a big oath in his mouth, he might not be recognized as a Saint on the other side of the veil. Hence I would like our brethren, and would recommend them to dispense with the idea, that on some occasions they can lay their religion to one side. It is said that an old Quaker, on a certain occasion when his family were grossly insulted and abused, felt very much like chastising the offender, but his religion forbade him fighting. He bore it tolerably well for a time, but at last his patience was exhausted, and, pulling off his broad-brimmed hat and his broad-tailed coat, said he--"Lie there religion until I lick this man." He might just as well have kept his religion on while doing the flogging. He might have felt as an uncle of Joseph Smith--Rev. Mr. Mack--did on a certain occasion. He was a Baptist minister, and was celebrated for his great physical strength. A professional pugilist went to see him once, and told him that hearing he was one of the strongest men in the state he had come to test his strength. The old man was too pious to wrestle or scuffle. The stranger said he would fight him, but Mr. Mack was too religious to fight. The stranger told him he had no ill will towards him, but said he--"I must and will know which is the strongest." Mr. Mack did his best to put him off, telling him that he was a minister and so forth, but the stranger would not be disappointed, and, as Mr. Mack turned round, he kicked him. The reverend gentleman's religion could not stand this, and he set to and gave the stranger a good thrashing. He went before his congregation and made a confession, which was something like unto this--"I bore all this patiently, notwithstanding my own nature was to try the man's strength, but after he kicked me I took off my coat and flogged him most properly." I think that kind of a rule might work under some circumstances; but at the same time a man should never lay down his religion, and should never believe that it is necessary to swear, not even in the canyon. *I tell you that every vile word we utter and every vile sentiment we entertain is a wrong for which we, some day, will have to atone.* When I hear men--young or old--talking intemperately or improperly, I realize that they have that folly to overcome and repent of. (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol.12, p.138-140, emphasis added)

Take a moment to review what James says about the tongue:

-) “The tongue . . . boasteth great things.”
-) “The tongue is a fire”
-) “The tongue is . . . a world of iniquity”
-) “The tongue setteth on fire the course of nature”
-) “The tongue is set on fire of hell”
-) “The tongue can no man tame”
-) “The tongue . . . is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison”

IV. WE SHOULD BE “DOERS OF THE WORD,” SHOWING OUR FAITH BY OUR WORKS (James 1:22-25,27; 2:14-26; 4:17)

James’ description of “pure religion” in 2:27 is all about doing and duty. In fact the whole book of James is about doing things, about the faith to act. His explanation of the relationship between faith and works in James 2:14-16 has for generations troubled those who believe that salvation is only by grace. And of course it is. Nephi wrote that “salvation is free,” (2 Nephi 2:4) and that Christ “hath given [salvation] free for all men . . .” (2 Nephi 26:27) The scriptures also tell us that we are saved not by our own righteousness but by the righteousness of our Redeemer. (see 2 Nephi 2:3; D&C 45:3-5) And that understanding is inherent in the language of James. But so many of our faithful Christian brethren have missed the point. Brigham Young taught it powerfully to the saints in Salt Lake one Sunday afternoon when he was informed that the survivors of an ill-fated handcart company, who had suffered so much in the snows and weather of Wyoming, were about to arrive. The Salt Lake saints were assembled that morning in the Tabernacle. Brigham Young said:

The afternoon meeting will be omitted, for I wish the sisters to go home and prepare to give those who have just arrived a mouthful of something to eat, and to wash them and nurse them up. You know that I would give more for a dish of pudding and milk, or a baked potato and salt, were I in the position of those persons who have just come in, than I would for all your prayers, though you were to stay here all the afternoon and pray. Prayer is good, but when baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place . . .
(Reported in the Salt Lake *Deseret News*, December 10, 1856, p. 320.)

There are times when faith or prayer without work are a travesty of righteous intent; that is, they are dead. As James said, “Seest thou how works wrought with his faith, and by works was faith made perfect?” (James 2:21, JST)

CONCLUSION

James has taught us with sweet simplicity some of the things we ought to do. The book is characterized by a description of vital Christianity—a Christianity based on good deeds and faith supported by doing things—by doing our duty. President Heber J. Grant spoke of the imperative need to be doing things—in fact he said that *doing* eclipses in importance any kind of *knowing*. He said that

There is but one path of safety to the Latter-day Saints, and that is the path of duty. It is not a testimony, it is not marvelous manifestation, it is not knowing that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that it is the plan of salvation--it is not actually knowing that the Savior is the Redeemer, and that Joseph Smith was His prophet that will save you and me; but it is the keeping of the commandments of God, living the life of a Latter-day Saint. (C.R. April, 1915, p. 82, or *Gospel Standards*, p.200)

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