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Review of James – Top Ten Themes (Selected Verses)

Brent Alderman / PO Box 2060, Annapolis, MD 21404 / brent.alderman@capitolcom.org / 240.818.3053

In our last study we concluded with the last passage in the book of James. Before moving on to our next series from another book (this time from the Old Testament), I'd like to do a quick review of what we saw as we journeyed through James' letter. I hope the studies were an encouragement to you. It is amazing how applicable these truths are to those in the political sphere! Let's take a look at the top ten themes that we were taught in James.

1. SUFFERING

James 1:2, 3; 5:10 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. . . As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

James is a book written to believers and early in the letter he makes it clear that trials are common, especially for those who follow Christ. For his first-century readers, persecution was much more prevalent than in twenty-first century America, but just by virtue of the fact that we are human, various forms of suffering will be present. James doesn't back away from addressing that fact, but throughout the rest of the book gives much needed encouragement to the one in pain.

2. WISDOM

James 1:5; 3:13 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. . . Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

What a crucial theme for politicians to consider! James tackles one of the most important needs of every person – how to make right choices. That skill requires the whole person's intellect, emotion and will, but James wisely points the needy wisdom-seeker to the true Source of all wisdom. Through prayer, the wisdom of God is available and this inner ability to see life for what it really is and take the right path will be clearly shown in outward actions.

3. PARTIALITY

James 2:1, 9, 13 My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. . . But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. . . For judgment is

without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

The principle of avoiding partiality is a difficult concept to live out for those in politics. Treating people equally, whether colleagues, staff, family or constituents can be a tricky feat. James reminds us that all people bear God's image regardless of whether they can do anything for us or not. When one keeps that in mind, mercy takes over where judgment would threaten to bring inequity.

4. FAITH AND WORKS

James 2:14, 17 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Probably the most controversial of the themes of James is the teaching on faith and works. If understood incorrectly or not reconciled with the rest of Scripture, one could come to a mistaken conclusion. The importance of both faith and works is clearly emphasized in chapter two, but their relationship to one another is key to grasping the nature of salvation.

The passage is adamant that saying that you have faith is not enough. True faith, as it works itself out in the life of a believer, will result in good actions. Since there are so many instances Scripture plainly eliminates the requirement of works for salvation, James underscores the truth that faith in one's heart will overflow into works that please God. But these works only give evidence of faith and aren't the basis of salvation.

5. THE TONGUE

James 3:7, 8 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Words have great power. We have seen it in the noble speeches of statesmen and the ranting of tyrants. They can create or tear down. It's stunning how you and I can recall actual words or sentences uttered by others decades after they were spoken. We also remember how those words made us feel. The stern warning from James is a reminder that we possess a small but lethal weapon. Used carelessly, it can devastate those we love and shatter relationships beyond

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repair. Part of the wisdom James writes about comes out in our words. Understanding its power is the first step. Harnessing its potential for building others up is a skill we can pursue for a lifetime and always find room for improvement.

6. HUMILITY

James 4:6, 10 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Again James addresses a tendency in all of us, namely pride. We are all wired to want our way in our timing. Submission is not our strong suit and verses such as these from chapter four focus us on the attitude that will please the Lord and display trust in his plan and timing. Grace and exaltation are promised to the one who, by exercising godly wisdom, bows to the will of Another, the One who knows all things. All we have to do is learn that we don't know it all and do not have all the answers.

7. SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

James 4:14, 15 . . . yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

The picture of the planning person in chapter four who wants to go to a city, make money and spend time there is typical of many in our world. Making concrete plans without consulting God or caring at all whether such a move would please him defeat the purpose of living a life of wisdom. But how often do we exclusively consult others or ourselves or our feelings and desires for supposed happiness? God's will is something we can find through knowing what he has revealed in Scripture, getting counsel from wise friends, and seeking guidance through prayer. Plans that are devised any other way can be foolish and destructive.

8. PATIENCE

James 5:7a, 11 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. . . Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Even though these verses are from the last chapter of James, patience is a thread that can be traced throughout the book. In the first couple of verses James already lets his readers in on an important truth: one of the main reasons for suffering in our world is for the purpose of developing patience. How many people have wandered from the faith because they didn't fully understand this?

If we look for rational answers to pain in our lives, the answers may never come. Anger at God due to difficult circumstances only feeds our natural desire to be in control and make sense of everything. But faith is not always rational. Trials are meant to produce patience, something we humans have in short supply. This patience or steadfastness is exemplified by God himself and proves his love for the one who suffers, for he is giving that one the opportunity to become more like him.

9. PRAYER

James 5:14, 16b Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. . . The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

These are beloved verses on prayer serving to remind us that the process of prayer and God's response to it will never be fully understood. Yet we still pray, believing in the God who hears and works in the lives of people. How it works is not our concern, but James joins many other authors in Scripture who encourage the child of God to stay in communion with him and seek his will and work on our behalf.

10. ACCOUNTABILITY

James 5:16a, 20 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another . . . let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James is written to the body of Christ and we are told in other epistles that we are members of each other. As such, we have a responsibility to each other to be accountable and help one another to live lives that glorify God. This is such an important theme that James ends his letter with the last verse quoted above.