



Lesson 1 February 18, 2010

"God's Imperatives"

Introduction

As we begin to study the book of James, we must remember that it is an epistle that deals with the practical realities of life and faith, the ethics of Christianity, not doctrine. James' overarching theme is the need for Christian maturity, so sorely lacking in the church today, and he logically outlines steps for us to follow in the process to maturity. It is not a book that endorses legalism and rules as some would suggest, but it is a book on faith that emphasizes the fruit of faith. Yes, "we are saved through faith; and not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9)." Faith is the cause of salvation, but the works that James describes are the result of salvation. While God can see and know our heart, our neighbors and family cannot – they can only see our faith by our actions and works. Note that Paul concludes his statement from Ephesians above by stating "that we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10)."

Consider that James, as Jesus' half brother (we will not take the time to establish his authorship, but responsible scholarship will confirm it) spent more time with the Lord than any of His disciples. Although James did not believe Jesus to be Lord until after His crucifixion and resurrection, James must have remembered much about His character and His life as a member of the family since the epistle corresponds to much of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount.

There are sixty imperatives, or commands, in one hundred nine verses in the book as James calls us to action as "doers of the word (1:22)" for he knew that a living, dynamic faith is manifested through good works. It is the only way that we can provide evidence of character, commitment, and integrity. As His people, our conduct makes a public comment about our Father. James wastes little time in background and begins his letter with four very specific commands in the first eight verses of the opening chapter.

1. In verse 1, James extends greetings, which can be more accurately translated as cheerful rejoicing and is one of his themes in facing trials. He then identifies the recipients of his letter – the twelve tribes, or more specifically, Christian Jews, who had been scattered. The word scattered connotes a farmer scattering his seed, and this action is one means by which the Lord orchestrates the spread of the gospel, (Acts 8:1) as some seed produced fruit. As you read these verses, note that the twelve tribes of Israel are not lost, as some have taught in error. How does Scripture confirm that point?



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2 Chronicles 11:14-16

Matthew 19:28

Luke 2:36-37

Revelation 7:4-8

2. In verses 2-4, James exhorts us to count or to evaluate it as a joy when, trials arise (v2), to know that our faith is always tested (v3), and to let patience begin to develop spiritual maturity (v4 -- pay particular attention to the importance given to the development of patience in this passage). In these three imperatives, James acknowledges that life in general, and the Christian life in particular, is subject to difficulties, but he encourages us to consider that such circumstances can be valuable lessons that teach us His ways and that mold us more and more into His image. How do these verses underscore that thought?

Genesis 50:20

Romans 5:3-5

2 Corinthians 4:17

1 Peter 1:7



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3. In verses 5-8, James further exhorts us to ask (his fourth imperative) God for the wisdom (v5) that will allow us to put his first three imperatives into practice. However, we must ask in faith and belief (v6) for unbelief will only produce instability in ourselves (v5-6, 8) with no response from God (v7). Without God given wisdom, we cannot learn the lessons that the Lord wishes to teach us, and we forfeit the opportunity for spiritual growth while still having to endure the trial. How do you think that we can learn to approach God with a believing faith? Remember that faith is obedience to His word despite the circumstances or the consequences of that obedience.

Genesis 22:1-14

Proverbs 1:7, 2:1-11

Matthew 7:7-8

Romans 10:17

Hebrews 11:6

Personal Application

True Christian life begins at the point of our birth, our being born again (John 3:7) – our salvation is not the end, it is the beginning – and our Lord expects us to begin the process of growing into maturity. “Be you therefore perfect (or mature), even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Unlike the physical process of growing into maturity, the spiritual process of maturing can only be realized by our making a conscientious, dedicated, and diligent effort toward that goal. James begins to outline practical steps that any believer can and should take in the pursuit of the goal of spiritual maturity.

James literally commands us to count or to evaluate life’s trials in light of eternity and to have goals and priorities that emphasize the spiritual, not the material. Trials can be expected in our everyday life – no one is immune – but if we value our need for the development of Christian character, then we can begin to count it joy in the midst of testing. To end with joy, we must begin with joy.



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But how can we rejoice in the midst of trials? James exhorts us to know, or to have an understanding mind, that our faith will always be tested. The tests of life work for us in helping us mature, for our Father wants to develop patience and endurance in us. “We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulations work patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope” (Romans 5:3-4). Patience is a courageous perseverance in the face of difficulty and works hand in hand with our belief and trust in God.

James then imperatively declares that we must let, or allow God through our surrendered will, to build our character through whatever means He deems appropriate. Our father wants us to be perfect and mature for He can only work through us after He works in us, but only with our cooperation.

Finally, James admonishes us to ask in faith with a believing heart for the wisdom to deal with life’s adversities in a Godly manner, not wasting the opportunity to learn that which the Lord wishes to teach us on our path toward maturity. It is not an easy path, and we many times will waver as James describes the unstable, but if we diligently continue in these four imperatives of counting, knowing, letting, and asking, our Father will grant us the wisdom and faith to grow in patience, maturity, belief, and stability. May we seek Him and love Him with all of our heart, soul, and might (Deuteronomy 6:5)