

Thinking on James

The Book of James

Dave Brisbin , August 13, 2005

Rather than diving into details, I think I'd like to take a more global and conceptual look at this book to get a handle on what it has to say generally about the process of this spiritual journey we're on—or supposed to be on.

Whenever I'm talking to someone about the spiritual journey or process, about spiritual principles or concepts, one of the most common questions I get is, "OK, but how do you *do* it?" "How do you get started and what exactly do you do to accomplish this thing." Aside from the fact that many/most of us don't even know how to define "this thing," it's a very reasonable question—and one that's not answered very well through the church, unfortunately.

Understanding the process itself, is, of course the first step. Jesus spent a lot of time trying to help his listeners in this very way. His repeated attempts to show us the Kingdom in stories, parables, word pictures, and especially in the actions of his life display for us how important this first step is. I've called it digging in the right spot: until we're standing over the X marking the spot, no amount of digging effort will ever get us any closer to the treasure. Another pastor recently used the image of buttoning your first shirt-button to the second button hole. You can button it all the way down from there, but it just won't be right. Any way you look at it, Jesus knew that we first had to have a good, conceptual understanding of what it is we're trying to accomplish in terms of our spiritual journey, our purpose here on earth. We need to clear away everything that's not useful, and take another first look at what's left. That's the role of the teacher and the counselor—to provide a framework within which a person can begin their journey—an X under which to begin digging. But as (of all people) martial artist Bruce Lee said, "I can't teach you anything. I can only help you to explore on our own," our efficacy as teachers is limited. I think we in the church forget this and have assumed that we can simply relay or transfer "truth" to people. Tell them how to successfully live their lives.

Western World, Western Church

We as Western thinkers have been seduced into the notion that everything can be reduced to mathematical equations or verbal expressions that fully describe a process or object; to digitize, to reduce something to numbers that will allow the full manipulation of that object and to make it then "work" for us. To analyze, compartmentalize, categorize, to catalogue, to thrust a pin through and place it under glass to visit from time to time as an accomplished act or fact—something completely understood and tamed as we move on to new frontiers of knowledge. This process has served the Western world well in the last 500 years in terms of science and industry, but it's been a disaster in terms of our spiritual and personal worldview. Our scientific accomplishments have come at the expense of our spiritual progress, our very ability to find the X that marks the spiritual treasure spot. And the Western church has gone right along for the Western ride.

From the deep mystical and spiritual grounding of ancient and medieval Christians, who prized direct experience with God and the other-centered lifestyles that flowed from that experience, we have come to ubiquitous "How To" books that break down our spirituality in neat categories, templates, and numbered lists. We hear speakers and pastors from more and more audio-visual venues telling us how to "do it." We see the footprints of Western marketing, economics, science, technology, and imperialism all over our churches—from the way they are organized to the messages we impart. Western thinking is, after all, our worldview, so we're really not even aware of it as we use it. It's the ground we walk on and the air we breathe. Even as I try to avoid the pitfalls of this thinking, I'm using it to describe my very efforts to avoid it. It's like thinking in a native language while trying to translate mentally into a second. Until we can actually think in the second language, we are always losing something in the translation. And here, that something lost is vital to our ability to understand the process of relating to God and each other, in other words, living in the Kingdom of God.

The Jesus-James Alternative

I know I digress, but by way of introduction, the Book of James seems to act as a kind of antidote to all this. First off, James is an intensely Jewish book. The Jews, from the most ancient times to today, have a genius for practicality, for what I'm starting to call *herenowness*. Jewish spiritual thinking is almost entirely focused on herenow, rather than on some future time or afterlife. (Jews then and now don't even have a clear concept of the

afterlife or a doctrine concerning it.) While it's true that by Jesus' time there was a lot of focus on the coming of a messiah who would restore the political and temporal throne of David and overthrow the Romans, the foreign imperial power du jour, it was Jesus himself who was trying to redirect Jewish thought back to the present moment and what that moment held in terms of unity of relationship. Jesus was trying to bring his listeners back to the original intent of the Law and practice and process of relating to God and each other right here and now. His model and image of what this process looked like in people's lives was the Kingdom of God—the living in the awareness of God's presence every moment of our lives. And all the images, symbols, and topics Jesus chose to illustrate this Kingdom had to do with everyday life, with the moment-by-moment activities that define the relationships that we have with our families, our most intimate neighbors, most casual acquaintances, and most despised adversaries. Our relationship with God, Jesus is saying, is only as good as our worst relationship with one another. We love God *by* loving each other. We see God in the faces around us, and we demonstrate what we believe in how we live these relationships. Or better, what we truly believe flows naturally from who we've become because of what we truly believe.

If this is starting to sound familiar in terms of James, it should. James, the traditional writer of the book, was the brother (or most likely a cousin as there is no Aramaic word for cousin) of Jesus, one of the most intimate of Jesus' followers, later called James the Just or James son of Clopas, a "pillar" of the Jerusalem church, and the first "nasi" (Hebrew for president or leader) of the first followers of Jesus in Palestine. According to early church documents, he led the primitive church for nearly 30 years until his execution by stoning in the year 62. James' account of how to proceed in the footsteps of Jesus very closely reflect not only Jesus' teaching, but the flavor, imagery, and emphases of Jesus as well. In many ways, James much more closely reflects Jesus' main thrusts than does Paul, who takes a more cerebral, academic approach. Consider what some argue to be a direct contradiction between James and Paul:

Paul writes in Eph 2:8: For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

And James in Jam 2:24: You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Now careful analysis will show that the two men were not in essential disagreement, but certainly the method of expression and the emphasis is quite different. James is taking a typical Jewish approach with emphasis on the herenow, the practical, all the small details of life that when added up and totaled, tell the tale of a person's identity. And identity is key. When God is asked who He is by Moses, He responds simply, "I am." Or, "I am that I am." In other words, what you see is what you get. God is all that He is and seems to be, and all that is, is a manifestation of the unity of that existence. Jesus says that He and the Father are one, if you've seen Him, you've seen the Father, and in his last prayer for us in John 17, He prays that we will all be one as He and the Father are one. Identity. We are here to find our identity. You want purpose in life? That's it. Who are you? The question can only be answered in relation to ultimate reality, the "I am" of God. Who we are depends on who God is. The question has no meaning otherwise. And both our understanding of who God is and our relationship to Him depends solely on the quality of our journey, our Way. This is the Kingdom of Jesus, the narrow Way that leads to life. But how do we *do* it?

X Marks the W Spot

In the broadest strokes, James is telling us that we do it first by knowing where the X is. Where to dig. Beginning at the beginning in the first chapter, he first tells us we need to understand life on its own terms. Life is difficult, in the words of Scott Peck, but the difficulties, if understood properly, will come not unexpectedly and not even adversarially. They really and truly can be seen as friends or blessings that come to help complete and mature us. Seeing life in this way, if not exactly helping us to make friends with tribulation, can at least help us make friends with life, to change our expectations of what life offers and so change our attitude toward it. (In this respect, it's critical to understand that we can be content and unhappy at the same time. Biblical contentment or joy is not based on emotion or external circumstances, but inward assurance and trust.) Changing our thinking is the prerequisite for changing anything else in life. We need to hear it before we can sing it, and see it before we can live it. James knows this and starts right there. And what is it that living gracefully and purposefully through trials brings us?

Well, wisdom, of course. And wisdom here is being seen in the traditional sense of Holy Wisdom, hokhmah in the Hebrew or sophia in the Greek, that is the underlying, broad, full knowledge, purpose, desire, even pleasure, or will of God. Holy wisdom was personified as female by the ancients and was seen as the constant companion of God. See Proverbs 8:22-31 for a wonderful description of hokhmah being "possessed by God" before all of creation, and

being present through all His works “of old.” This holy wisdom, originally seen as an attribute of God alone, began to be seen as acquirable for us through our identification with the Spirit of God. It is our ability to identify with God, to become one with Him as Jesus was, that allows us to see ourselves as God sees us and to have an accurate perception of life and our part in it. As practical James is telling us, this wisdom cannot be separated from the day-to-day details of life. It is the knowledge and purpose of God *applied to life* and the relationships of living that is prized in James’ letter.

Filling in the Details

Look at the topics and details that James uses to illustrate the Way of Jesus. In chapter 1, after showing us the right way to look at life and life’s trials, he holds up wisdom as the goal and tells us how to go about obtaining it: asking without doubt or double-mindedness. This is the corollary to his comments about trials—that the testing of faith as experienced in life’s difficulties produces endurance, and endurance produces the trust necessary to displace the doubt and vacillation associated with it. After all, doubt and vacillation are manifestations of fear and wisdom is a manifestation of love, so the two are mutually exclusive as we read in 1 John 4:18. There is a flow here, from having an accurate perception of life to the experience, faith, and trust that leads to wisdom. And how is that wisdom manifested in a person’s life?

James begins to paint a picture as he goes on to warn about the dangers of trusting in materialism; of the nature of temptation and how it is avoided; he speaks of trusting the steadfastness of God’s provision; of how to listen and how to speak; of the harm of giving vent to anger; of putting aside lower/vulgar things; of being doers of the word and not merely hearers; that to merely hear without a change in living life is a loss of proper identity; that controlling the tongue is primary; and distinguishing between the merely religious and the purely spiritual is prerequisite to avoiding self-deception. All this packed into the first short chapter. James seems to be running through a catalog of behaviors and pitfalls in life, but he’s only warming up.

In chapter two, he begins by talking about the avoidance of favoritism or any partiality in the church; he talks about what it really means to love each other and that faith without works is a dead thing; that mere belief is not enough if it doesn’t inform our choices in life. Then in chapter three he returns to the subject of the tongue and the need for integrity between what is spoken and what is done. In chapter four he talks about submission and drawing near to God as opposed to independence and arrogance in attitude and behavior. And finally in chapter five, he warns again about the seduction of materialism, extols patience and perseverance as virtues, warns against taking oaths; raises the importance of prayer and praise in daily life, as well as the mentoring of others in all these ways.

Transform v. Conform

I don’t know of a single significant area of life that James omitted. He has covered the gamut of the details of day-to-day living, and if we take these admonitions and couple them with v2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone,” it can seem that James is preaching a gospel of works, of legalism—especially when contrasted with the writings of Paul. But is this what James is saying? Not at all. A careful reading of James tells us that James is no legalist. He is not telling us to be mere conformers to the Law, or to the code of behavior he’s laying out. What he is telling us is that if our faith has not radically *transformed* us, then it’s really not faith at all. It’s not about conformance, but *transformance*. He is telling the people of his church and us that if we don’t see this fruit in our lives, then don’t be deceived; we’re playing a religious game, with no real substance. The behavioral guidelines of James are the *picture of the finished product, not the recipe for getting there*. It’s not by following the rules that we are justified, but if we are justified, we’ll find ourselves following the rules, not consciously, but the rules will have become a part of us. Loving each other will be written on our hearts in such a way, and our identity with God’s purpose will be so ingrained in us that we’ll be able to say with Jesus, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.” Our reactions and responses will be automatically like Jesus’ or the Fathers’.

Faith v. Works

It’s in this way that faith without works is dead. For instance, in a very real sense, electricity doesn’t exist in a pure state. You can look at a live electrical outlet, but there really isn’t any electricity there until you plug something in, put a load on the circuit and perform some work: light a filament, heat a coil, turn a motor. It’s in the closed circuit, in the work being performed that electricity actually exists. Before that, there is only the *potential* for electricity to exist. James is saying the same thing is true for faith. The potential for faith to exist is set up in the mental assent of our belief. We believe something about God to be true, but until we put a load on our circuit and behave in a loving way, there really is no faith. Faith is always in motion, flowing through some relationship as electricity through a

circuit. James is no legalist; he's a realist, a pragmatist, a good Jew in his thinking. And in this way, he's given us a roadmap for negotiating our spiritual journey, and guidelines for the mentoring and counseling of others.

Spiritual v. Physical

First of all, the spiritual life can't be separated from the physical life. The two function together. We Westerners, just like ancient Gnostics like to think in terms of dualities: opposing and opposite forces such as light and dark, good and evil, spirit and flesh, faith and works, etc. It's a binary world of on and off, this and that, with no connection between the two. But the Eastern mind (which includes the ancient Jews) doesn't think in terms of dualities, but of the connectedness of all things. Even light and dark, good and evil were seen as continuums bridging the gaps between poles. Just as light sometimes appears as waves and other times as particles (connected or disconnected) our lives reflect both of these same properties, and both are good and necessary. We can experience connectedness in our individuality, and yet can continue to experience our individuality in the connectedness of all. To be more spiritual is not to be less physical or to remove ourselves from the "world." It is in the world that spiritual truth is played out in this life. That's very Jewish and very James—the herenowness of our faith. This is not an academic exercise, but one we really live out in every face around us.

Once we've securely embedded the spiritual into daily life and understand the connection between the two, we need to see that life as it really is and accept the difficulties of life as the agent of change and acquisition of wisdom. It's in the cycles of this process, in the humility and submission of a life being lived simultaneously on two planes, the spiritual and physical that we begin to bring heaven to earth and earth into heaven. And it's in this process that we begin to look more and more like the Law, like Jesus, like the Father.

James the Just Counselor

From a counseling and mentoring point of view, we first need to help others change the way they view their spirituality and the terms of life in general. To paraphrase Chris Thurman (from his book *The Lies We Believe*), we need to help people dispel the lies they believe that limit their ability to see and live life as it is and not as they wish it to be or fear that it may be. Giving people an X to mark the spot is the first step, as both James and Jesus showed us. From there, reinforcing the picture of the finished product: "the Kingdom of Heaven is like..." in endless word pictures and stories and above all in the model of our own lives is priceless in forming a clear concept in another's mind of what it looks and feels like to live in the daily presence of God.

Then comes the inevitable question: how do you *do* it? You do it by *living* it. There just is no other way. Remembering that our own understanding and assurance is not directly transferable to anyone else, we need to be patient, helping people learn how to explore on their own—understanding that though we really teach them nothing, we can show them everything and let them interpret as they will and find their own way. The spiritual journey is intensely personal. No one can simply hitch their wagon to another or the church and go along for the ride. Active and rigorous participation is required of each one of us in order to enter the narrow gate and travel the narrow path—another expression of herenow from Jesus. I suppose from a counseling and mentoring point of view, the greatest gift we can give anyone is the stoking of their desire to enter into this active and dynamic Way of life, to sense the excitement and adventure of life lived abundantly. And I suppose the only way this is done is through the example of our own lives. After all, to paraphrase Henri Nouwen from *Life of the Beloved*, we can't give anything we don't first possess for ourselves.

Or as Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel continuously. Use words where necessary."