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## *A Faith that Works* *The Epistle of James*

***You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (2:24)***

***“The Eyes of Faith”***

**April 12, 2015**

**Sermon Text:** James 1

**Scripture Reading:** 1 Peter 1:1-12

**Introduction-**

James 1:1-4 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. (2) Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, (3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (4) And let steadfastness have its full effect,

that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

We learned last time that the author of this epistle is thought to be the James that was the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, not the James of “James and John” the sons of Zebedee who was one of the original 12 apostles. This James became a leader of the church in Jerusalem quite early on, as we know from numbers of references in Acts and Galatians.

James is writing about faith. About a faith that works, that is genuine, and how we must take care not to be deceived by a false faith. For example:

James 1:22-26 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (23) For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. (24) For he looks at himself and goes away and at once

forgets what he was like. (25) But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (26) If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

James 2:14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James 4:4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 5:19-20 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, (20) 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.

There is another interesting characteristic of James' writing and preaching (this epistle really is like a sermon) that we see throughout the letter. Namely, like a good pastor, James speaks, as he addresses local

churches through this letter, to two groups of people, both of which claim to be Christians. He will speak to his "beloved brothers" one moment, then turn to an almost thunderous admonishment of the hypocrite who might be hearing him. For example:

James 1:26-27 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. (27) Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

And again –

James 4:4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

One of the most common and serious errors in our day is to pronounce everyone sitting in a church service "blessed" by the Lord, simply because they are there or have made some kind of claim to be a Christian. This is the normal practice in many local churches, is it not? (Of course the equally serious error is preaching that assumes that virtually NO ONE is blessed by God! That is the error of the

legalist). James' main focus however seems to be on the person who claims Christ but whose faith is shown to be spurious by his lack of the fruit of genuine faith – fruit that James calls, “works.”

Every time a visible, local church gathers, we must always understand that we must speak and apply God's Word to two kinds of people: those who truly are in Christ, and those who have deceived themselves about being in Christ. It is then up to the Spirit to take that Word and apply it properly and accurately to people as only He can. We dare not err by:

1. Speaking as if everyone present in any gathering of the church is assuredly in Christ,
2. Speaking as if it is doubtful that ANYONE in the church is really saved. (Although in some churches that may be appropriate!)

### **The Church in the Dispersion**

I was taught that James wrote to Jews who had professed Christ and who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Israel had undergone other dispersions – expulsions from the Promised Land, in the past – such as the deportation to Babylon back in Daniel's day. It is interesting that Peter speaks similarly to James,

addressing Christians who were “in Babylon” or “exiles of the dispersion.”

1 Peter 5:13 She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son.

1 Peter 1:1-2 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, (2) according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

I want to suggest to you that it is quite possible and I believe probable that both James and Peter are not writing merely to Jewish people who are Christians, but that they are addressing *the church, consisting of both Jew and Gentile, as Israel in a state of exile.* Let's think through this idea a bit further and apply it to ourselves.

Certainly in the New Testament days, there were Jewish people scattered throughout the world. Not all the Jews by any means returned to Israel after the Babylonian captivity in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Most of them remained in the “diaspora” which is what the dispersion was called. They

were viewed as exiled. And here it appears to me that both Peter and James are using that “exile” and “dispersion” language, only they are applying it to all Christians throughout the world. If this be the case, then the question is – what are WE, the church, in exile from? And the answer is – from our inheritance. From our Land. From the Land and home that Christ has prepared for us. We are exiles in this world:

Hebrews 11:13-14 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (14) For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

1 Peter 1:17-19 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, (18) knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, (19) but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

1 Peter 2:11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain

from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

This means two things:

1. The church is in fact the true Israel, and
2. The church is presently in exile in this present world, awaiting a great Exodus yet to come and a return to our true homeland.

James even addresses the church then as “the twelve tribes.” Of course this is where we embrace quite a different interpretation of Scriptures like this than that endorsed by Christians who are dispensational in their theology. They would maintain that James and Peter are addressing literal Jews – that the 12 tribes could only mean the 12 tribes of Israel. Well, we believe that as well, but we maintain that James uses 12 tribes as an Old Testament type that is fulfilled by the New Testament church. [On this note it is interesting that Jesus chose 12 Apostles].

Christian, YOU are an exile in this present world. That means that your real homeland, your real country and citizenship *is not in this life and not in this place.*

Philippians 3:20-21 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus

Christ, (21) who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Listen to this again –

Hebrews 11:13-14 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (14) For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

This is the description of true faith, of the true people of Christ while we are still in this world. We *die in faith*. Even at the moment we lie on our death bed, *still not having received the things promised us by the Lord*, we remain in faith, trusting His promises, because:

1. We have seen these things and welcomed them, even though they are in a far off place,
2. We have come to understand that we are strangers and exiles in this world. That our land is not this land.
3. And therefore a Christian is a person who is – a seeker, a pilgrim, a person who is traveling

through on the way to his true home.

Christian, how is it that the Lord says that you have SEEN the promises? I think this is a reference to what we can call “the eyes” of true faith –

Hebrews 11:1-6 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (2) For by it the people of old received their commendation. (3) By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (4) By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. (5) By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. (6) And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

The conviction of things not seen, and therefore, *seen*. It is by the eyes of faith that we see and believe

*everything* God’s Word tells us. We were not present at creation, and yet by faith in what the Lord has told us about creation, we are “eyewitnesses” of a rather incredible thing – a universe created out of nothing. And it is through this faith in God’s Word that Christ’s own people have been “commended as righteous” – Abel, Enoch, Abraham, and you.

All of these truths are wrapped up in this wider truth that WE who are in Christ are the true Israel, the real 12 tribes, in exile and dispersed throughout this present world as strangers, as citizens of another Place.

*Therefore....*

James 1:2-4 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, (3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

In this earthly life, we experience trouble and trials. Some more, some less than others – the degree probably determined by the Lord according to the weakness or strength of our faith (though of this we cannot be certain). Many young people have not experienced severe trials yet. But be assured that before your earthly life is

over, you will. Life it seems, does not get easier as we grow in years. Our present lives and all the details of them do not so often turn out as we had imagined. After all, we do not write the script. And right here in these opening verses of James’ letter, we find that he turns to this very topic –

*“Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds.”*

Genuine, true, saving faith *perseveres*. It does this:

Revelation 12:10-11 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. (11) And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

See it? This true faith, which is given to us as a gift by the Lord, by its very nature can never be extinguished. This is what “persevering to the end” means. It means a faith that never dies. It can be assaulted and seem close to failing, but as the confession of faith says, it always gets the victory.

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord's supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.

By this faith a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word for the authority of God himself, and also apprehends an excellency therein above all other writings and all things in the world, as it bears forth the glory of God in his attributes, the excellency of Christ in his nature and offices, and the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit in his workings and operations: and so is enabled to cast his soul upon the truth consequently believed; and also acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come; but the principle acts of saving faith have immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification,

sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

This faith, although it be in different stages, and may be weak or strong, yet it is in the least degree of it different in the kind or nature of it, as is all other saving grace, from the faith and common grace of temporary believers; and therefore, though it may be many times assailed and weakened, yet it gets the victory, growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

And it is this faith that I suggest to you is the large theme of the book of James.

And so James here speaks to us “strangers and exiles” to encourage us and, as we will see, to challenge anyone who claims to have this faith yet who does not. He reminds us immediately that this world is not our home; that we really are “just passing through.” And he tells us that for our good, for the strengthening of this faith so that we can persevere in faith in the face of the most severe trials, that the Lord allows various kinds of trials to come our way:

- For the testing of your faith
- To produce steadfastness of faith

This steadfastness, this persevering in faith in the Word and Promises of the Lord even in the most intense trials, has this effect:

*“that we would be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

Our sanctification, you see, is largely all connected with the strengthening of our faith.

Think it through – how much weight the Lord Himself puts on this matter of our faith, for His glory. Consider for instance, as you think back through the Scriptures:

Genesis 17:15-17 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. (16) I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." (17) Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Genesis 22:1-18 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." (2) He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac,

whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (3) So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (4) On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. (5) Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." (6) And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. (7) And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (8) Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. (9) When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. (10) Then Abraham reached out his hand and



took the knife to slaughter his son. (11) But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." (12) He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." (13) And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. (14) So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." (15) And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven (16) and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, (17) I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, (18) and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

This is why the author of Hebrews says in that great 11<sup>th</sup> chapter after he had recounted over and over...by faith, by faith, by faith...

Hebrews 11:32-40 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- (33) who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (35) Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. (36) Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. (37) They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated-- (38) of whom the world was not worthy--wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (39) And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, (40) since God had provided something better for us, that apart

from us they should not be made perfect.

These are the things James is speaking to us about. Our faith. Its testing. Its strengthening. Its value.

As we hear from James then in these next weeks, may the Lord strengthen our faith that we might live lives more glorifying to Him, and that we might begin to experience more and more of this “counting it all joy” in the face of trial because we know with even greater confidence that the Lord’s promises are most certainly true, and that we are headed for our real and eternal home.

Horatius Bonar, long years ago (1856), wrote these verses while he was watching the morning sunrise –

*Yet look we for a sunrise  
More beautiful than this,  
And watch we for a dawning  
Of purer light and bliss;*

*When a far fairer morning  
O’er greener hills shall rise,  
And a far fresher sunlight  
Look down from bluer skies.*

*Is not creation weary?  
Has sin not reigned too long?  
Hear, Lord, Thy Church’s pleading,  
Come, end her day of wrong!*