

The Message of James

by G. Campbell Morgan

The letter of James teaches that faith in God produces life according to the will of God, and that we can prove our faith by venturing on it and perfecting our patience.

Scripture: Matthew 5:20, Matthew 5:48 - 6:1, Galatians 2:20, Hebrews 10:38, James 1:2-4, James 1:12, James 2:1, James 3:17, James 4:7

Topics: "Faith in Action", "The Power of Faith"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes in 'The Message of James' that true faith in God manifests itself through a life aligned with His will, producing patience in trials, steadfastness against temptation, and love in religious practice. He contrasts this with a life that denies faith, characterized by strife, respect of persons, and unbridled speech. Morgan calls believers to prove their faith through action and to perfect their patience, highlighting that the life of faith is both perilous and powerful, challenging worldly norms and overcoming spiritual opposition. He concludes that faith fosters unity and love within the church, eliminating class distinctions and strife.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching

i Positive. Faith in God produces Life according to the Will of God.

a. Personal Life.

1. In Trial. Patience.

2. In Enticement. Steadfastness.

3. In Religion. Love.

b. Relative Life.

1. In Thought. No Respect of Persons.

2. In Speech. The Silence of heavenly Wisdom.

3. In Action. Peace.

ii. Negative. Life contrary to the Will of God denies Faith in God.

a. Personal Life.

1. In Trial. Storm-tossed.

2. In Enticement. Drawn away.

3. In Religion. Unbridled.

b. Relative Life

1. In Thought. Respect of Persons.

2. In Speech. Set on Fire of Hell.

3. In Action. Strife.

II. The Abiding Appeal

i Prove your Faith.

a. Venture on it.

b. Vindicate it.

ii. Perfect your Patience.

a. It comes by proving Faith.

b. It issues in perfect Life.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. Individual

i. The Life of Faith is a life of Peril.

a. It challenges the Spirit of the Age.

b. It denies the Call of the Flesh.

c. It provokes the Enmity of the Devil.

ii. The Life of Faith is the Life of Power.

a. It is superior to the Spirit of the Age.

b. It triumphs over the Claim of the Flesh.

c. It causes the Devil to flee.

iii. Life lacking these Signs is not the Life of Faith.

II. Church

i. In the Assembly Faith kills Class Distinctions.

ii. In the Assembly Faith makes Strife impossible.

iii. In the Assembly Faith is the Principle of Communion.

In dealing with the content of this letter we indicated its theme by suggesting as a subtitle, Christ and His Ethic. Its burden is ethical, not doctrinal. Some of the fundamental truths of our most holy religion are hardly referred to from beginning to end. The writer was preeminently occupied with the practice of Christianity.

There are many parallelisms between the Manifesto of Jesus and this letter of James. Let us recall three passages in that Manifesto (Matthew v.20; v.48; vi.1);

"I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven."

"Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

"Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father which is in heaven."

I have taken these three because in some senses they are inclusive. In the first one, by way of introduction our Lord uttered the fundamental demand of His ethic; "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven." These words were spoken immediately before the actual enunciation of His laws.

In the second the King revealed the ultimate aim of His ethic; "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Immediately following we have the King's revelation of the abiding principle of His ethic; "Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them."

The fundamental demand was for righteousness exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, which was intellectually orthodox, but lacked the harmony of the corresponding life.

The ultimate aim was that of the perfecting of humanity in harmony with the character of God.

The abiding principle was that of doing everything as in the sight of God, and to be pleasing to Him, rather than in the sight of men, to be pleasing to them. In these three words then we have the master principle of the ethic of Jesus.

For the purpose of the present study and by way of introduction let us give a little closer attention to the word revealing the ultimate aim; "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." With that in mind we turn at once to the letter of James, and within the first few sentences we find these words, "Let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing." The interpretation of the perfection which James enjoined must be discovered by an understanding of the

perfection which Jesus demanded.

Before uttering His laws, Jesus had said that righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Righteousness is not to be a thing of words, but of works; not of creed, but of conduct ; not orthodoxy of doctrine, but fulfillment of duty. Perfection is righteousness according to the will of God, rather than according to the opinion of men.

That perfection, the perfection of righteousness which seeks to be pleasing to God, and makes that the one unending, unceasing, unbending aim of the life, can only result from faith in God. So that the root of righteousness is faith, and the fruit of faith is righteousness. That takes us back to that central enunciation of the master principle of life in the prophecy of Habakkuk, "The just shall live by his faith." That word of Habakkuk reappears constantly in the teaching of Jesus. He consistently linked life to belief. One supreme illustration is found in a word recorded in the third chapter of John, "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life." We must not be narrow in our interpretation of that great word. It has to do most certainly with the initial fact that a man believing on Jesus receives the gift of life; but it has a much wider application. Life is the outcome of faith. "The just shall live by his faith," both as to the beginning, and as to the continued victories and manifestations. The proof of a man's belief in Christ is the manifestation of the Christ-life in that man's life.

Paul argued for the same principle and always in relation to Christ Himself. In Galatians he declared that there is no righteousness by law, and quoted the word of Habakkuk. In Romans he put the declaration into close connection with faith in the gospel of the Son of God. In Hebrews, he-or some one else-put the same quotation in relation to the second Advent of our Lord.

That principle is recognized by James. It was stated to the prophet; the fulfillment of it was claimed by Christ in His own Person ; it was argued by the great apologist of the gospel, Paul ; it was illustrated by James. The theme of James was preeminently that of faith producing works. James did not argue against faith; he argued for faith.

Recognizing this fact we turn to consider the essential message of the letter, and find that its central teaching has a positive and a negative emphasis. The positive teaching may be summarized thus; Faith in God produces life according to the will of God; while the negative teaching is that life contrary to the will of God denies faith in God.

It may appear at first sight that the teaching of this letter is entirely negative, but the negative is only of value as we discover the positive behind it. It may be said that the negative is really the central teaching ; if a man say he has faith, let him show it by his works; life contrary to the will of God denies faith in God ; if a man shall say he has faith, and his life is not life that springs out of faith, then his affirmation of faith is false. But it is at once evident that such a negative statement implies a positive truth. Consequently we have in this letter quite as surely the positive teaching that faith in God produces life according to the will of God.

The abiding appeal of the letter is twofold; first, prove your faith; secondly, perfect your patience. The two injunctions are intimately associated.

There is an application of the letter ; first to the individual, and secondly to the Church.

Familiarity with the movement of the letter, with its content and line of argument, will show how James first of all declared that faith in God produces life according to the will of God; and that in two respects. He gave those to whom he wrote two pictures, one of personal life, and one of relative life; and in each case he illustrated the fact that where there is faith in God, the life harmonizes with the will of God, insisting that it must do so, that there can be no escape.

His first picture is one of individual life in circumstances of trial. He shows that where a man lives by faith in such circumstances his attitude is that of patience. Faith produces patience in trial. His next picture is one of individual life in the midst of enticement to evil. In such circumstances the man living by faith remains steadfast, and is victorious over every temptation. His final picture is one of individual life in the matter of religion. When there is faith in God, "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" ; that is to say, religion is love. The one and only principle which enables a man to live this life harmonizing with the will of God is faith in God.

When a man of faith is in the midst of circumstances of trial and difficulty, his attitude is that of calm patience. We know how true this is when we test the matter by personal experience. When the child of God in circumstances of trial is impatient, it is always because confidence in God wavers. Faith failing, patience passes away. Christian souls living by faith in God in the midst of circumstances of trial are not callous, not hardened. They are conscious of the sweeping of the storm; but they are filled with quietness and patience. Faith in God is the only principle which can produce that patience in the soul of any man or woman in circumstances of trial.

In dealing with the subject of enticement to evil, James gives us a wonderful definition of the genesis of sin. No man is lured towards evil by God. A man is drawn away, enticed of his own lust. By faith in God there is steadfastness, and refusal to answer the enticement. There is no other secret of victory over temptation to sin than that of faith in God. No man is safe to-day by reason of the fact that for ten, twenty, thirty, forty years he has been a Christian. Men are not safe one moment longer than they live by simple faith in God. It is perfect faith in God which gives perfect victory over enticement towards sin.

So also in the matter of the life of religion in the truest, deepest sense of the word. There is no more wonderful definition of religion in the New Testament than this; and it is only faith in God which inspires a man to give expression to his religion in acts of love and sympathy. Destroy faith in God, and by that act you destroy love towards man.

With regard to relative life, James shows what faith does for a man in these respects; in thought, in speech, in action.

In thought, by faith in God a man ceases to be a respecter of persons. As he looks upon his fellow men, if he have faith in God, he sees these men as they are related to God, and thus loses sight of the things that the man who lacks faith in God sees. If a man has no faith in God he is material in his outlook upon his fellow men, and expresses it by differentiating between rich and poor. The man who lives by faith in God sees every man as related to God. I have sometimes said in speaking of our Lord that which is not literally true, but which is true in spirit; that Jesus looked upon scribes and Pharisees and never saw their phylacteries; and looked at poor men and never saw their rags. That is not literally true, for He saw everything; but it is spiritually true that His mind was not affected by the incidentals, but by the essentials. We divide as between men, and hold them in differing approbation on the basis of the incidentals. By faith

in God every man is seen to be a man. The thought of every man as to his fellow man is determined by his faith in God, or his lack of such faith. Faith in God creates that attitude of mind towards our fellow men which may be described as having no respect of persons. "There is no respect of persons with God." The man who is living by faith shares the Divine attitude of mind towards men; he is without respect of persons.

As to speech, we must look for the positive carefully. James is emphatic about the negative, the evil of the tongue. The paragraph which immediately follows is one that speaks of the heavenly wisdom that will not lie. The speech of the man who lives by faith in God is characterized by the silence of heavenly wisdom. Faith in God makes more for silence than for speech about our fellow men.

As to action; faith in God brings peace as between man and man. Wars, strifes, enmities, these are never the outcome of faith in God. War in any kind never results from faith in God. When we come to the individual aspect, it is certain that strife as between man and man cannot be the outcome of faith in God.

The life of faith in God is a life that has no respect for persons; and is characterized by that carefulness in speech which is most often manifested in the silence of heavenly wisdom, and by those activities which produce peace between man and man. That constitutes the positive teaching of this letter.

We turn now to the negative. Life contrary to the will of God denies faith in God.

Personal life in trial is storm-tossed, like the waves of the sea; and such experience is proof of lack of faith in God. I say it very carefully because I know how it searches the heart, and yet I know it is true. When in hours of trial and suffering we murmur and complain, it is because we are failing in faith.

In the matter of enticement towards evil, a man is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. If he yield, it is because he fails in faith towards God. It is a searching, practical word. We cannot attend to the message of this letter without feeling how very practical it is. Whenever we sin it is because our faith fails. Discussions as to whether it is necessary for the believer to sin or not are surely unnecessary. Whenever we listen to the clamant cry of lust, and answer it independently of the Divine will, it is because we fight in our own strength; but it is finally because we fail to trust in God. No man need be overcome by enticement towards evil, if he live by faith in God.

In regard to religion, one illustration is sufficient, that of the unbridled tongue. That is the expression of an attitude of mind which is the opposite of love. Whenever the tongue is unbridled, untamed, unmanaged, there is evidence of lack of faith in God.

The negative teaching concerning relative life is equally clear. Where there is no faith in God there is respect of persons. If we show a man into a back seat in the church because he wears shabby clothes, we are saying by that action that we have lost faith in God. We have no business to know whether he has on goodly apparel or not. It is quite as possible to have respect of persons in the opposite direction, as in the one which we most often condemn. It is as possible to hold in contempt the man who is well dressed as to hold in contempt the man in rags. Faith in God does not see the incidentals. It is always conscious of the essentials.

In speech, lack of faith means the tongue set on fire of hell. Is there a more startling and awful word than that in the whole of Scripture? A tongue set on fire of hell is the result of lack of faith in God. Where there is faith in God there is the silence of heavenly wisdom. Where it is lacking the tongue is set on fire of hell.

It is almost impossible to read this word without feeling that James had in mind the symbol of the tongue of fire. Speech is always inspired in hell or in heaven. It is always the expression of heavenly wisdom or an utterance inspired of hell. When the tongue is used to say things that are contrary to love and truth, it is because there is failure of faith in God. The master principle of true speech is that of faith in God.

As to action ; wars, strifes, fightings, are all the outcome of fleshly lusts, all the result of the fact that the life is not governed by the principle of faith in God. The forces that overcome and spoil individual life, and relative life, are all the result of the absence of the master principle of faith in God.

The abiding appeal of this letter is first, Prove your faith. "Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations; knowing that the proof of your faith worketh patience. And let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing." In this connection, prove your faith means venture on it, put it to the test. So to prove faith is to vindicate it. Vindicate your faith by venturing on it. When you venture on it, it immediately produces a definite result, and that result proves, or demonstrates, your faith.

A man says, I have faith. Let him prove it. How shall he prove it? By argument? No, by venturing on it, by doing the things that are in harmony with faith in God. If a man says that he has faith, and does not venture on it, then no results are produced. If he do not thus prove it, he cannot prove it at all. If he do not put this principle of faith into active proof, he cannot demonstrate the fact that he has faith; he rather demonstrates the fact that he lacks faith. As we pass through this letter and read the things that are denounced as evil things, and then look at our own lives, and find these things existing, we know that the measure in which these things are present is the measure of our lack of faith. On the other hand the measure in which life perfectly harmonizing with the will of God is manifest in conduct, is the measure in which we are proving that we have faith. We prove the faith we have, and so we prove that we have faith. A man says, I have faith. I have no right to deny it; but I have the right to say: Prove your faith, put it to the test; live by faith homed in God, aiming at the perfection upon which the heart of God is set, and expect that by your faith in Him He will cooperate with you in that activity. He always does. In every victory won by faith there is the evidence of faith.

The second note of the appeal is, Perfect your patience. Patience comes by proving faith; and patience issues in perfect life. "Let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire," Notice the process. Faith is first. I believe the thing that God says. I will prove my faith by venturing on it, and doing the thing I could not do without it. In that deed I prove my faith to another man. In that victory won, patience fills my soul, I come to quietness and strength. When that patience, which is the outcome of faith, has completed its process, I shall be "perfect and entire, lacking in nothing."

Thus it is clear that James was not arguing against faith; he was arguing for it. He revealed the fact that faith is the one and only principle that is equal to that perfection of life, upon which the heart of the Lord is set.

The application of this letter to the individual is twofold. It teaches me first that the life of faith is a life of peril; and secondly, that the life of faith is a life of power.

The life of faith is a life of peril. We cannot live the life of faith in God without being immediately in great peril.

The life of faith challenges the spirit of the age. The spirit of the age is not in favour of faith; it never has been, it is not to-day. The spirit of the age is the spirit of life by sight, by wit, by wisdom, and by human cleverness. To live the life of faith is immediately to challenge the spirit of the age.

The life of faith denies the call of the flesh. The moment we begin the life of faith in God, we begin where Christ said we must, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself."

The life of faith provokes the enmity of the devil, because the life of faith is the only life that challenges the empire of sin. When a man begins to live by faith he inevitably therefore provokes the enmity of the devil. That is why the young Christian so often asks, How is it that since I gave myself to Christ I have been tempted as I have never been tempted before? immediately a man is regenerated he becomes the object of the attack of all spiritual antagonisms. The life of faith is not a soft, dilettante life in which we sing hymns all the time. It is a life of conflict, demanding heroism and courage and definiteness. It is a life of peril.

"They climbed the steep ascent to heaven,

Through peril, toil and pain,"

is always true of the saints.

But the life of faith is a life of power. If it challenge the spirit of the age, it is superior to the spirit of the age.

If the life of faith denies the call of the flesh, it triumphs over the claim of the flesh.

If the life of faith provokes the enmity of the devil, it causes the devil to flee. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." There is no other way in which you can compel him to flee.

Wherever a man is living by faith he is living the life of power. I suppose one would have to argue that in the case of many a man. Some one is saying, This is all theory. No, it is more; it is experience. For that simple faith in God that obeys and ventures I am not an advocate merely. As a witness I declare that I have, and can, and do, overcome where else I were overcome. The life of faith is a life of peril; but it is also a life of power.

The last word is an application of this teaching to the Church.

In the assembly of the saints faith kills class distinctions. A community of men and women living by faith in God is at the end of the distinctions which are of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Let every church then test its faith not by recitation of its creed, but by that inner atmosphere of true communism and fellowship. The life of faith destroys all class distinctions.

In the assembly of the saints faith makes strife impossible. In that aspect of the assembly which is local, or in that which is catholic, where there is strife there is lack of faith in God.

In the assembly of the saints faith is the principle of communion. If we would correct the things of difference and hatred that are amongst us, we need to say to our Lord and Master what one said to Him of old, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief."

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net