

James 1:1-8, No. 1**“Introduction”****October 18, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

I mentioned, in announcing this new series of evening sermons, that we would be studying the New Testament’s Book of Proverbs, or, at least, the book of the New Testament most like the book of Proverbs. I wonder how many of you guessed which book it is. Listen to this from J.I. Packer.

“Of the five wisdom books of the Old Testament, it has been classically said (I think by Oswald Chambers, though I cannot find the reference) that the Psalms will teach you how to pray, Proverbs how to live, Job how to suffer, the Song how to love, and Ecclesiastes how to enjoy. That dictum seems to me wonderfully insightful, and it is totally reinforced by James, the New Testament writer, who speaks to all these themes most forcefully within his five brief chapters.” [*Truth and Power*, 153]

In other words, *James is the New Testament’s book of wisdom*. Right at the beginning of James’ letter we read, “If any of you *lacks wisdom*, let him ask of God, who gives generously to all without reproach.” He uses the very word that is the theme of Proverbs. At the beginning of that book we read: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” And through the years we have learned what “wisdom” is and means in those OT wisdom books. It is not guidance in particular that James is talking about when he writes “If anyone lacks wisdom...” He is often taken to mean that, as if James is talking about those “fork in the road” decisions that we must make from time to time. Should we go to this school or that, marry this person or not, take this job or another, and so on. Real wisdom helps us immensely at those points of our lives, but that is not what wisdom is. It is not intelligence from on high at the point of decision-making.

In the Bible wisdom is character, it is the skill of living a godly life in a world beset with temptations to sin of every kind. Wisdom in the spiritual life is compared in Proverbs 30 to the skill by which certain animals – coney, or rock badgers, and lizards and ants and the like; animals without great strength and with many natural predators – nevertheless make a success of their lives. The world suffers no shortage of ants or lizards and when we were in Israel last January we saw a great many coney. Those five books that Dr. Packer mentioned, though I must admit the Psalms as a book is not usually included among them (though it certainly contains psalms everyone understands to be wisdom psalms), are universally known as the wisdom books precisely because they are instruction in such skillful living. They are instruction in the nuts and bolts of a godly life and of God-honoring behavior. Someone has said that wisdom concerns those life lessons that are too fine to be caught in the mesh of the law. Wisdom is the next step beyond obedience to the Ten Commandments. Wisdom concerns the finer points of true godliness. And that is what wisdom is in James. In 3:17-18 James gives us a snapshot of true wisdom and it is quite like the profile of a godly character that we can construct from the proverbs. A wise person is peaceable – he doesn’t start arguments and when they break out he tries to stop them. She is gentle. You remember this from Proverbs don’t you? “A soft answer turns away wrath.” He is open to reason. He listens carefully to what people say, to both sides of an argument, and doesn’t jump to conclusions. He weighs the evidence. And so on. Do you get

the point? None of this is found in the Ten Commandments, but it is essential to a truly godly life. That is biblical wisdom.

In that sort of teaching and emphasis the wisdom books are, in fact, different from the other books of the Old Testament, not that we do not find the teaching of wisdom elsewhere, especially in the historical narratives. But the wisdom books do not refer to Israel's theological foundation. You won't find anything about the exodus or about the giving of the law at Mount Sinai in the Book of Proverbs. The theme of redemption or atonement is absent from the book. You won't read about the sacrifices or about other parts of the temple worship. Abraham isn't so much as mentioned in the book; nor is Moses, nor is David. There is no recollection of the history of Israel. You'll find no sermons or precis of sermons in Proverbs, oracles of judgment and promises of God's future mercy, such as fill most of the pages of the prophets. What you find are simple life lessons, pithily put.

Well, James is much like that. James even emphasizes some of the themes that are particularly prominent in Proverbs, such as wealth and poverty, our speech, and dissension and unity. But that has led to some controversy through the ages, as you may know. There is nothing in this New Testament book about the incarnation of God the Son, of his virgin birth, of his suffering and his death on the cross, or even of his resurrection. Twice James makes reference to the Lord's "coming" (4:7, 8), but says nothing more about it. More striking still, the name of Jesus Christ appears only twice, one of which is in the salutation of the letter, and nothing more is said about him. We have only his name! In other words, the subjects that belong to what we typically refer to as the *gospel* seem strangely lacking. In that James is very like Proverbs, which while it uses the covenant name of God, *Yahweh*, otherwise says nothing about the covenant and little more about God himself. His name is mentioned a number of times, but of the Lord little else is said.

You may remember that because James not only doesn't include any teaching about justification by faith and, in fact, makes some remarks in chapter 2 that have been taken by some – mistakenly to be sure – as virtually contradicting Paul's teaching about justification by faith. Martin Luther, for whom that doctrine of justification was the very center of the Bible's teaching, thought James, as he put it, "a right strawy epistle in comparison with [the books of the New Testament that reveal Jesus Christ, such as the Gospel of John and Paul's epistles to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians], for it has no gospel character to it." [Cited from Tasker, *TNTC*, 14] In his preface to the book in his German translation of the New Testament Luther damned James with faint praise.

"I will not have it in my Bible in the number of the proper chief books, but do not intend thereby to forbid anyone to place and exalt it as he pleases, for there is many a good saying in it."

Luther did more than simply express his dissatisfaction with James. Though he never actually taught that it should not be treated as Holy Scripture, and though he often referred to it as Scripture in his writings, he had "arbitrarily, and without any support from ancient manuscripts, placed the four books which he considered to be of doubtful apostolic authority and of secondary value doctrinally at the end of his German New Testament published in 1522. Those four books

formed a kind of supplement to the New Testament; and he did not number them in the table of contents. Those books were Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation.” [*Ibid*, 13] William Tyndale followed Luther in this, so the first full-scale translation of the Greek New Testament into English placed James in a secondary position at the end without a number.

Now, to be sure, there were a great many Christian authorities, indeed the vast majority through the ages, who had no such doubts about the apostolic authority or the great usefulness of James. And, all the more at the time of the Reformation, when it was realized that there was no contradiction between Paul and James on the subject of justification by faith, James was usually given back its rightful place among the writings of the New Testament. As Calvin put it in the forward to his commentary on James,

“If James seems rather more reluctant to preach the grace of Christ than an apostle should be, we must remember not to expect everyone to go over the same ground.”

“I am fully content to accept this epistle, when I find it contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ. Indeed, it is a rich source of varied instruction, of abundant benefit in all aspects of the Christian life. We may find striking passages on endurance, on calling upon God, on the practice of religion, on restraining our speech, on peace-making, on holding back greedy instincts, on disregard for this present life...” [Calvin, 259]

But I think it will help us still more to appreciate James, both for what it contains and for what it does not contain, if we remember to think of it as a book of *wisdom*. It is very like Proverbs or the Song or Job or Ecclesiastes precisely in its concentration on other things than the great themes of most other biblical books. Most New Testament books are not like James. Indeed, there is really no other book like James in the New Testament. But that only makes its place in the New Testament secure and the more obviously important. We need *wisdom* today as surely as God’s people needed it in the ancient epoch. Indeed, I’m not sure that what the American evangelical church today most desperately lacks is just this biblical wisdom.

Proverbs continues to be an immensely popular book among serious Christians in chief part because of its great practicality. And for all that has sometime been said against it, James remains a very popular book among Christians, who find its teaching important, challenging, stirring, memorable, and, in all these ways, immensely practical.

But there is something more. As the British scholar Alex Motyer observes,

“As soon as we read through the letter of James, we say to ourselves, ‘This man was a preacher before he was a writer.’ He addresses his readers as a preacher addresses his hearers, directly, pointedly.” [*The Message of James* BST, 11]

The book is direct address from beginning to end. He’s talking to us; no, he’s preaching to us. “Count it all joy when you meet various trials,” “Do not be deceived...”, “Know this...”, “Do you want to be shown...”, and so on throughout the letter. He’s looking right at us, hunting out our excuses, giving us our marching orders. That is what serious Christians have loved about the

book through the ages. James is talking turkey to us *where we live* every day. He's saying what we all know we need to hear and hear again and again.

In fact, Motyer goes on to suggest that it is at least plausible that sermons lie behind and beneath the letter of James. He wonders if someone didn't say to James, "Have you thought of publishing your sermons? Don't you think this material should have a wider audience and influence?" [12] Who knows precisely how the letter came to take the shape it does, but in the abrupt shifts from one subject to another that we encounter in James, we might well conclude that what we have here are the notes from which whole sermons were developed.

All of this reminds us of something that has been altogether forgotten by some in our own day. Every sermon does not have to cover the same ground, just as every book of the Bible was not required to emphasize the same message. The *Sermon on the Mount*, the greatest sermon in the Bible, is like James in that it concentrates almost exclusively on the behavior of Christians and says virtually nothing about the gospel, about our redemption in Christ, or even about the necessity to live daily by faith in the Lord Jesus. The fact is James was a Christian writing to Christians. They shared without question the fundamental convictions of their faith. He should certainly be allowed to choose his own subject and treat it in his own way, which is what James did. [Cf. Tasker, 38] His subject was wisdom.

Now what makes all of this all the more interesting is that the author of the letter was none other than the Lord's own brother! The James of the title is not the James of the trio of the Lord's disciples, the James of "Peter, James, and John," or the other James among the twelve, James the son of Alphaeus. James, as you can see, was a common name. It is, after all, simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name Jacob. And since Jacob was one of the patriarchs, you will not be surprised that a great many Jews were named after him. In fact there are four men named James mentioned in the New Testament, three of them found in the single verse, Acts 1:13.

The author of the letter James is the man known to Christian history as James the Just, the brother of Jesus. We know from the Gospels that James, the Lord's brother, did not believe in Jesus during the days of his public ministry, but he was found among the disciples of the Lord in the Upper Room in Acts 1. Certainly it seems likely that it was an encounter with his older brother after his resurrection that caused the scales to drop from James' eyes and brought the rest of the Lord's siblings into the company of his followers. We know from Paul (1 Cor. 15:7) that the Lord Jesus did appear to James subsequent to his resurrection and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it was that appearance that made James a Christian.

This is the James who became the leader of the Jerusalem church either before or after the disciple James, John's brother, was executed by Herod Agrippa, the account of which we find in Acts 12. For example, we read in Acts 12:17 that after Peter was miraculously delivered from prison he went immediately to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, and there he told his friends to report to "James and to the brothers" that he was free again. Obviously by that time James was regarded, even by Peter, as a leader of the Jerusalem church. This James, the brother of Jude and author of the letter, then figured in a leadership role at the synod held in Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, and again when Paul visited Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, whose conversation with Paul on that occasion we find in Acts 21. Tradition at the time of the

church historian Eusebius in the 4th century held that James had been appointed by the Lord and his apostles as the first bishop of Jerusalem, almost certainly a reading back into apostolic history the church government that developed later. But the tradition certainly indicates what we already knew, that it was widely known that James had been the *de facto* leader of the Jerusalem church in its early years.

In Acts 15, at the synod, it is clear that James' authority was unquestioned. It was his opinion, offered last, that became the decision of the entire assembly of apostles and elders. In that respect he seemed to function as an apostle himself, which title he seems to be given by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:7. At the synod he is revealed as a man who both welcomed the influx of Gentile converts, was willing for them to be Christians without becoming Jews – as others were demanding – but also worked to find a *modus vivendi* between Jewish and Gentile Christians that would foster unity rather than provoke resentment.

James was a peace-maker. He urged harmony between Jewish Christians and Gentile converts. Ever the wise man, he counseled Gentile believers not to rub their Jewish brothers' noses in their freedom from the ceremonial laws to which Jews still felt bound by the weight of ancient tradition: such laws as those having to do with circumcision and clean and unclean food. That kind of wide-spirited reasonableness, that capacity to put oneself in another's shoes is precisely what is meant by *wisdom* and James not only wrote about it, he practiced it. We're going to get more of that wisdom we find in Acts 15 here in James.

Another thing that is noteworthy about James is his humility. If I were the brother of the Lord I certainly would have made a point of saying so in the salutation of my letter, but James identifies himself not as the brother of Jesus but as his servant. If I were the brother of the Lord, I would certainly find some way to drop his name throughout my letter, perhaps add a scintillating anecdote or two that I would know because I was a family insider. For example, every reader of the letter would be fascinated to hear just what happened when Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection. But James gives us nothing of that. In fact, one of the reasons why there has been such confidence that James is an authentic letter from the real James is that a man claiming to be James would certainly have advertised the fact that he was a personal relative of the Lord Christ, which James did not do. That humility on James' part is the sincerity that James will tell us is true wisdom.

Given that James the Just is its author, and we know from other evidence that James was probably martyred in Jerusalem in A.D. 62, the letter could not have been written later than that. However, other evidence, too complicated to go into now, suggests a much earlier date, a date before the synod in Jerusalem described in Acts 15, so sometime in the mid-40s of the first century. What is interesting about that is that it would make James the first NT book to have been written. In the earliest days of apostolic Christianity, writing probably to a group of Jewish Christians who had perhaps been driven out Jerusalem and Judea by the persecution of the fledgling church and were organized in various churches, *this is what he felt needed to be said!*

The question that faces any interested reader of the letter at the outset is this: why did God think it important to include in his book a letter like James, a letter that does not feature the gospel in the way we expect it to be featured, indeed, in the way it is featured in every other NT writing?

James is a letter that does virtually nothing else but challenge Christians to faithful living and it does so with specifics: we need to do this and we need not to do that. Is this not *legalism*, or, at least *moralism*? Legalism, precisely understood, is the doctrine that we *earn* our salvation by our obedience or good works. Moralism, precisely understood, is simply an undo concentration on behavior, on obedience, on performance, a concentration that threatens to minimize the importance of God's grace – on salvation in its entirety as God's gift –, Christ's work – on salvation in its entirety as Christ's achievement –, and on the Holy Spirit's ministry in a Christian's heart – on the Christian life as the result of the Spirit working within us and not our own effort. These emphases, biblical as they certainly are, do not feature in James! James is much more about Christians doing things and not doing other things. What is more there doesn't seem to be any obvious organization to his material; he simply jumps from one topic to the next. There does not seem to be any obvious connection between them. That too is very like the book of Proverbs.

Now, to be sure, the grace of God is not absent from the letter. James talks about the generosity of God as a reason for a life of prayer in v. 5, he reminds his readers that every good gift comes down from the Father of lights in v. 17, and of God's work of grace and power in giving us new life in v. 18. But the burden of his letter lies elsewhere. Nor is the Lord Jesus at any remove from James' teaching. It has long been observed that James depends, perhaps more than any other NT writer, on the teaching of Jesus himself. To be sure James doesn't quote Jesus word for word, though 5:12 is virtually a citation of Matthew 5:34, but again and again the closest parallels to James' teaching are the words of the Lord Jesus, especially as found in the Gospel of Matthew. [D. Moo, *James*, PNT, 7] As one scholar put it:

“The author of the letter seems to have been so soaked in the atmosphere and specifics of Jesus' teaching that he can reflect them almost unconsciously.” [Moo, 7]

So, to put it bluntly, if we have a problem with James, we must take it up with the Savior himself!

Now, with all of that said, what are we going to find in James? Well we are going to find what we find in many places in the New Testament, a truth put in many different ways and looked at from many different vantage points. In 1:18 we read that those Jewish Christians to whom James was writing were Christians, followers of Jesus, by the regenerating work of God. They were “born again by the imperishable seed of the word” as Peter would put it (1 Pet. 1:23). But that was but the beginning of their Christian lives. Salvation in its fullness was not yet theirs, as James reminds them in 1:21:

“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word *which is able to save your souls*.”

It is the chronological and theological gap between the beginnings of God's grace and its consummation in a person's life that is the theme of James. They have begun to follow Jesus, but now they must continue. They must grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ until finally they are with him in glory, either at death or at his coming.

But the problem, which faces all Christians and which James addresses squarely, is that being born again does not end the conflict and the struggle but only begins it. Christians though we may now be, the old nature is powerful to reclaim what has been lost to it, the world besets us with temptations of every kind, and our sinful habits can be excruciatingly difficult to break. James is, as it were, a bucket of cold water to the face to any Christian who thinks that God's grace to him or to her makes it possible to relax, to stop and smell the roses as it were while living one's Christian life. There are problems, severe problems in every Christian life that must be faced, and we are sorely tempted not to face them, to accept attitudes and behavior that are genuinely inconsistent with loyalty to Jesus Christ.

We know this. We all know it altogether too well. There are some of us with an acid tongue; others of us who care far too much about money. There are others of us who have a terribly thin skin and are easily offended by sins committed against us that do not compare to the sins we have committed against God and Christ. There are people who imagine themselves to be humble who cannot stop talking about themselves. And on and on. All of us to far too great a degree have these defects as running sores in our characters.

No wonder James should begin where he does.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [There is no commandment to steadfastness in the Ten Commandments; this is biblical wisdom.] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

The idea of Christians striving to be perfect, by the way, is another echo of the teaching of the Lord Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. But take his point. Troubles, afflictions, trials are necessary to root out our sins and to mature our faith. That is how deeply rooted there are; they must be cut out with a sharp knife.

Young Christians may perhaps be forgiven in thinking that now they are God's children, now their sins are forgiven, now that they have the love of God in their hearts theirs will be an easier, more comfortable life. But it is not so. We are, by new birth, “born for battle.” [Motyer, 13] Christians are, as one commentator put it, a special people, but they are not a protected species. [14] Indeed, Christians should expect *more* trouble, not less, precisely because it is by trouble that God purifies us of what remains of our sinful attitudes and behaviors. We often don't appreciate this because we don't see our attitudes and behaviors for what they are, for the offense they are to God, for the contradiction they are of our new life in Christ. We are comfortable with them, we find the same attitudes and behaviors in other Christians, and so we accept them as somehow normal. We make our peace with them and stop worrying about them. But James will have none of it.

That is why James has always struck a powerful chord in a Christian conscience. We know, we know all too well that far too much of the time our lives, our priorities, our loves and hatreds, our attitudes toward others, our commitments of time and money, our private and public behaviors are hard to distinguish from those of an ordinarily nice unbeliever. But every now and again, perhaps also as often as we read James, a shaft of light illuminates our conscience as a bolt of

lightning and we realize how great is the chasm that has opened up between what we ought to be as the followers of Christ and what we actually are. That God cares about that gap, that he wants to see it closed is proved not only by the constant exhortations to godly thoughts, words, and deeds, that we are treated to from the beginning of the Bible to its end, but by the troubles that visit us of one kind or another, sent from heaven to force us to face facts we would otherwise be content to ignore.

Do you know Christina Rossetti's splendid poem "Up-Hill"? The first verse reads:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
 Yes, to the very end.
 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
 From morn to night my friend.

But what *is* that journey that Rossetti is talking about? What is the long up-hill climb that will consume our earthly pilgrimage? Well, primarily it is the struggle, the battle with sin and temptation, from the beginning to the very last breath of a Christian life. I don't think most of us reckon with this most of the time, but as Christians we remain in the world precisely to grow in holiness and purity and love and to serve God and our neighbor in ever increasing fruitfulness. Everything else, I mean *everything else*, is detail. And for us far too often it is the detail that gets the real attention rather than the main point.

God cares about every detail of your life, to be sure. But what job you work, how much money you make, how healthy you are, whether married or single, whether old or young, whether highly intelligent or run-of-the mill, how much you enjoy your diversions and entertainments, none of this compares in importance to whether you are growing in that steadfastness from which true godliness is born. Your salvation is not complete. As Paul writes in Philippians 2 we are to "work out our salvation in fear and trembling," and that is what James is talking about. That is our great calling in life. And how is that done? By putting on holiness in the fear of God. And that is what James will teach us to do.

But that is difficult work precisely because, as C.S. Lewis memorably described the process of Christian sanctification:

"A new nature is being not merely made but made out of an old one. We live amid all the anomalies, inconveniences, hopes, and excitements of a house that is being rebuilt."
 [*Miracles*, 155]

The other day Florence and I drove by and then got out to get a closer look at the house in St. Elmo, at the foot of Lookout Mountain, near Chattanooga, that Steve and Nicky Lewin are restoring to be their family home. For those of you who don't know, Nicky is the daughter of John and Carol Pribyl, so Steve is their son-in-law. We walked around the yard, full of construction materials and scrap, a mobile home on the property houses the family at present, and saw as much as we could of the house. Looking in the front windows it is obvious that much work has been done: the interior has been stripped to the studs, the new staircase has been exposed and the electrical service is nearly complete. But apart from the windows on the street

that provide a barrier to the entrance of unwanted guests, the house's windows are simply open holes in the walls. The exterior is either new and unsurfaced or unpainted or, if the original, chipped and faded. The front porch needs to be completely replaced. The sheetrock has not yet been hung, the plumbing not yet installed. The house is there and it is not there. One can imagine what it will someday be, but a great deal of work remains to be done.

That is a perfect picture of you and me. And the Lord's interest in your life and mine is precisely completing that house, installing the windows, the kitchen, the plumbing and electrical fixtures, the trim, the paint, the porch, the lawn. And that is what James is all about. He will attack the sagging porch in one paragraph, the empty windows in another, the trim around the door frame in still another.

Take a good hard look at your house, your soul, your life, your behavior as a Christian, the measure of your devotion to Jesus Christ in thought, word, and deed. And then do what any wise man or woman with the necessary resources would certainly do. Go hire someone who can help you do the work really well. James, after all, was a carpenter's son and, almost certainly, as the oldest son, inherited Joseph's business when he died. James knows how to build a house. Steve Lewin has a reputation for perfection, one reason it takes him so long to get projects done! James is after perfection too and it will take a long time to finish this house. But, then, to have your windows in is certainly better than having empty holes letting in the weather and getting the sheetrock up means it is now possible to begin painting the walls and attacking the trim.

We often pray in morning worship, "Our soul is like a house, O Lord; it contains much that you will not be pleased to see. It is in ruins but we ask you to remake it." Well, to read and study and obey the letter of James is what someone does who really is serious about that prayer!