



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

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SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 27 Commentary James and Jude
Lesson 28 Questions 1 Peter

BROTHERS OF THE LORD James and Jude

INTRODUCTION

We now come to the last of the letters (epistles) in the New Testament; these seven were called “Catholic” epistles, from the Greek word meaning “whole” or “all,” for they were not addressed to any group or person but to the whole church (Eusebius, Church historian, 260-340 A.D.); however, 2 and 3 John are exceptions, but not 1 John.

These two letter-writers (James and Jude) were blood brothers, it is thought (Matthew 13:55), but we can never be sure of this in the New Testament, for to the Jews, close relatives were called by this term, brother or sister, for their language was a sparse one, with not so many different names for different relatives. Neither of these was an apostle (Galatians 1:19). Jesus gave us a nice puzzle by calling two James’s and two Judas’s as Apostles: James, the brother of John, and James, “son of Alphaesus”; Jude (called Thaddeus in Matthew) and Judas Iscariot. In addition, these two relatives of Jesus are two of the writers of the New Testament. Some commentators believe they were part of the relatives of Jesus who did not ac-

cept Him in His public life (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3).

James’ letter is to the believers in Jesus who are dispersed in the empire, but of the twelve tribes of Israel. He calls himself by a term that suggests authority: “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is James who speaks with authority in the Council of Jerusalem; he is considered the “administrator of the Jerusalem Church,” which was in the beginning the “headquarters” of the Church (Acts 15:13-21).

James is a practical teacher; his message is concerned with practicing the faith: “Be not a hearer only, but a doer,” the earlier translation (Douay) says. The New American translates it, “Act on this word; if all you do is listen to it, you are deceiving yourselves” (James 1:21b-22).

Yet, this letter from James is also strong on wisdom, and its wisdom passages parallel some of the books we studied at the beginning of this year: (Proverbs 2:6; Wisdom 7:25, 9:4; Sirach 1:1-4). His wisdom words here are a masterful sketch of

Christian wisdom, recalling the Beatitudes in Matthew, and Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 (JBC).

James' letter is in the Greek language, correct and beautiful, and is also beautifully expressed, particularly when he is using nature as illustrations (James 1:11, 14-15).

The letter of Jude is also written in competent Greek style... (As brothers, they have a more accomplished education than the apostles.) It is usually dated as around 80 A.D., and written because of a danger to the communities that received it: immoral practices in regard to sex and a form of Gnosticism, "a special knowledge" that other Christians did not have. Very short, Jude's letter attacks the heretics and corrects their errors as false teachers, ending with positive steps they should take. One of these verses is a strong sentence about the faith in God as a Trinity.

THE LETTER OF JAMES 1:1 - 5:20

I. ADVICE ON WISDOM (James 1:5-8, 3:13-18)

A. Becoming Wise. James himself wisely suggests: "Ask for it." He describes the one who alone gives the kind of wisdom mankind needs: "For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding... (Proverbs 2:6). "Ask it from God who gives generously and ungrudgingly to all, and it will be given him" (James 1:5b). Again, James repeats: "...ask in faith, never doubting or you will be like waves tossed and driven with the wind, and must not expect anything from the Lord" (James 1:6). Strong cautions!

B. Results of Wisdom (James 3:13-16). In practice true wisdom shows a humility "filled with good sense" (James 3:13b). This humility destroys "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts." People of little experience of faith that comes from knowing and hearing God's teaching, understand little of true wisdom. We all have felt the temptation that comes from jealousy and selfish ambition. Consider quietly how these

sinful elements in our human natures caused by Adam's loss of innocence before God, affect you. Yet remember, as James next cautions, that we sin only by acting on these feelings. "At least," he says, "refrain from arrogant and false claims against the truth" (James 3:14). James considers these fruits of false wisdom "earthbound... even devilish" (James 3:15b). This kind of false wisdom abounds in the world today, and it breeds all kinds of "jealousy, strife, inconstancy and vile behavior." The wisdom that Jesus and His life and teaching bring to us is quite different. Being God and man, His humility was delicately blended by His divinity in His perfect human soul. "Come to me and I will refresh your soul" (Matthew 11:28).

C. Qualities of Wisdom (James 3:17-18; 1 Corinthians 2:6-9)

1. Knowledge of the Truth (James 1:18, 3:14, 5:19). This knowledge is divine revelation, especially when revelation from God is put into practice. The wisdom of the world is directly opposed to it, and false and worthless finally.

2. Origin of Real Wisdom (Proverbs 2:6, Wisdom 7:25, 9:4). It is the opposite of earthly wisdom which is unspiritual, even devilish at times. Divine wisdom is unknown to the worldly, rich in money and poor in truth. It leads to peace of heart, a future that will last in its joys, in its satisfying peace. James points out that unspiritual people know nothing of true wisdom, lasting wisdom, mentioning "the rulers of this age" especially. For their lives, even those of small "rulers" who think only of themselves, are often filled with jealousy... selfish ambition... disorder.

3. Christian Wisdom (James 3:17-18, Matthew 5:3-10, Galatians 5:22-23). The Jerusalem Bible (New) has a delightful translation of James' words on true wisdom that follow this warning:

“Where ever there are jealousy and ambition, there are also disharmony and wickedness of every kind; but the wisdom that comes down from above is something pure; it is peaceable, kindly and considerate; it is full of mercy and shows itself by doing good; nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it. Peace sown by peacemakers brings a harvest of justice.”

Each of us can go through this description of Christian wisdom, asking ourselves, pondering about our usual selves, praying for wisdom; “Do I possess these qualities? What do I do that prevents them in me?” This is an excellent examination of conscience for a sincere confession. Ask the Holy Spirit to gently tell you when you practice unchristian qualities.

II. WORDS—GOD’S AND OURS

A. Words from God (James 1:16-19, 1 Peter 1:23-24). The unchanging God, Father of lights in the heavens, which go into shadow at times and their light we cannot see, is an eternal Light. He spoke a Word who is His Son. He brought us to birth also by this Word, His Son, who tells us, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light.” Our birth into divine Life came at our Baptism (1 Peter 1:3-5) when the Word of God, Jesus, brought divine life into us. He dwells there unless we reject Him with a serious (mortal) sin, which, as the word mortal means, is a kind of death in us of the divine life in our immortal souls, which last forever, with reward or punishment due to us by our choice.

Another birth of light in our souls is when we accept the “word of truth” in the Bible, when we accept the message of God’s Word given to us in this “Book of Books.” This makes it a tremendous value for you to have accepted the invitation to be a Scripture Study member, with its five-years of daily, weekly, growth in God’s Word. Share this value with others by inviting them. This brings us to our response to God’s Word and God’s words.

B. Our Response (James 1:19b-26).

Here, James begins to be very practical about his teaching. “Be quick to hear”; be good listeners, but “slow to speak”; avoid angry words which we usually blurt out, for “anger does not fulfill God’s justice” (James 1:19). “Justice” as used here means all that is right and good in us, a development of the Christ-life in us—holiness as a Christian who lets the word of God “take root in you, with its power to save you” (James 1:21).

“Act on this word” (James 1:22, Matthew 7:24-27). “Be doers of the word” is the former translation of this verse which continued, “not hearers only.” These few words, read out as the Epistle of the Baccalaureate Mass at the graduation of my class at the Academy which I attended, forever changed my life, for they came strongly with a personal message: “You have heard, all the years at this academy, of God and his Word, now go be a Sister and teach the Word to others.” That was my call, so strong that nothing attracted me more strongly, and strengthened me to do that very thing the following Fall: become a Sister of St. Mary, the congregation devoted to teaching which taught me so much about God.

C. Words From Us (James 3:1-12, 4:11-17, 5:12). Bits in the mouths of horses give us power over the whole horse and its movements; small rudders direct a whole ship; a tiny spark sets a forest ablaze. In these clear and sharp images from James, we experience one of this early Christian’s gifts—the ability to use words masterfully and fruitfully. If you have such a gift, James’ letter is one you can use to guide your speech to speak God’s truths and His love. But James just was not using his gift with words, he was teaching us about our words, and he continues with one more apt image: “Every four-footed or winged, crawling or swimming creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed, by mankind; but no one can tame the tongue” (James 3:7). It is a “restless evil, full of deadly poison”!

Sins of speech, recognized and regretted, can be overcome by truly admitting them to yourself, and harder than that, admitting them to others.

That can be so humiliating that rather than do that often, you will begin to avoid the sin! Humble words heal, both you and the other person. At the end of this section on our speech, James gives us a penetrating analysis of this fault of sins of speech: “A brackish source cannot yield fresh water” (James 3:12b). Sin comes from our heart. Work at goodness and holiness, pray for it. As Jesus said, “Come to me, for I am meek and humble of heart”; pray that He make our hearts like His: “Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours!”

James comes back again in chapters four and five to this common problem. “Do you speak ill of one another?” Judging our neighbors is a common fault; in a not very clear way, James reasons with us about this (James 4:11-17). He ends, though with a come-down that helps us, “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12). Once again, he counsels us against speaking with what he calls presumption: presuming that we will be alive, or be able to order our life regardless of God’s plans, we make great statements of what we will do. Instead say, “If the Lords wills it, we shall live to do this or that.” He is counseling us to realize that our days are under God’s decision, not ours, and respecting that humbly is best. Finally, in James 5:12, he counsels against abusing an oath (Matthew 5:33-37).

III. FAITH AND GOOD WORKS (James 2:14-26, Galatians 5:6, Matthew 25:41-44, 1 John 3:17)

A. Practicing Faith. Here, James begins a teaching that caused Martin Luther to suggest that this book be taken out of the New Testament, for he saw an apparent contradiction to Paul’s teaching on justification by faith. Luther was so convinced of Paul’s position that in one translation he added the word “alone,” “justification by faith alone,” probably to Romans 5:1. We are justified by more than just belief.

This whole letter is on living the faith we believe, belief such as Matthew, chapters 5-7, in the sermon on the Mount, records as Jesus’ teaching.

In Paul’s words in Galatians 5:6b, he combines the two aspects of Christian life taught by Jesus; “In Christ Jesus, ...only faith which expresses itself through love... counts.”

B. Examples of Faith in Action

1. Abraham (James 2:20-24). James points out that Abraham, that father of our faith, was justified by the heroic action of obeying God’s command to sacrifice his son. At this proof of preferring God even to his son, who was the hope of God’s words and promise to Abraham, God made His great promise to Abraham that through Isaac all the nations of the earth shall find blessing (Genesis 22:15-18).

James 2:24 states the Christian belief very well: “You must realize that a person is justified by his works and not by faith alone.” This is where the word “alone” is used correctly.

2. Rahab (James 2:25). This verse is followed by one other Biblical example: Rahab, the pagan woman, was justified by her good deed to the messengers from God’s people (Joshua 2:4-16, Hebrews 11:31). James ends this teaching by the strong statement: “Be assured then, that faith without works is as dead as a body without breath” (James 2:26). James does not place faith and works as opposed in some way, but he sees opposites in faith, as living faith and dead faith. Is your faith expressed only by Mass on Sunday, once a week? What other ways in this letter does James teach?

IV. QUALITIES IN CHRISTIAN LIFE (James 1:9-11, 1:12-15, 2:1-13, 5:1-6, 5:7-12, 5:13-14, 5:19-20)

A. Humility (James 1:9-11, Isaiah 6:1ff). The pride of a poor person, or those with less possessions, can be that very condition, for it is a certain “eminence”—a likeness with Christ, who “had no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). And the pride of a rich person is in his certain lowliness after this life, when he has “withered away in the midst of his many projects” (James 1:11).

B. Trials and Temptations (James 1:12-15, Romans 8:28). The Lord himself will crown those who hold out in trouble and trial. Temptations to sin come not from God, but from our fallen nature, our own passions and sinfulness. God clasps His faithful ones in the fight and in the troubles of life, close to Himself.

C. Favoritism (James 2:1-13, 1 Corinthians 1:26-29). A very common fault in all groups is attention and care given to those who are well-dressed and of an obviously upper class, attention such as showing them to the best seats, etc. James says: "Have you not set yourselves up as judges handing down corrupt decisions?" (James 2:4). "Listen," he seems to cry, "God chose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom he promised to those who love him" (James 2:5ff). Whose favor do we value, God's or the rich?

D. Advice to the Rich (James 5:1-6, Matthew 6:19-21). James quickly predicts weeping and wailing over rotted riches, wardrobes moth-eaten, and impending miseries. Boldly, he accuses them of withholding wages from farmhands. In west Texas where I worked in pastoral ministry in several small towns, I learned of this very dreadful sin, openly practiced by some ranchers. They hired poor migrants, and after the job was done, they reported them to the immigration authorities who came and returned them to Mexico. They were never paid for their hard labor. What a horrible future those ranchers were preparing for themselves, for they can never right that wrong to that particular migrant. "Money is the root of all evil." Let it not bring evil within you.

E. Worldliness (James 4:1-10; Matthew 6:21, 24; John 2:15-16; 1 John 2:15-17). Desire for the world's goods and for fame in this life often ends in murder, envy, quarreling and fighting. "O you unfaithful ones, are you not aware that love of the world is enmity to God?" (James 4:4). "Draw close to God and He will draw close to you." If we saturate ourselves with modern magazines and TV entertainment, we can,

without realizing it, adopt standards that the Gospels discredit. With whom do we wish credit?

F. Patience (James 5:7-11, Hebrews 10:35-39). "As your models in hardship and patience, take the prophets," says James. We, who have come into life two thousand years after Jesus came to teach all and die for all, have numerous examples whom we call saints, of lives according to the Gospels and the Scriptures. These have truly won a crown of glory far beyond earthly materials that fade and fall apart. Are you, are we, following the teaching of Jesus and of His uncounted saintly followers in the heavenly kingdom, and of what we are reading and studying together in these precious words of the Bible? What are we following?

V. A LAST SACRAMENT (James 5:13-20; Mark 6:7, 12-13)

"Is anyone sick among you? He should ask for the presbyters of the Church. They are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord. This prayer uttered in faith will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his" (James 5:14-15). This has always been one of the sacraments, instituted by Christ to give grace and to save from sin. It is one that is denied by some Christians since the Reformation (better-called a revolution...).

In the history of the church, there have been many cures in the use of this sacrament called now "the Sacrament of the Sick," formerly called Extreme (last) Unction (anointing with holy oils) and given to the seriously ill or permanently injured even. In the modern Charismatic Movement, there has been re-discovered and re-given by God, healings through prayer. Did you ever see a miracle in the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. Once, in my teaching days, a young friend of mine, a student who was in a rather bad crowd, was shot and was dying. When I was called to visit him, I suggested that his parents call the priest to anoint him. They were reluctant, fearing it would "frighten him." An aunt insisted on it, however, and after the priest came, while he was administering

the sacrament, we all saw the boy's color return, then the eyes open in astonishment at all of us around. He recovered completely, and was dismissed the next day...

It is God's will to decide on the kind of results sacraments have, depending on our own dispositions, faith, and love, and God's future plans for

His creatures. But He has left them to the Church and has given the distribution of Christ's salvation to that Church, reviving and renewing, in different ages, different effects of Christ's willing death for us, and His life's efforts to bring us to His Father. Let our hearts be full of gratitude and love and cooperation with Him throughout our lives.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 28
1 Peter

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. Give one or two information items that you learned.

- b. Did anything speak to your own life or faith?

Day 2 Read 1 Peter 1, John 3:3-7, Matthew 6:19-21.

- a. In the Greeting, how does St. Peter bring in the Blessed Trinity?

- b. In the Thanksgiving (1 Peter 1:3-12), what does he teach that our “new birth” in Christ will bring to each Christian?

- c. From 1 Peter 1:6-12, quote words or sentences that moved you in this beautiful description of what will result from our trials here.

- d. In 1 Peter 1:13-15 list some of the challenges Peter gives to us who have the graces of this new birth.

Day 3 Read 1 Peter 2, James 1:21, Exodus 19:6.

- a. In the directions Peter gives in 1 Peter 2:1, suggest some actual ways to overcome, to “strip away” one of the faults listed.

- b. In verse 5, how does Peter include all Christians, all of us, in “a holy priesthood”?

- c. In Peter’s teaching to citizens and even to slaves (verses 13-25), what impresses you or helps you in your life?

Day 4 Read 1 Peter 3, Ephesians 5:22-30.

- a. Will the words addressed to husbands bring balance to the relationships of a successful marriage, in your opinion? Why or why not?

- b. What helps you in verses 8-12?

- c. What encourages you in verses 13-22?

Day 5 Read 1 Peter 4 and its footnotes.

- a. In verse 8, what amazing result do we receive from “love for one another”?

- b. Though “insulted” is a harsh thing for us, what does verse 14, a beatitude promise, assure us?

- c. What “trial by fire” did those first Christians suffer in the Roman empire?

Day 6 Read 1 Peter 5 and its footnotes.

- a. What new understanding do you learn?

- b. Give the words of promise in verse 10.

- c. What is the meaning of “Babylon” here? Why would Peter be writing from “Babylon”?