

NOTES ON THE GENERAL EPISTLE OF ST. JAMES

THIS is supposed to have been written by James the son of Alpheus the brother (or kinsman) of our Lord. It is called a General Epistle, because written not to a particular person or church, but to all the converted Israelites. Herein the apostle reproves that antinomian spirit, which had even then infected many, who had perverted the glorious doctrine of justification by faith into an occasion of licentiousness. He likewise comforts the true believers under their sufferings, and reminds them of the judgments that were approaching. It has three parts:

I. The inscription, Chap. i. 1

II. The exhortation,

1. To patience, enduring outward, conquering inward, temptations, 2-15

2. Considering the goodness of God, 16-18 to be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath And these three are,

1. Proposed, 19-21

2. Treated of at large.

a. Let hearing be joined with practice, 22-26 Particularly with bridling the tongue, 26 With mercy and purity, 27 Without respect of persons, ii. 1-13 And so faith universally with works, 14-26

b. Let the speech be modest, iii. 1-12

c. Let anger, with all the other passions, be restrained, 13- iv.1- 17

3. To patience again.

a. Confirmed by the coming of the judge, in which draws near The calamity of the wicked, v.1-6 The deliverance of the righteous, 7-12

b. Nourished by prayer, 13-18

III. The conclusion, 19

JAMES

I

1. A servant of Jesus Christ - Whose name the apostle mentions but once more in the whole epistle, chap. ii, 1. And not at all in his whole discourse, [Acts xv, 14](#), &c.; or [Acts xxi, 20-25](#). It might have seemed, if he mentioned him often, that he did it out of vanity, as being the brother of the Lord. To the twelve tribes - Of Israel; that is, those of them that believe. Which are scattered abroad - In various countries. Ten of the tribes were scattered ever since the reign of Hosea; and great part of the rest were now dispersed through the Roman empire: as was foretold, [Deut. xxviii, 25](#), &c. xxx, 4. Greeting - That is, all blessings, temporal and eternal.

2. My brethren, count it all joy - Which is the highest degree of patience, and contains all the rest. When ye fall into divers temptations - That is, trials.

4. Let patience have its perfect work - Give it full scope, under whatever trials befall you. That ye may be perfect and entire - Adorned with every Christian grace. And wanting nothing - Which God requires in you.

5. If any want - The connection between the first and following verses, both here and in the fourth chapter, will be easily discerned by him who reads them, while he is suffering wrongfully. He will then readily perceive, why the apostle mentions all those various affections of the mind. Wisdom - To understand, whence and why temptations come, and how they are to be improved. Patience is in every pious man already. Let him exercise this, and ask for wisdom. The sum of wisdom, both in the temptation of poverty and of riches, is described in the ninth and tenth verses. Who giveth to all - That ask aright. And upbraideth not - Either with their past wickedness, or present unworthiness.

6. But let him ask in faith - A firm confidence in God. St. James also both begins and ends with faith, chap. v, 15; the hindrances of which he removes in the middle part of his epistle. He that doubteth is like a wave of the sea - Yea, such are all who have not asked and obtained wisdom. Driven with the wind - From without. And tossed - From within, by his own unstableness.

8. A doubleminded man - Who has, as it were, two souls; whose heart is not simply given up to God. Is unstable - Being without the true wisdom; perpetually disagrees both with himself and others, chap. iii, 16.

9. Let the brother--St James does not give this appellation to the rich. Of low degree - Poor and tempted. Rejoice - The most effectual remedy against doublemindedness. In that he is exalted - To be a child of God, and an heir of glory.

10. But the rich, in that he is made low - Is humbled by a deep sense of his true condition. Because as the flower - Beautiful, but transient. He shall pass away - Into eternity.

11. For the sun arose and withered the grass - There is an unspeakable beauty and elegance, both in the comparison itself, and in the very manner of expressing it, intimating both

the certainty and the suddenness of the event. So shall the rich fade away in his ways - In the midst of his various pleasures and employments.

12. Happy is the man that endureth temptation - Trials of various kinds. He shall receive the crown - That fadeth not away. Which the Lord hath promised to them that love him - And his enduring proves his love. For it is love only that "endureth all things."

13. But let no man who is tempted - To sin. Say, I am tempted of God - God thus tempteth no man.

14. Every man is tempted, when - In the beginning of the temptation. He is drawn away - Drawn out of God, his strong refuge. By his own desire - We are therefore to look for the cause of every sin, in, not out of ourselves. Even the injections of the devil cannot hurt before we make them our own. And every one has desires arising from his own constitution, tempers, habits, and way of life. And enticed - In the progress of the temptation, catching at the bait: so the original word signifies.

15. Then desire having conceived - By our own will joining therewith. Bringeth forth actual sin - It doth not follow that the desire itself is not sin. He that begets a man is himself a man. And sin being perfected - Grown up to maturity, which it quickly does. Bringeth forth death - Sin is born big with death.

16. Do not err - It is a grievous error to ascribe the evil and not the good which we receive to God.

17. No evil, but every good gift - Whatever tends to holiness. And every perfect gift - Whatever tends to glory. Descendeth from the Father of lights - The appellation of Father is here used with peculiar propriety. It follows, "he begat us." He is the Father of all light, material or spiritual, in the kingdom of grace and of glory. With whom is no variableness - No change in his understanding. Or shadow of turning - in his will. He infallibly discerns all good and evil; and invariably loves one, and hates the other. There is, in both the Greek words, a metaphor taken from the stars, particularly proper where the Father of lights is mentioned. Both are applicable to any celestial body, which has a daily vicissitude of day and night, and sometimes longer days, sometimes longer nights. In God is nothing of this kind. He is mere light. If there is any such vicissitude, it is in ourselves, not in him.

18. Of his own will - Most loving, most free, most pure, just opposite to our evil desire, ver. 15. Begat he us - Who believe. By the word of truth - The true word, emphatically so termed; the gospel. That we might be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures - Christians are the chief and most excellent of his visible creatures; and sanctify the rest. Yet he says, A kind of - For Christ alone is absolutely the first-fruits.

19. Let every man be swift to hear - This is treated of from ver. 21 to the end of the next chapter. Slow to speak - Which is treated of in the third chapter. Slow to wrath - Neither murmuring at God, nor angry at his neighbour. This is treated of in the third, and throughout the fourth and fifth chapters.

20. The righteousness of God here includes all duties prescribed by him, and pleasing to him.

21. Therefore laying aside - As a dirty garment. All the filthiness and superfluity of wickedness - For however specious or necessary it may appear to worldly wisdom, all wickedness is both vile, hateful, contemptible, and really superfluous. Every reasonable end may be effectually answered without any kind or degree of it. Lay this, every known sin, aside, or all your hearing is vain. With meekness - Constant evenness and serenity of mind. Receive - Into your ears, your heart, your life. The word - Of the gospel. Ingrafted - In believers, by regeneration, ver. 18 and by habit, [Heb. v, 14](#). Which is able to save your souls - The hope of salvation nourishes meekness.

23. Beholding his face in a glass - How exactly does the scripture glass show a man the face of his soul!

24. He beheld himself, and went away - To other business. And forgot - But such forgetting does not excuse.

25. But he that looketh diligently - Not with a transient glance, but bending down, fixing his eyes, and searching all to the bottom. Into the perfect law - Of love as established by faith. St. James here guards us against misunderstanding what St. Paul says concerning the "yoke and bondage of the law." He who keeps the law of love is free, [John viii, 31](#), &c. He that does not, is not free, but a slave to sin, and a criminal before God, ver. 10. And continueth therein - Not like him who forgot it, and went away. This man - There is a peculiar force in the repetition of the word. Shall be happy - Not barely in hearing, but doing the will of God.

26. If any one be ever so religious - Exact in the outward offices of religion. And bridled his tongue - From backbiting, talebearing, evilspeaking, he only deceiveth his own heart, if he fancies he has any true religion at all.

27. The only true religion in the sight of God, is this, to visit - With counsel, comfort, and relief. The fatherless and widows - Those who need it most. In their affliction - In their most helpless and hopeless state. And to keep himself unspotted from the world - From the maxims, tempers, and customs of it. But this cannot be done, till we have given our hearts to God, and love our neighbour as ourselves.

II

1. My brethren -- the equality of Christians, intimated by this name, is the ground of the admonition. Hold not the faith of our common Lord, the Lord of glory - Of which glory all who believe in him partake. With respect of persons - That is, honour none merely for being rich; despise none merely for being poor.

2. With gold rings - Which were not then so common as now.

3. Ye look upon him - With respect.

4. Ye distinguish not - To which the most respect is due, to the poor or to the rich. But are become evil-reasoning Judges - You reason ill, and so judge wrong: for fine apparel is no proof of worth in him that wears it.

5. Hearken - As if he had said, Stay, consider, ye that judge thus. Does not the presumption lie rather in favour of the poor man? Hath not God chosen the poor - That is, are not they whom God hath chosen, generally speaking, poor in this world? who yet are rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom - Consequently, the most honourable of men: and those whom God so highly honours, ought not ye to honour likewise?

6. Do not the rich often oppress you - By open violence; often drag you - Under colour of law.

7. Do not they blaspheme that worthy name - Of God and of Christ. The apostle speaks chiefly of rich heathens: but are Christians, so called, a whit behind them?

8. If ye fulfil the royal law - The supreme law of the great King which is love; and that to every man, poor as well as rich, ye do well. [Lev. xix, 18](#).

9. Being convicted - By that very law. [Exod. xxiii, 3](#).

10. Whosoever keepeth the whole law, except in one point, he is guilty of all - Is as liable to condemnation as if he had offended in every point.

11. For it is the same authority which establishes every commandment.

12. So speak and act - In all things. As they that shall be judged - Without respect of persons. By the law of liberty - The gospel; the law of universal love, which alone is perfect freedom. For their transgressions of this, both in word and deed, the wicked shall be condemned; and according to their works, done in obedience to this, the righteous will be rewarded.

13. Judgment without mercy shall be to him - In that day. Who hath showed no mercy - To his poor brethren. But the mercy of God to believers, answering to that which they have shown, will then glory over judgment.

14. From chap. i, 22, the apostle has been enforcing Christian practice. He now applies to those who neglect this, under the pretense of faith. St. Paul had taught that "a man is justified by faith without the works of the law." This some began already to wrest to their own destruction. Wherefore St. James, purposely repeating (ver. 21, 23, 25) the same phrases, testimonies, and examples, which St. Paul had used, [Rom. iv, 3](#), [Heb. xi, 17, 31](#), refutes not

the doctrine of St. Paul, but the error of those who abused it. There is, therefore, no contradiction between the apostles: they both delivered the truth of God, but in a different manner, as having to do with different kinds of men. On another occasion St. James himself pleaded the cause of faith, [Acts xv, 13-21](#); and St. Paul himself strenuously pleads for works, particularly in his latter epistles. This verse is a summary of what follows. What profiteth it? is enlarged on, ver. 15-17; though a man say, ver. 18, 19 can that faith save him? ver. 20. It is not, though he have faith; but, though he say he have faith. Here, therefore, true, living faith is meant: but in other parts of the argument the apostle speaks of a dead, imaginary faith. He does not, therefore, teach that true faith can, but that it cannot, subsist without works: nor does he oppose faith to works; but that empty name of faith, to real faith working by love. Can that faith "which is without works" save him? No more than it can profit his neighbour.

17. So likewise that faith which hath not works is a mere dead, empty notion; of no more profit to him that hath it, than the bidding the naked be clothed is to him.

18. But one - Who Judges better. Will say - To such a vain talker. Show me, if thou canst, thy faith without thy works.

19. Thou believest there is one God - I allow this: but this proves only that thou hast the same faith with the devils. Nay, they not only believe, but tremble - At the dreadful expectation of eternal torments. So far is that faith from either justifying or saving them that have it.

20. But art thou willing to know - Indeed thou art not: thou wouldest fain be ignorant of it. O empty man - Empty of all goodness. That the faith which is without works is dead - And so is not properly faith, as a dead carcase is not a man.

21. Was not Abraham justified by works - St. Paul says he was justified by faith, [Rom. iv, 2](#), &c.: yet St. James does not contradict him; for he does not speak of the same justification. St. Paul speaks of that which Abraham received many years before Isaac was born, [Gen. xv, 6](#). St. James, of that which he did not receive till he had offered up Isaac on the altar. He was justified, therefore, in St. Paul's sense, (that is, accounted righteous,) by faith, antecedent to his works. He was justified in St. James's sense, (that is, made righteous,) by works, consequent to his faith. So that St. James's justification by works is the fruit of St. Paul's justification by faith.

22. Thou seest that faith - For by faith Abraham offered him, [Heb. xi, 17](#). Wrought together with his works - Therefore faith has one energy and operation; works, another: and the energy and operation of faith are before works, and together with them. Works do not give life to faith, but faith begets works, and then is perfected by them. And by works was faith made perfect - Here St. James fixes the sense wherein he uses the word justified; so that no shadow of contradiction remains between his assertion and St. Paul's. Abraham returned from that sacrifice perfected in faith, and far higher in the favour of God. Faith hath

not its being from works, (for it is before them,) but its perfection. That vigour of faith which begets works is then excited and increased thereby, as the natural heat of the body begets motion, whereby itself is then excited and increased. See [1 John iii, 22](#).

23. And the scripture - Which was afterwards written. Was hereby eminently fulfilled, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness - This was twice fulfilled, - when Abraham first believed, and when he offered up Isaac. St. Paul speaks of the former fulfilling; St. James, of the latter. And he was called the Friend of God - Both by his posterity, [2 Chron. xx, 7](#); and by God himself, [Isaiah xli, 8](#) so pleasing to God were the works be wrought in faith. [Gen. xv, 6](#)

24. Ye see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only - St. Paul, on the other hand, declares, "A man is justified by faith," and not by works, [Rom. iii, 28](#). And yet there is no contradiction between the apostles: because,

1. They do not speak of the same faith: St. Paul speaking of living faith; St. James here, of dead faith.
2. They do not speak of the same works: St. Paul speaking of works antecedent to faith; St. James, of works subsequent to it.

25. After Abraham, the father of the Jews, the apostle cites Rahab, a woman, and a sinner of the gentiles; to show, that in every nation and sex true faith produces works, and is perfected by them; that is, by the grace of God working in the believer, while he is showing his faith by his works.

III

1. Be not many teachers - Let no more of you take this upon you than God thrusts out; seeing it is so hard not to offend in speaking much. Knowing that we - That all who thrust themselves into the office. Shall receive greater condemnation - For more offenses. St. James here, as in several of the following verses, by a common figure of speech, includes himself: we shall receive, - we offend, - we put bits, - we curse - None of which, as common sense shows, are to be interpreted either of him or of the other apostles.

2. The same is able to bridle the whole body - That is, the whole man. And doubtless some are able to do this, and so are in this sense perfect.

3. We - That is, men.

5. Boasteth great things - Hath great influence.

6. A world of iniquity - Containing an immense quantity of all manner of wickedness. It defileth - As fire by its smoke. The whole body - The whole man. And setteth on fire the course of nature - All the passions, every wheel of his soul.

7. Every kind - The expression perhaps is not to be taken strictly. Reptiles - That is, creeping things.

8. But no man can tame the tongue - Of another; no, nor his own, without peculiar help from God.

9. Men made after the likeness of God - Indeed we have now lost this likeness; yet there remains from thence an indelible nobleness, which we ought to reverence both in ourselves and others.

13. Let him show his wisdom as well as his faith by his works; not by words only.

14. If ye have bitter zeal - True Christian zeal is only the flame of love. Even in your hearts - Though it went no further. Do not lie against the truth - As if such zeal could consist with heavenly wisdom.

15. This wisdom - Which is consistent with such zeal. Is earthly - Not heavenly; not from the Father of Lights. Animal - Not spiritual; not from the Spirit of God. Devilish - Not the gift of Christ, but such as Satan breathes into the soul.

17. But the wisdom from above is first pure - From all that is earthly, natural, devilish. Then peaceable - True peace attending purity, it is quiet, inoffensive. Gentle - Soft, mild, yielding, not rigid. Easy to be entreated - To be persuaded, or convinced; not stubborn, sour, or morose. Full of good fruits - Both in the heart and in the life, two of which are immediately specified. Without partiality - Loving all, without respect of persons; embracing all good things, rejecting all evil. And without dissimulation - Frank, open.

18. And the principle productive of this righteousness is sown, like good seed, in the peace of a believer's mind, and brings forth a plentiful harvest of happiness, (which is the proper fruit of righteousness,) for them that make peace - That labour to promote this pure and holy peace among all men.

IV

1. From whence come wars and fightings - Quarrels and wars among you, quite opposite to this peace? Is it not from your pleasures - Your desires of earthly pleasures. Which war - Against your souls. In your members - Here is the first seat of the war. Hence proceeds the war of man with man, king with king, nation with nation.

2. Ye kill - In your heart, for "he that hateth his brother is a murderer." Ye fight and war - That is, furiously strive and contend. Ye ask not - And no marvel; for a man full of evil desire, of envy or hatred, cannot pray.

3. But if ye do ask, ye receive not, because ye ask amiss - That is, from a wrong motive.

4. Ye adulterers and adulteresses - Who have broken your faith with God, your rightful spouse. Know ye not that the friendship or love of the world - The desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life, or courting the favour of worldly men, is enmity against God? Whosoever desireth to be a friend of the world - Whosoever seeks either the happiness or favour of it, does thereby constitute himself an enemy of God; and can he expect to obtain anything of him?

5. Do you think that the scripture saith in vain - Without good ground. St. James seems to refer to many, not any one particular scripture. The spirit of love that dwelleth in all believers lusteth against envy - [Gal. v, 17](#); is directly opposite to all those unloving tempers which necessarily flow from the friendship of the world.

6. But he giveth greater grace - To all who shun those tempers. Therefore it - The scripture. Saith, God resisteth the proud - And pride is the great root of all unkind affections. [Prov. iii, 34](#)

7. Therefore by humbly submitting yourselves to God, resist the devil - The father of pride and envy.

8. Then draw nigh to God in prayer, and he will draw nigh unto you, will hear you; which that nothing may hinder, cleanse your hands - Cease from doing evil. And purify your hearts - From all spiritual adultery. Be no more double minded, vainly endeavouring to serve both God and mammon.

9. Be afflicted - For your past unfaithfulness to God.

11. Speak not evil one of another - This is a grand hindrance of peace. O who is sufficiently aware of it! He that speaketh evil of another does in effect speak evil of the law, which so strongly prohibits it. Thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge - Of it; thou settest thyself above, and as it were condemnest, it.

12. There is one lawgiver that is able - To execute the sentence he denounces. But who art thou - A poor, weak, dying worm.

13. Come now, ye that say - As peremptorily as if your life were in your own hands.

15. Instead of your saying - That is, whereas ye ought to say.

17. Therefore to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not - That knows what is right, and does not practice it. To him it is sin - This knowledge does not prevent, but increase, his condemnation.

V

1. Come now, ye rich - The apostle does not speak this so much for the sake of the rich themselves, as of the poor children of God, who were then groaning under their cruel oppression. Weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you - Quickly and unexpectedly. This was written not long before the siege of Jerusalem; during which, as well as after it, huge calamities came on the Jewish nation, not only in Judea, but through distant countries. And as these were an awful prelude of that wrath which was to fall upon them in the world to come, so this may likewise refer to the final vengeance which will then be executed on the impenitent.

2. The riches of the ancients consisted much in large stores of corn, and of costly apparel.

3. The canker of them - Your perishing stores and moth-eaten garments. Will be a testimony against you - Of your having buried those talents in the earth, instead of improving them according to your Lord's will. And will eat your flesh as fire - Will occasion you as great torment as if fire were consuming your flesh. Ye have laid up treasure in the last days - When it is too late; when you have no time to enjoy them.

4. The hire of your labourers crieth - Those sins chiefly cry to God concerning which human laws are silent. Such are luxury, unchastity, and various kinds of injustice. The labourers themselves also cry to God, who is just coming to avenge their cause. Of sabaoth - Of hosts, or armies.

5. Ye have cherished your hearts - Have indulged yourselves to the uttermost. As in a day of sacrifice - Which were solemn feast-days among the Jews.

6. Ye have killed the just - Many just men; in particular, "that Just One," [Acts iii, 14](#). They afterwards killed James, surnamed the Just, the writer of this epistle. He doth not resist you - And therefore you are secure. But the Lord cometh quickly, ver. 8.

7. The husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit - Which will recompense his labour and patience. Till he receives the former rain - Immediately after sowing. And the latter - Before the harvest.

8. Stablish your hearts - In faith and patience. For the coming of the Lord - To destroy Jerusalem. Is nigh - And so is his last coming to the eye of a believer.

9. Murmur not one against another - Have patience also with each other. The judge standeth before the door - Hearing every word, marking every thought.

10. Take the prophets for an example - Once persecuted like you, even for speaking in the name of the Lord. The very men that gloried in having prophets yet could not bear their message: nor did either their holiness or their high commission screen them from suffering.

11. We count them happy that endured - That suffered patiently. The more they once suffered, the greater is their present happiness. Ye have seen the end of the Lord - The end which the Lord gave him.

12. Swear not - However provoked. The Jews were notoriously guilty of common swearing, though not so much by God himself as by some of his creatures. The apostle here particularly forbids these oaths, as well as all swearing in common conversation. It is very observable, how solemnly the apostle introduces this command: above all things, swear not - As if he had said, Whatever you forget, do not forget this. This abundantly demonstrates the horrible iniquity of the crime. But he does not forbid the taking a solemn oath before a magistrate. Let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay - Use no higher asseverations in common discourse; and let your word stand firm. Whatever ye say, take care to make it good.

14. Having anointed him with oil - This single conspicuous gift, which Christ committed to his apostles, [Mark vi, 13](#), remained in the church long after the other miraculous gifts were withdrawn. Indeed, it seems to have been designed to remain always; and St. James directs the elders, who were the most, if not the only, gifted men, to administer at. This was the whole process of physic in the Christian church, till it was lost through unbelief. That novel invention among the Romanists, extreme unction, practiced not for cure, but where life is despaired of, bears no manner of resemblance to this.

15. And the prayer offered in faith shall save the sick - From his sickness; and if any sin be the occasion of his sickness, it shall be forgiven him.

16. Confess your faults - Whether ye are sick or in health. To one another - He does not say, to the elders: this may, or may not, be done; for it is nowhere commanded. We may confess them to any who can pray in faith: he will then know how to pray for us, and be more stirred up so to do. And pray one for another, that ye may be healed - Of all your spiritual diseases.

17. Elijah was a man of like passions - Naturally as weak and sinful as we are. And he prayed - When idolatry covered the land.

18. He prayed again - When idolatry was abolished.

19. As if he had said, I have now warned you of those sins to which you are most liable; and, in all these respects, watch not only over yourselves, but every one over his brother also. labour, in particular, to recover those that are fallen. If any one err from the truth - Practically, by sin.

20. He shall save a soul - Of how much more value than the body! ver. 14. And hide a multitude of sins - Which shall no more, how many soever they are, be remembered to his condemnation.