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Letter of James (1)

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The theological Message of the Letter of James

The prevailing moral character of the letter of James is evident. The letter appears as a collection of counsels and exhortations, sometimes very small, and at other times accompanied by some argumentation. It could be said that James writes to differentiate pure or authentic religion from the vain or assumed religion.

It is clear that many times James presupposes some theological principles as the basis of moral behaviour. He does not inculcate morality for the sake of morality. On the whole the themes strictly theological are recalled only very rarely. James makes recourse to them when he wants to correct a false opinion or when he wants to justify an exhortation. Keeping for the next lecture the exposition of the moral message of the letter, now we shall concentrate on those few principles of faith that are clearly affirmed in the letter of James.

1. James 1,12-18:

The Origin of Temptation

In Jas 1,12-18, we have indicated the third section of discourse in which the writer takes into consideration the theme of temptation. The text says: "Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted: 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures."

The first affirmation of the section contains a beatitude, a "macarism" (from the Greek word *macharios* = blessed) to say it in technical terms, composed of a proclamation ("Blessed is the man





who endures trial”) and of a motivation (“for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him”). The expression “crown of life” is clearly an image that simply means life. It is an image which indicates symbolically the life of man with God after death.

This sense is confirmed by the successive affirmation of the text which says that the crown of life has been promised by God to those who love Him. The promise regards the future when God in his judgment will give the recompense.

In v. 13 James confronts the problem of the origin of temptation. It begins with the refutation of the opinion of those who make God himself the author of their temptations. To show that this opinion does not correspond to truth he recalls indirectly the absolute goodness of God saying that God cannot be tempted with evil and He tempts no one.

After having said what is not a temptation, he affirms what is a temptation. In v. 14 he shows that the origin of sin is in concupiscence, i. e. in desire.

Following the text it is not proper to qualify such desire as “evil”, comparing it with the “good” desire as the origin of good. James only affirms that the created man is tempted by his own desire which attracts and seduces him. Attraction and seduction, the two actions that the desire activates, are not by themselves evil, but they become such when they lead man, to act against the law of God.

A comment on the two images of the v. 15 which speak of generations referring to sin and death is in order. Concupiscence “conceives and brings forth sin”. It is clear that James is speaking of the created humanity and of the condition in which it is found. Humanity allows itself to be seduced by its own desire; it projects and commits sin. In order to show the tremendous force of desire the author attributes to it typical human actions, but of course it is the man who desires and violates the divine law. Hence it is he who sins.

The phrase sin “when it is conceived generates death” means that the man who sins is at the same time in a situation of death and is destined to die. Clearly, the word death is used here with a symbolic value. It indicates the actual condition of the sinner who finds himself separated from the life of God, a separation that becomes definitive and eternal if he does not repent before death.

In the final paragraph of the section, vv. 16-18, James explains further his thoughts on God. Verse 16 warns “do not be deceived”, i. e. do not “be lead astray” or “be cheated” regarding the origin of temptations. Then we read: “every good endowment and every perfect gift comes from above and descends from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (v. 17). Speaking of God the author makes recourse to symbolic images to define his nature: the expression “every good endowment and every perfect gift” indicates every form of good, while the other expression “comes from above and descends from the Father of lights” indicates its origin from God.

To explain the meaning of the title “Father of lights” recourse is made to many hypotheses. The most common one retains that it simply indicates God as Father, creator of the sun, moon, and stars in opposition to the symbolic shadow of deceit and error. What is said immediately afterwards confirms such an interpretation. In God there is no “variation or shadow due to change”. These images are also symbolic, i. e. taken from physical phenomena, but used to indicate the moral quality of the nature of God.

What is said positively in v. 17a, is expressed negatively in v. 17b, thus strengthening the weight of the affirmation: in God not only there is no evil or error and there cannot be any, but there is only good and truth. Hence the whole sentence of 1,17 is a theological affirmation on the nature of God by means of symbolic images. The first part of the sentence presents God as the origin of good and truth; the second part excludes from Him the opposite, i.e. evil and error.

At this point we find a development in which James, always with symbolic language, affirms that God has created men in view of good. Man who has his origin from God, the source of good and truth, has been created in truth and to do good. In fact he says: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures”.

The principal affirmation refers almost certainly to the fact and mode of the creation recalling the creation of man by means of the word of God according to the account in the book of Genesis (cf. Gen 1,25-28). This interpretation is suggested by the context immediately preceding which speaks of God as the “Father of lights”, i. e. as the Creator. Other commentators, nevertheless take the expression “word of truth” to refer to the Christian regeneration that occurs by the announcement of the gospel. This interpretation is possible because there are texts in the NT in which the formula indicates certainly the gospel (See for example, Eph 1, 13; Col 1, 5; 1 Pet 1, 23).

The following clause indicates the purpose of the creation of men: that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. This is again a symbolic expression. In nature the first fruits are those which are collected. Since it refers to the believers, the expression could indicate the works and the way of living referred to as the best fruits. However, the expression signifies that God has created us with his true word so that we might be the best among the creatures in the execution of good deeds.

Summing up the principles of faith contained in this section the following conclusions can be made: (first) temptations do not have their origin from God but from the desire of man; (second) only good has its origin from God and in Him there is no evil or error; (and third) God has created men in view of the good.

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2. Jas 2, 12-13: The Judgment

In the last paragraph of the fifth section, 2,1-13, James recalls God's judgment in order to exhort his audience to adopt a correct way of thinking and behaving: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (2,12-13). The exhortation is brief and concise, but it is a very dense affirmation regarding a fundamental article of our faith.

First of all the judgment is intended as a final judgment. It is suggested from what follows where the author urges his addressees to consider themselves a persons who "are to be judged", and he puts the verb in future: "the judgment will be..."

James also specifies the way of such a final judgment when he affirms that it will happen "according to a law of liberty". This characteristic expression of the letter of James indicates the moral law given by God and contained in the Scripture, as we clearly understand from the preceding paragraph, Jas 2,8-11. There the word "law" designates the moral norms, i. e. the commandments given by God and referred to in the Scripture (Regarding this point refer to my discussion of the moral message of the letter). As a consequence, the affirmation "according to a law of liberty" indicates that the judgment will consist in examining whether or not human actions are in conformity with the moral law established by God and contained in the Scripture.

Regarding the result of the judgment the text affirms that "it will be without mercy to one who has shown no mercy". In the light of the context that precedes "do not showing mercy" means despising the poor. James in fact has condemned as sin the preference for the rich and the despise of the poor (2,6.9). This interpretation is confirmed by other passages of the letter. In 1,27 James has affirmed that the genuine religion consists in helping the widows and orphans, namely in doing works of charity. In 2,14-16 he argues that the faith without good works is dead. In order to demonstrate this truth, in 2, 25 he brings the biblical example of Rahab who obtained salvation for having shown hospitality towards the explorers. In the moment of judgment God will not use mercy towards the sinners who during their life acted without mercy towards the needy. On the other hand, he who shows mercy to his neighbour in need will find mercy on the day of judgment for his own deficiencies before God. James concludes by repeating the principle that mercy triumphs over judgment, that is mercy allows men to undergo condemnation in the last judgment.

In summary we can say that in this small section four essential principles of faith are recalled with an ethical function: (first) There will be a judgment; (second) every one will be judged by the law, that is to say, by the conformity or not conformity of his actions to the will of God, of which the law is an expression; (third) he who has not shown mercy during his life will not find mercy in his judgment; (and fourth) mercy will triumph over judgment in as much as the mercy one has shown towards the needy and will make him worthy to find mercy before God for his own sins.

3. Jas 2, 14-26: Faith and Works

The sixth section of the discourse of James, 2,14-26, is centered on the problem of salvation. James engages in a lively confrontation with a hypothetical opponent. He discusses a following dilemma: Is salvation obtained by faith or by works? He proposes, so to speak, a third way which consists in giving the term "works" the meaning of good works done in favour of those in need.

In the first paragraph, verses 14-17, James invites his audience to reflect on the fact that the faith that does not produce works cannot bring salvation because it is dead. In order to explain his thought without giving way to misunderstanding, he brings an example. For instance, if one who sends away a brother without giving him the clothes or food he asks for, his faith is dead. Hence he, who affirms that he believes but does not help his brother in need, cannot hope of having salvation in judgment.

In the second paragraph, verses 18-20, James shifts to direct dialogue in order to show that the boasting of having faith is vain. The faith is of a spiritual nature and no one can prove to have it without works; conversely he who does works can easily show his own faith. To illustrate this idea he brings the example of demons. They believe and even tremble before God, but remain without salvation. Their faith will not save them from the wrath of divine judgment because their behaviour is evil.

As a proof to support his thesis in vv. 21-24 he cites an example from the Bible. He asks his partner in the dialogue if Abraham was not justified for his works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. This rhetorical question does not require an answer. Besides, what Abraham does is a work that by itself reveals his faith in God. From this, James cogently concludes by referring to Gen 15,6: "You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled, which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'; and he was called the friend of God" (vv. 22-23). James recalls again briefly the account of the sacrifice of Abraham from which it results that he is just, i. e. obedient to the will of God. The text of Gen 15,6 in its context affirmed that faith produced the justice of Abraham and that through his work he

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showed the justification received by faith from the grace of God. Jas 2,23 cites this famous text to say that Abraham manifested his faith by being ready to sacrifice his son in obedience to God. Hence James affirms that the word of the Scripture was fulfilled.

In v. 24 he leaves his hypothetical dialogue partner and returns to his audience saying: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone”.

In the last paragraph, vv. 25-26, he brings a second biblical example to confirm his thesis and concludes: the prostitute Rahab obtained salvation when the whole of Jericho, where she lived, was destroyed, because she had given hospitality to the explorers. Notwithstanding her bad conduct, Rahab obtained salvation for having fulfilled one good work. Concluding the argument James returns to the thesis enunciated in the beginning. He makes a comparison between the body without the spirit and faith without works: both of them are really dead, deprived of life.

On the whole the reader understands that what counts before God is not what one says that he believes, not even one’s own moral behaviour, but the good that one does to those in need. James has proved it by presenting the example of demons who do believe, still are not saved because of their evil works. He also proposed example of Rahab who, despite her sinful life, was saved for having done a good deed. With the example of Abraham he has indicated that the believers must show with their works the justice obtained by faith. Finally, with the comparison of the body without the spirit he has indicated that the charity that moves to do good works is that which vivifies the faith.

We can summarize the whole teaching of Jas 2,14-26 in in a question: How is salvation obtained, by faith or by works? and in an answer: salvation is obtained by faith which reveals itself in “good works” done to help those who are in need. In the light of this central teaching on salvation it is understandable why James affirms that the final judgment will be made on the good works that one has done or not done when one could do them.

4. Jas 4, 5: The love of the Spirit that God has given to man with the gift of life

In the second paragraph (4,4-6) of the ninth section of his discourse James directly addresses his audience by calling them “unfaithful people” He also asks a rhetorical question to clearly affirm that he who loves the world becomes the enemy of God. Then he asks the following question: “Or do you suppose it is in vain that the Scripture says, ‘He loves us jealously, the spirit which he has made to dwell in us?’ ”. He concludes by citing Prov 3,34 (LXX): “God opposes the proud; but he gives grace to the humble” to make his audience understand how great is the grace that God grants to those who humble themselves.

Even if the affirmation about the Spirit is not of easy interpretation, it interests us because it contains a principle of faith. Summarizing the discussion among the scholars, the main problems regarding v. 5 can be reduced to two: (1) Who is the subject of the verb “love”: God or the Spirit? (2) Who is the subject of the verb “to dwell”? God, as in the translation of the Revised Standard Version? or the Spirit? If the subject is the Spirit, one should have translated not as “has made to dwell” but as “dwells”.

From the syntax of the sentence the subject that can be assumed is the Spirit, i. e. the Spirit of God. He “loves us until jealousy” and “dwells in us”. The noun with the article, “the Spirit”, is the only one that can be a subject. There is no need to take God as the implied subject and the second verb with a causative meaning, i. e. “has made to dwell”.

We find here more an indirect allusion than a direct quotation of the Scripture. The reference is perhaps to Ex 20,5, but the theme of God’s jealous love is frequent in the OT (cf. Deut 4, 24). James says this of the Spirit of God who dwells in the human creature. Through this theme he admonishes his audience and confirms what he has already affirmed, namely that he who wants to be a friend of the world will find himself as the enemy of God. The motive of such irreducible opposition lies precisely in the following theological principle: the Spirit of God who dwells in us, loves us in a jealous way, he desires until jealousy. What he desires is that the creature in whom he dwells, may love God and does his will in an absolute way, without any compromise with the pleasures of this world. The love of the world, which reveals itself in the search for its pleasures, constitutes man as an enemy of God because he violates the law of that same God whose Spirit loves him in a jealous way.

The text does not only affirm the jealous love of God, but also indicates its purpose with the sentence: “He even gives us a greater grace”. Certainly, in his jealous love, God is demanding because he wants for himself the whole love of his creatures. However, this divine love only aims at the wellbeing of the beloved person because he also gives a greater grace.

The divine Spirit of which this text speaks is probably the Spirit that God has given to the human creature with his living breath, i. e. with the gift of life, as says Gen 2,7. Hence it is this living Spirit, by which God gives life, that loves the man in a jealous way. The purpose is that in his behaviour the man may not violate the divine law, which God has given to protect life. In the light of this interpretation we understand that the actions against the law mentioned in 4,1-3 are seen like a betrayal of the

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love of the Spirit of God. We also understand the reason for the negative epithet (“unfaithful people”, literally “adulterers”) with which James qualifies the audience.

5. Jas 4, 12:

Two Titles and Two Fundamental Activities of God

In the tenth section, 4,11-12, James recalls two divine titles and two fundamental activities which are tied to them. This section comprises a single paragraph. It opens with the exhortation not to speak evil against one another and with the respective motivation: he who judges his brother, judges the law.

Probably James thinks about the situation in which some brethren not only do not practise the law but also speak against those who remain faithful to it. They make themselves judges of the law to which, on the other hand, the other brethren conform their own conduct. The one who assumes the right to judge the law violates the same law in which God commands to love his neighbour. In any case, what is of interest here is, above all, what follows because it recalls a principle of faith.

Verse 12 reads: “There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy”. The reference to God, even though not named, is evident because the two clauses evoke exclusively divine activities.

The first attribute, “lawgiver”, refers to God as the author and giver of the moral law. James has recalled this law in the verse immediately preceding and in 2,8-11. There it is said that the commandments are to be observed according to the principle of the love one’s neighbour and according to other norms contained in the Scripture.

The second attribute, “judge”, similarly refers to God as the one who does the final judgment on the conduct of man. He will examine the actions to verify if they are in conformity with the moral law given by himself. Taken together, the two titles, which are only attributed to God, are a warning: those who transgress the law cannot flee from the final judgment because the one who has given the law and the one who will the judge will be one and the same God.

From the theme of judgment James passes to the theme of salvation and perdition. In fact, the two divine predicates James adds a reference to two divine activities with the words: “He who is able to save and to destroy”. The connection with judgment is evident because the phrase deals with the two activities that God exercises as judge. James means to say that God is the judge in as much as he has the power to save and to destroy. The eternal destiny of every human creature depends on the divine judgment, i. e. salvation or destruction. In this text, according to a commentator, “theology and eschatology are summarized” (F. Mussner, *La lettera di Giacomo*, Brescia 1970, 141-142).

Summing up we can say that Jas 4,11-12 makes the following affirmations: (first) There is one single lawgiver: God, the giver of the moral law; (second) there is one single judge: God, who will make the final judgment on the conduct of man examining if his actions are in conformity with the moral law; (and third) God is the judge as much as he has the power to save and to destroy through his final judgment.

Conclusion

Concluding this lecture let me remind you of my thought with which I have started. The letter of James is certainly written with a paraenetic and moral purpose. Yet the ethics, or the Christian way of life, which James recommends, has a clearly doctrinal basis in his theology. Thus he recalls to his audience and to the Christians of all generations the nature of God, the Creator of all good things, and the Father. God is the only Saviour and Judge; he loves jealously and gives more grace to the human creatures; the eternal salvation is obtained by faith which reveals itself in good works.

