

The Book of James

by Dick B.

(The Parts Dr. Bob Considered “Absolutely Essential”)

Dr. Bob said quite often that the parts of the Bible that early A.A. oldtimers considered essential to their recovery were the Sermon on the Mount, the Book of James, and 1 Corinthians 13. Many other parts of the Bible contributed to A.A. ideas, but Dr. Bob highlighted these three. Therefore, our first article discussed the specific ideas that the A.A. pioneers too from Jesus’s sermon which is found at Matthew Chapters Five, Six, and Seven.

This article will pinpoint the great contribution of the Book of James.

The Book of James

Of probably even greater importance (than the Sermon) in the day-by-day thinking of early A.A. was the Book of James. It was much studied by A.A.'s co-founders. Quotes and ideas from the Apostle James can be found throughout the Big Book and in A.A. literature. The Book of James was considered so important that many favored calling the A.A. fellowship the “James Club” (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 71; *Pass It On*, p. 147). And even the most fundamental phrases in A.A., such as “It Works” and Bill Wilson's own “Works Publishing Company” (which published the First Edition of the Big Book), probably have their origin in the “Faith without works is dead” phrases in James (See Nell Wing, *Grateful to Have Been There*, pp. 70-71).

Let’s therefore review the Book of James, chapter by chapter. As we do so, we will point to traces of that book which we believe can be found in, or probably influenced the text of, the Big Book. At the outset, please note that, as our research into the Biblical roots of A.A. has progressed, so has our understanding of some root sources that previously went unnoticed.

For example, some time back, Dr. Bob's son, Bob Smith, told the author by phone that his father had placed great stake in *The Runner's Bible*. We had encountered difficulty locating a copy. Moreover, we were still looking for some commentary on the Book of James similar to the many on the Sermon on the Mount (by Oswald Chambers, Glenn Clark, Emmet Fox, and E. Stanley Jones) and on 1 Corinthians 13 (by Henry Drummond, for example) which Dr. Bob had studied. We believed such commentaries probably impacted upon the thinking of Dr. Bob, Anne, Henrietta, and the early AAs as have the actual Bible verses in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, and 1 Corinthians 13.

We could find no similar commentary on the Book of James despite A.A.'s emphasis on James. Finally, as we studied the spiritual literature early AAs read, we noticed in *The Runner's Bible* the frequency with which all Dr. Bob's “essential” books and chapters of the Bible (Matthew 5, 6, 7; 1 Corinthians 13; and James) were there mentioned. And we particularly noticed the frequency with which *The Runner's Bible* mentioned and discussed verses from the Book of James that had found their way into A.A..

Hence our reader will find many references to *The Runner's Bible* in footnotes in our title *The Good Book and The Big Book: A.A.'s Roots in the Bible*; for we believe that this little devotional

book may have provided Dr. Bob, Anne Smith, and perhaps even Bill Wilson, with much of the fodder that caused them to focus on James and conclude that James was their “favorite” book of the Bible.

In a phone conversation with the author in 1995, from his home in Texas, Dr. Bob's son stated he felt it would be almost impossible to confirm that *The Runner's Bible* was the source of either A.A.'s or its founders' emphasis on James and other Biblical sources. But he pointed out that this little Biblical devotional book was used by those who wanted a quick and easy source for Biblical ideas in which they were interested. Perhaps, then, that book became a reference source for Dr. Bob, Anne, and even Bill Wilson when they were studying the pertinent Biblical ideas they extracted from 1 Corinthians 13, the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly James. Whatever the facts are concerning the reading of *The Runner's Bible*, we know for sure that it was used a great deal by the pioneers, that it quotes and discusses many verses from James that AAs used, and that the oldtimers very definitely studied James itself.

James Chapter 1

1. *Patience*. Chapter One is not the only chapter in the Book of James which mentions patience. Nor is it the only portion of the Bible that stresses patience. But we've noted that James was a favored Biblical source in early A.A., and James 1:3-4 does state:

Knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have *her* perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

Patience certainly wound up as one of the most frequently mentioned spiritual principles in the Big Book (pp. 67, 70, 83, 111, 118, 163).

2. *Asking wisdom of God with unwavering believing*. James 1:5-8 states:

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all *men* liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.

A double minded man *is* unstable in all his ways.

Asking for God's direction and strength and receiving “Guidance” from Him, are major themes in both the Old and New Testaments. They were important Oxford Group ideas as well. We therefore discussed them at length in our titles, *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Anne Smith's Journal*. And the Big Book, including the Eleventh Step itself, is filled with such Guidance concepts (pp.13, 46, 49, 62-63, 69-70, 76, 79-80, 83, 84-88, 100, 117, 120, 124, 158, 164).

3. *Resisting temptation.* It should surprise no one that AAs of yesteryear and of today are interested in resisting temptation, and having the power to do that—the power of God. James 1:12-16 states:

Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to those that love him. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren.

4. *Every good and perfect gift comes from God, the Father of lights.* James 1:17 states:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

Bill seemed to be referring to this verse when he wrote on page 14 of the Big Book:

I must turn in all things to the Father of Light [*sic*] who presides over us all.

Bill made the same reference to God, the Father of lights who presides over us all, in Appendix One of the Big Book.

5. *Let every man be slow to speak, slow to wrath.* James 1:19-20 states:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

The verse is quoted in *The Runner's Bible* and seems quite relevant to the Big Book's injunction, "If we were to live, we had to be free of anger. . . . God save me from being angry."

6. *Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.* James 1:21-22 states:

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

Reverend Sam Shoemaker devoted an entire chapter in one of his titles to this verse, stating:

I think St. James' meaning is made much clearer in Dr. Moffatt's translation, "Act on the Word, instead of merely listening to it." Try it out in experiment, and prove it by its results—otherwise you only fool yourself into believing that you have the heart of religion when you haven't (Shoemaker, *The Gospel According to You*, pp. 44-55).

In the same chapter, Shoemaker also pointed out that prayer is often more a struggle to find God than the enjoyment of Him and cooperation with His will. He added that "God is and is a Rewarder of them that seek Him." (See *The Gospel According to You*, p. 47; Hebrews 11:6).

We cannot find a specific reference to James 1:21-22 in the Big Book; but A.A. stresses over and over that A.A. is a program of *action*, that probably no human power can relieve a person of alcoholism, and “That God could and would if He were *sought*” (p. 60). A.A.'s program emphasizes action in the experiment of faith it adopted from John 7:17—seeking God by *following* the path that leads to a relationship with God. James 1:22 stresses *doing* God's will as expressed in His Word—not merely listening to it. James was an Akron favorite. Shoemaker was a Wilson favorite. “Faith without works” was a Big Book favorite; and it therefore seems possible that A.A.'s stress on *action* might have derived from in part from James 1:21-22.

7. Pure religion and undefiled before God . . . to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction. James 1:27 states:

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

At the very least, this verse bespeaks unselfishness and helpfulness to others which were cardinal A.A. principles.

James Chapter 2

Chapter Two of the Book of James may have made two direct and major contributions to the language of the Big Book and also to A.A.'s philosophy. Those two contributions were “Love thy neighbor as thyself” and “Faith without works is dead.”

1. Love thy neighbor as thyself. James 2:8 states:

If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well.

This commandment to “Love thy neighbor,” exists in other parts of both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, when the Big Book uses this phrase, there is no assurance that the quote is from James or from one of the other Bible verses to the same effect. But the Big Book certainly does state:

Then you will know what it means to give of yourself that others may survive and rediscover life. You will learn the full meaning of “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (p. 153).

The Book of James is very probably the specific source of this Biblical quote since Dr. Bob, early AAs, and Bill Wilson himself spoke with such favor concerning the importance of “love” as the code of A.A. *and* the Book of James as the favorite book.

2. Faith without works is dead. Said to be the favorite verse of Anne Smith and perhaps the origin of many expressions in A.A. concerning “works,” this expression, or variations of it, appears several times in Chapter Two of the Book of James. For example, James 2:20 states:

But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

“Faith without works” as a phrase and as an A.A. “action” concept are quoted or referred to many times in the Big Book (pp. 14-15, 76, 88, 93, 97). A.A.’s original Oxford Group connection also put emphasis on these James verses, using them in connection with the importance of witnessing.

3. *Helping Others*. It hardly requires citation or documentation to state that A.A.’s cardinal objective is to help others. And this service concept is underlined in Chapter 2 of James, beginning with verses 1 to 7. James 2:15-16 states the principle very well:

If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so, faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

And every alcoholic who has helped one of his miserable, suffering, destitute brothers in need will instantly relate to those verses and hence to the importance of James to the early AAs.

4. *The Ten Commandments*. Again! James 2:10-11 states:

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one *point*, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

James Chapter 3

1. *Taming the tongue*. In his Farewell Address to A.A., Dr. Bob said:

Let us also remember to guard that erring member the tongue, and if we must use it, let's use it with kindness and consideration and tolerance (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 338).

A major portion of James, Chapter Three, is devoted to the trouble that can be caused by an untamed tongue. Following are a few verses emphasizing the point:

Even so the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and *it is* set on fire of hell. . . . But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

. . . Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be.

These verses are not quoted in the Big Book. But Anne Smith referred to them frequently in her journal, as did other A.A. roots sources (Dick B., *Anne Smith's Journal*, pp. 28, 44, 76, 77; Holm, *The Runner's Bible*, p. 68). In paraphrasing the verses, Dr. Bob seemed to be speaking of tolerance, courtesy, consideration, and kindness. James makes clear that good *conversation* should be a focus—conversation, we believe, laced with consideration, kindness, and tolerance (See James 3:13). And these latter principles *are* very much stressed in the Big Book (pp. 67, 69-70, 83-84, 97, 118, 125, 135).

2. *Avoidance of envy, strife, and lying.* James 3:14-16 stresses clear that a heart filled with envy, strife, and lies has not received such “wisdom” from God, but rather from devilish sources. The verses state:

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts; glory not, and lie not against the truth.

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

“Envy” is not as much decried in the Big Book as jealousy; but a more modern translation of these King James verses equates “envy” with “jealousy” (The Revised English Bible, New Testament, p, 208). And the Big Book most assuredly condemns jealousy (pp. 37, 69, 82, 100, 119, 145, 161). In fact, the Big Book states as to jealousy *and* envy:

Keep it always in sight that we are dealing with that most terrible human emotion—jealousy (p. 82).

The greatest enemies of us alcoholics are resentment, jealousy, envy, frustration, and fear (p. 145).

And as to strife, the Big Book states:

After all, our problems were of our own making. Bottles were only a symbol. Besides, we have stopped fighting anybody or anything. We have to (p. 103)!

James 3:17-18 talks much about making peace and the fruit of righteousness being sown in peace of them that make peace.

As seen in the James 3:14 quote, lying and dishonesty are considered devilish; and one should consider the Big Book’s frequent emphasis on grasping and developing a manner of living which “demands rigorous honesty” (p. 58). As to all the verses in James 3:14-16, however, there is little certainty that these particular verses were an exclusive or even major source for the traits of envy, jealousy, strife, and dishonesty because all these traits are decried also in many other parts of the Bible.

James Chapter 4

1. *Asking amiss for selfish ends.* There is much to say about unselfishness and overcoming self-centeredness as far as A.A. principles are concerned. But the following in James 4:3 particularly emphasizes selfishness in prayer:

Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

Christian A.A. sources that were favorites of Dr. Bob's discuss this verse at length. And the Big Book authors may therefore have borrowed from James 4:3 for the following:

We ask especially for freedom from self-will, and are careful to make no request for ourselves only. We may ask for ourselves, however, if others will be helped. We are careful never to pray

for our own selfish ends. Many of us have wasted a lot of time doing that and it doesn't work (Big Book, p. 87).

2. *Humility*. The Book of James has no corner on the Biblical injunction to be humble. But the importance of James, and the remarks of Reverend Sam Shoemaker (quoted under Item 3 immediately below) suggest that the following verses from James may have been a source of the Big Book's frequent mention of humility. James 4:7, 10 state:

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

The Big Book is filled with discussions of humility, of humbling one's own self before God, and of humbly asking for His help. Examples include:

There I humbly offered myself to God, as I understood Him, to do with me as He would (p. 13).

He humbly offered himself to his Maker—then he knew (p. 57).

Just to the extent that we do as we think He would have us, and humbly rely on Him, does He enable us to match calamity with serenity (p. 68).

We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day "Thy will be done" (pp. 87-88).

3. *Trusting God and cleaning house*. James 4:8 states:

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

The Big Book says on page 98:

Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man that he can get well regardless of anyone. The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house.

And, in language closely paralleling that in James 4:8, the Big Book says further that one can establish conscious companionship with God by simply, honestly, and humbly seeking and drawing near to Him:

He has come to all who have honestly sought Him. When we drew near to Him He disclosed Himself to us (page 57)!

In Step Seven, the Big Book relates "cleaning house" of one's character defects to "humbly asking" God to remove them. The foregoing verses in James, which speak of drawing near to God, cleansing our hearts, humbling ourselves in His sight, and then being "lifted" up by God, appear to have been directly involved in framing the Big Book's Seventh Step language. In fact, many years after the Big Book was written, Sam Shoemaker wrote about his understanding of the Seventh Step and said in A.A.'s *Grapevine* in 1964:

Sins get entangled deep within us, as some roots of a tree, and do not easily come loose. We need help, grace, the lift of a kind of divine derrick (Shoemaker, *Those Twelve Steps as I Understand Them*; Volume II, Best of the Grapevine, p. 130).

4. *Taking your own inventory.* James 4:11-12 states:

Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of *his* brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?

The Fourth Step idea of taking your own inventory has been discussed in connection with relevant verses in the Sermon on the Mount which were often quoted by Oxford Group people and by Anne Smith (See Matthew 7:1-5). Yet the Big Book also stresses looking “for our own mistakes,” asking “Where were we to blame,” and coming to realize that, “The inventory was ours, not the other man's.” Considering the importance to AAs of the Book of James and its insights, the foregoing James verses probably also had an impact on the A.A. idea of avoiding judgment of another in favor of examining one's own conduct for wrongdoing.

James Chapter 5

1. *Patience.* To reiterate, in our discussion of James, Chapter One, we covered the verses on patience, which can be found in James 5:7, 8, 10, 11.

2. *Grudges covered in a resentment inventory.* James 5:9 reads:

Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned; behold, the judge standeth before the door.

A major portion of the Big Book's Fourth Step discussion is devoted to resentment, about which page 64 says:

Resentment is the “number one” offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease.

The Big Book then suggests putting resentments on paper—making a “grudge list” (pp. 64-65). Oxford Group spokesman Ebenezer Macmillan wrote at length on the importance of eliminating resentments, hatred, or the “grudge” that “blocks God out effectively.” Rev. Sam Shoemaker specified “grudges” as one of the “sins” to be examined in an inventory of self (Shoemaker, *Twice-Born Ministers*, p. 182). Since the Big Book lists resentments or “grudges” as one of the four major “character defects” which *block us from God*, we think it quite possible that the “grudge” language in the Big Book was influenced by James, and perhaps specifically in James 5:9.

3. *Asking God's forgiveness for sins.* We repeat James 5:15, partially quoted above. The entire verse says:

And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.

The Big Book says this, concerning asking God's forgiveness when we fall short:

If we are sorry for what we have done, and have the honest desire to let God take us to better things, we believe we will be forgiven and will have learned our lesson (p. 70).

When we retire at night, we constructively review our day. . . . After making our review, we ask God's forgiveness and inquire what corrective measures should be taken (p. 86).

The foregoing Big Book quotes show that, even after their initial surrender, wrongdoers may still gain forgiveness from God for the shortcomings in which they indulged after their initial surrender. Here again, James has no corner on the statement that God makes it possible, through forgiveness, for a believer to regain fellowship with Him. 1 John 1:9 may also have been a source of these Big Book ideas:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

See also our discussion of forgiveness in connection with the Sermon on the Mount. The Books of James, 1 John, or Matthew could each or all have been the basis for the Big Book forgiveness concept.

4. *Confess your sins one to another.* It has often been noted that *both* the Oxford Group concept of sharing by confession *and* Step Five in the Big Book were derived from James 5:16:

Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed.

5. *Effectual, fervent prayer works.* James 5:16 states:

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

The Big Book abounds with prayers. And it states:

Step Eleven suggests prayer and meditation. We shouldn't be shy on this matter of prayer. Better men than we are using it constantly. It works, if we have the proper attitude and work at it.

James 5:16 could well have been a major basis for the Big Book's emphasis on the effectiveness of prayer.