

The Letter of James

The Letter of James

“DOING THE WORD”

An eleven-week study of the epistle of James



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Title

James, like all of the general epistles except Hebrews, is named after its author (v. 1).

Author and Date

Of the 4 men named James in the NT, only two are candidates for authorship of this epistle. No one has seriously considered James the Less, the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Acts 1:13), or James the father of Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). Some have suggested James the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Matt. 4:21), but he was martyred too early to have written it (Acts 12:2). That leaves only James, the oldest half-brother of Christ (Mark 6:3) and brother of Jude (Matt. 13:55), who also wrote the epistle that bears his name (Jude 1). James had at first rejected Jesus as Messiah (John 7:5), but later believed (1 Cor. 15:7). He became the key leader in the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:12), being called one of the “pillars” of that church, along with Peter and John (Gal. 2:9). Also known as James the Just because of his devotion to righteousness, he was martyred ca. A.D. 62, according to the first century Jewish historian Josephus. Comparing James’ vocabulary in the letter he wrote which is recorded in Acts 15 with that in the epistle of James further corroborates his authorship.

James		Acts 15
1:1	“greetings”	15:23
1:16,19; 2:5	“beloved”	15:25
1:21; 5:20	“your souls”	15:24,26
1:27	“visit”	15:14
2:10	“keep”	15:24
5:19,20	“turn”	15:19

James wrote with the authority of one who had personally seen the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:7), who was recognized as an associate of the apostles (Gal. 1:19), and who was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

James most likely wrote this epistle to believers scattered (1:1) as a result of the unrest recorded in Acts 12 (ca. A.D. 44). There is no mention of the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 (ca. A.D. 49), which would be expected if that Council had already taken place. Therefore, James can be reliably dated ca. A.D. 44–49, making it the earliest written book of the NT canon.

Background and Setting

The recipients of this book were Jewish believers who had been dispersed (1:1), possibly as a result of Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7, A.D. 31–34), but more likely due to the persecution under Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12, ca. A.D. 44). The author refers to his audience as "brethren" 15 times (1:2,16,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:1,10,12; 4:11; 5:7,9,10,12,19), which was a common epithet among the first century Jews. Not surprisingly, then, James is Jewish in its content. For example, the Greek word translated "assembly" (2:2) is the word for "synagogue." Further, James contains more than 40 allusions to the OT (and more than 20 to the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5–7).

Historical and Theological Themes

James, with its devotion to direct, pungent statements on wise living, is reminiscent of the book of Proverbs. It has a practical emphasis, stressing not theoretical knowledge, but godly behavior. James wrote with a passionate desire for his readers to be uncompromisingly obedient to the Word of God. He used at least 30 references to nature (e.g., "wave of the sea" [1:6]; "reptile" [3:7]; and "heaven gave rain" [5:18]), as befits one who spent a great deal of time outdoors. He complements Paul's emphasis on justification by faith with his own emphasis on spiritual fruitfulness demonstrating true faith.

Interpretive Challenges

At least two significant texts challenge the interpreter: 1) In 2:14–26, what is the relationship between faith and works? Does James' emphasis on works contradict Paul's focus on faith? 2) In 5:13–18, do the promises of healing refer to the spiritual or physical realm?

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THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 1:1-12 Happy Trials

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

James was from the Show-Me state. For James, seein' is believin'. Check out 2:18—"show me your faith without the works." And 3:13—"Let him show by his good behavior." James would say, "If it ain't showin', it ain't growin'." James totally agrees with Paul—we are justified by faith alone, but never by a faith that is alone. James was very concerned that there were professing Christians out there who thought they were believers just because they subscribed to a set of doctrines. No, true God-given faith in Jesus Christ will absolutely change your life.

(Ernie Godshall)

1. Who wrote this letter, and whom did he write it to? (v. 1)
2. There were millions of good subjects with which James could have started his letter—why do you think he chose to start with trials? How does the way James treats the subject of trials differ from the way a Christ-less person would? (v. 2)
3. Why does God let His children get hit with trials? (vv. 3-4)
4. What kind of person benefits from the promise in verse 5? What kind doesn't? (vv. 5-8)
5. Why is the poor brother in a high position? What is the rich man's humiliation? What does this show us about how God views our money and stuff? (vv. 9-11)
6. Which is heavier: our trials, or the crown of life? See Paul's answer in 2 Corinthians 4:17. (v. 12)

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. What is the biggest trial God has placed you in right now? If you were to perfectly apply these verses from James, how would your attitude in and toward that trial look?

2. Charles Spurgeon once noted, "A little faith will bring your soul to heaven; a great faith will bring heaven to your soul." Based upon the presence or absence of enduring joy in your life, how would you describe your faith?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 1:13-18 How Sin Happens

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

1. What is one thing God cannot be? What is one thing He does not do? (v. 13)
2. Explain the sin process. (vv. 14-15)
3. So when you sin, who is to blame? Many are deceived about this—who or what typically receives the blame for our sin? (vv. 14-16)
4. Check out Genesis 3:8-13. Why do you think we naturally shift the blame for our sin onto God and/or others?
5. A pastor once wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” How does James want us to think about God? (vv. 17-18)
6. What does verse 18 tell us about God’s will? See also Romans 12:2.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. Think of a temptation you commonly face. In view of what James says about the process of sin, how specifically might you resist the temptation the next time it arises?

2. Your friend tells you, "I know it's sin and I shouldn't do it, but I can't help it—it's just the way God made me!" How do you respond?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 1:19-27 Prove Yourselves Doers

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

1. "If we were supposed to talk more than listen we would have been given two mouths and one ear" (Mark Twain). What conversation counsel does James give in verse 19?

2. Why should we be slow to anger? Explain. (vv. 19-20)

3. There's a multi-million dollar market out there for methods and tools that are supposed to help people change. According to James, what is the one tried-and-true method for real and lasting change? (v.21)

Step 1:

Step 2:

Step 3:

4. How does James describe "hearers" of God's words who do not do them? (vv. 22-24) How did Jesus describe these people in Matthew 7:26-27?

5. How is God's word described in verse 25? Why?

6. How can you know if your religion is worthless? How can you know if it is pure and undefiled in the sight of God? (vv. 26-27)

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. Jonathan Edwards wrote: "There is no question whatsoever, that is of greater importance to mankind, and what is more concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, than this: What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards? Or, which comes to the same thing, What is the nature of true religion? And wherein do lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness that is acceptable in the sight of God?"

Based on James 1:19-27, what are some of the marks that separate true believers from false? Which are most evident in your life?

2. What would it look like for you to apply the three-step process of question 3 to a specific area of struggle in your life?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. What are some of the subtle ways that money influences how Christians interact with each other? How should these interactions look?

2. How would you rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, your understanding of God's mercy toward you? Do you think that is reflected in the way you treat other Christians?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 2:14-26 Faith Works

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

“We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” - Martin Luther

1. How does James help his readers to understand the deadness of faith without works? What comparison does he make? (vv.14-17)

2. James isn't arguing against justification by faith alone; rather, James is arguing against justification by *fake* faith. What word does James use in verse 17 to describe this fake faith, and what is this fake faith's main characteristic? (v. 17)

3. Someone is reading verses 18 to 26 and says to you, “Paul says we're justified by faith apart from works, but James says we're justified by works. Well, which is it?” Outline your response, including how you would explain the following verses.

v. 18 –

v. 25 –

v. 19 –

v. 26 –

vv. 20-24 –

4. Someone who is known for living a life of open and unrepentant sin says to you, “Yeah, I prayed to accept Jesus into my heart at a summer camp when I was fourteen. I'm good with God.” How might you use these verses in James to warn him about the danger of his soul?

v. 18 –

v. 25 –

v. 19 –

v. 26 –

vv. 20-24 –

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. How important is the doctrine of justification by faith alone to you? Is it a hill you are willing to die on? Why or why not?

2. How do you know that your faith is real and not a fake faith?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. In this part of James, we are told how *not* to speak. Where in Scripture would you find practical instructions on how you ought to speak? Is this how you speak on a typical day? On a particularly stressful day?

2. Paul once wrote, “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13a). Elders and pastors who teach incur a stricter judgment and must give an account for the souls of those under their care. What might you do or what changes might you make in order to “[l]et them do this with joy and not with grief” (Heb. 13:17)?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 3:13-18 The Wisdom from Above

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

“How blessed is the man who finds wisdom And the man who gains understanding. For her profit is better than the profit of silver And her gain better than fine gold. She is more precious than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her.” -- Solomon

1. James’ motto could be, “Show, don’t tell.” How does someone *show* that he or she is wise? (v. 13)

2. Where in Scripture would you go to learn more about this heavenly wisdom? Do descriptions of wisdom elsewhere in Scripture line up with James’ description of it? Give examples.

3. Contrast heavenly and earthly wisdom (vv. 14-18):

HEAVENLY	EARTHLY

4. What is the biggest giveaway that someone has earthly wisdom? What is the biggest giveaway that someone has heavenly wisdom? (vv. 14-18)

5. Can you think of one biblical character who had earthly wisdom and one who had heavenly wisdom? Explain why you chose whom you did.

6. Based on what comes right after it in chapter 4, why do you think James throws verse 18 in after his discussion of wisdom?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. Proverbs 9:10 reads, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." The one prerequisite for wisdom is that you fear the LORD—that is, that you know Him personally through His Son. Is it evident to others that you fear the LORD by your good behavior and by deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom?

2. Jealousy and selfish ambition are common to man. What are some things that we know from the Bible that can knock down these temptations when they rise up?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 4:1-12 Christian vs. Christian

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

1. Why were the recipients of James' letter fighting with each other? Is this the same reason that people fight with each other today? (vv. 1-2a)

2. What are the two reasons that God's children don't always get what they want? (vv. 2b-3)

3. C. J. Mahaney writes, "The world we're not to love is *the organized system of human civilization that is actively hostile to God and alienated from God.*" What does it mean to be a friend of this world? (vv. 4-6)

4. Here is one of the clearest pictures of repentance in the Bible. What is commanded, to whom is it commanded, and what is promised for those who obey? (vv. 7-10)

WHAT IS COMMANDED?	TO WHOM?	WHAT IS PROMISED?

5. Does God prohibit all kinds of judging in the Bible? What kind of judgment are Christians allowed to practice? Consider John 7:24, 1 Corinthians 6:1-6, and Acts 8:20-23.

6. What kind of judgment is prohibited in James 4:11-12? Why is it wrong?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. If you are involved in a conflict with a believer right now, what inside motivation or motivations do you think helped start the conflict? What inward change would need to take place, on your part or his or hers, to bring the conflict to an end?

2. How did Jesus act toward the “world” during the thirty-something years that He was physically here? How do your attitudes and actions toward the world resemble His? How do they differ?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 4:13-5:6 Bad Business

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

1. Describe the attitude of the man addressed in 4:13.
2. Why is the attitude in 4:13 a bad one? What would be a better one? (vv. 14-16)
3. What does verse 17 have to do with the verses before it? What helpful Christian principle can we draw from this verse?
4. Is it a sin to be wealthy? Explain using other Scripture passages. (5:1)
5. What kind of rich people is James denouncing? What are they doing wrong? (vv. 1-6)
6. Consider the attitude of those in 4:13-17 and the attitude of those in 5:1-6. How are they similar? How are they different?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. The proud do not like to hear of God's sovereignty (that He is ultimately in control of all things), but the humble find great comfort in it. What comfort can you draw from the picture of you and God given in 4:14-15?

2. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, a beggar named Lazarus has a hard life but dies and heads toward heaven, while his rich neighbor lives luxuriously but, not having faith in God, dies and suffers torment in hell. Abraham, who is carrying Lazarus to heaven, says to the suffering rich man, "Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony" (Luke 16:25). How should this, along with James 5:1-6, shape your priorities?

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. What is one great comfort you can take from this passage to help you in a trial you are now facing, or to prepare you for a trial to come?

2. Imagine you just heard a great trumpet blast outside and the voice of an archangel. What are the first few things that would come to your mind?

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Doing the Word

James 5:13-20 Effective Prayer

QUESTIONS FROM THE WORD

1. Why does James connect suffering with prayer and cheerfulness with singing? Does this mean that the suffering shouldn't sing, or that the cheerful shouldn't pray? (v. 13)
2. Commentators disagree on the meaning of verses 14-16. Some think they refer to the healing of physical illnesses, while others believe they have reference to the restoration of those who have become exhausted under sufferings. In either case, what is the process James prescribes? (vv. 14-16)
3. Based upon verses 14 to 16, how should the relationship between church elders and those under their care look? (Consider also Acts 6:4)
4. What can the effective prayer of a righteous man accomplish? What example of this does James give? (vv. 16b-18)
5. Explain the relationship between prayer and faith. See also Mark 11:22-24.
6. With what encouragement does James end his letter? (vv. 19-20)

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LIFE

1. Do you think you could stop the rain by praying? Why or why not?

2. An English writer once noted, "In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible gimmick may be dismissed." How can we pray "in faith" and yet at the same time pray, "not my will, but Yours be done"?