

Module: The New Testament

Session 24 – James

Author

Widely believed to be James, the half-brother of Jesus. James was not a follower of Jesus during His time on earth (Mk 3:21-35; John 7:5) but eventually became an apostle, as one who had seen and believed the Lord after His-resurrection (1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19). He then became one of the leaders of the church at Jerusalem. Peter singled him out among the other Christians living there (Ac 12:17). James made the deciding speech at the Jerusalem Council (which he moderated; Ac 15:13-22), and Paul called James one of the pillars of the church (Gal 2:9). James was martyred in approximately 62AD, according to the historian Josephus (37-100AD).

Date of Composition

Most likely written around 50. James was possibly the first New Testament book written.

Purpose and Audience

The Epistle of James is written to Jewish Christians. This is explicit in 1:1 and implicit in his descriptions of the law and people from the Old Testament cited to illustrate his teachings. There is not the emphasis on sins common in Gentile communities that features in much of Paul's writings. James does not mention Gentile Christians. He describes meetings in synagogues (where many of the first Christian gatherings took place, when Christianity was still seen as a Jewish sect and overall numbers were smaller), making an early date for the letter (prior to the Jerusalem Council described in Ac 15) most likely.

Remember the leadership role of James in the predominantly Jewish church in Jerusalem when you approach the epistle and try to contextualize and understand what he has written.



James combats an extreme view that is widespread today, called *antinomianism* (anti=against + nomos = law), which holds that through faith in Christ one is completely free from all Old Testament law and religious legalism (attempts to base our salvation on works and compliance with rules). Paul takes aim at antinomianism in Romans 6. By the same token, James is not a legalist either (cf Ac 15).

Martin Luther disliked this epistle and called it “the epistle of straw, with no tang of the Gospel about it”. This is no doubt because most of the church in his day stressed works over faith, as pre-conditions for salvation, to the point of corruption. Luther (who stressed *sola fide*, or faith alone) seems not to have recognized that James’ teaching on works complements (ie does not contradict) the New Testament’s teaching on faith for salvation and Christian living. While Paul’s teachings concentrate on justification, James concentrates on works that exemplify justification and demonstrate faith in life.

James writes to encourage the believers to continue growing in their Christian faith. He emphasizes that good actions will (> must) naturally flow from those who are filled with the Holy Spirit and questions whether someone may or may not have a saving faith if the fruits of the Spirit cannot be seen, much as Paul describes in Gal 5:22-23.

Structure

James is about “practical” religion. It starts with encouragement to those facing persecution, then moves to a Christian world view about issues; and commands about pursuing a life of holiness. Christians evidence their faith by walking in certain ways. Faith that does not produce change and Christian character is spurious/worthless (2:17). James points us to Abraham in Gen 15 and 22; Rahab in Josh 2; Job; and Elijah, who obeyed God because of their faith. Their external actions were evidence of an inner trust and obedience. Hebrews 11 has many more examples of this faith/action binary.

James focuses on five things, in the context of applying the Christian message:

- ‡ trials and temptations
- ‡ faith and works
- ‡ patience and prayer
- ‡ riches and poverty
- ‡ control of the tongue



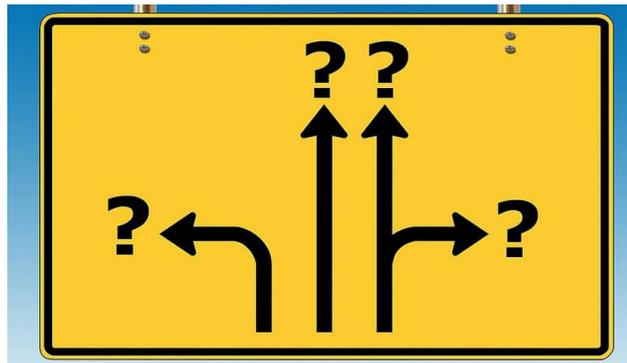
“...a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire” (3:5-7).

Key Issues

Things that Enable Christian Growth

“... when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So, let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.” (1:3, 4). We are called to “hang in there” with faith and patience (note the illustration from farming in 5:7, 8).

Strength and maturity in the Christian life come from singlemindedness in following Christ (in mind, heart, speech and action).



“But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.” (1:6-8)

There is also another side: we are strengthened when we recognise who God is, what He is like, and what He is doing in our lives:

“Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession” (1:16-18).

How Temptation and Sin Work

We should never blame God for sin in our lives. The following verses are quite graphic:

“Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death” (1:14, 15).

The Message puts it this way: “The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us. We have no one to blame but the leering, seducing flare-up of our own lust. Lust gets pregnant, and has a baby: sin! Sin grows up to adulthood, and becomes a real killer”.

Action that Reflects Faith - “faith is dead without good works” (2:26)

James’ letter is a powerful description of the relationship between faith and works. So ingrained in the requirements of the Mosaic Law and works were the Jewish Christians to whom James wrote that he spent considerable time explaining that no one is actually made right with God by the works of the law (Gal 2:16). This was initially a stumbling block for many, who depended on obedient to law to make God love them. James declares to them that even if they try their best to keep the various laws and rituals, doing so is impossible, and failing in the smallest part of the law makes them guilty of breaking all of it (2:10), because the law is one entity. Jesus says the same thing in Mt 5:20, cf Mt 7:21.

Note James’ challenge: “If you are wise and understand God’s ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom” (2:13).

James says that faith produces genuine deeds. In other words, if those who call themselves God’s people belong to Him, their lives will produce the right actions. James contends with hypocritical believers who say one thing but do another (cf Mt 7:16-20).

For James, faith is not an abstract proposition. It has effects in the real world. James offers practical examples to illustrate his point; faith in action:

- ‡ endures in the midst of trials,
- ‡ calls on God for divine wisdom
- ‡ recognises the power for great good, or destruction, of words, and controls the tongue (note his illustrations: a bit in a horse’s mouth, rudder of a ship, fire, poison, bitter water)
- ‡ sets aside wickedness
- ‡ visits orphans and widows
- ‡ does not play favorites.

James stresses that the life of faith is comprehensive, impacting every area of our lives and driving us to engage with other people. While he recognized that believers do stumble from time to time (3:2), he also knew that faith cannot function in those who turn a blind eye to the less fortunate, or curse those in their paths. We should not show favouritism to some people because they have more, or are considered more “important”, than others. God is impartial. “If you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin” (2:9).

“Strong people
don't
put others down...
They
lift them up.”

The epistle puts to rest the idea that one can become a Christian and yet continue living in sin, exhibiting no fruit of righteousness. Such a “faith”, James declares, is shared by the demons who “believe and tremble” (2:19). It cannot save because it is not verified by genuine actions that always accompany true faith (Eph 2:10). Good works are not the means of salvation, but they are the result of it.

Faith leads to action: “it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it” (4:17). For James, faith and action go hand in hand. Faith produces results.



“..don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.” (1:22-25)

Non-Christians do not like it (no surprise) when Christian faith and conduct align:

“Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life.” So said Lord Melbourne, William Wilberforce’s chief opponent in the drive to abolish slavery throughout the British realm. There are many who believe Christian faith to be strictly a private affair, having no real import or impact on what we do or say on a daily basis. Christian voices should not be hijacked (as far as belief and action are concerned) by public opinion. Christians live by what Christ taught, irrespective of political correctness, public pressure, social averages, relativism, or liberal theology (which is not Christian at all). James’ message is that, as Christians, we make choices based on authentic Christian faith in action. This is reinforced by 4:4-10, in which James passionately states:

“If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.”

Getting Wisdom

“If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you” (1:5). There is an earthly wisdom, and a heavenly wisdom. The two have opposite effects:

- ✎ Jealousy and selfishness are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are “earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

- ✦ But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favouritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness (3:16-18).

Earthly Riches are Transitory

James denounces those who grow rich unjustly. Wealth gets eaten up, possessions perish, greed leads to extortion and injustice (5:1-5). Christians should be leading the way advocating for social justice by their lives.



The Power of Prayer

- † Job endured suffering, and God honoured him (5:11).
- † Elijah was just like us, but God heard and answered his prayers (5:17, 18).

James gives instructions for praying for those experiencing hardships, and the sick, and expecting healing and forgiveness where appropriate (5:13-16).

For Reflection:

- Do you have faith in God, which leads to character change and “doing the works of God” (like Jesus, Jn 9:4), or just faith in faith, or a half-hearted kind of faith that wavers with your personal circumstances?
- Think about what motivates you (1:5-8). Why do you want God’s wisdom, guidance, blessing and provision?
- “But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says.” (1:22-25)
- Consider a comment made to Ps Stanley Lloyd Jones: “I believe in God, but not sufficiently to influence my conduct, except now and then.” Is there a gulf between faith and life, so that Christian living is by exception?
- How do you treat those who are less fortunate, in the way you speak and relate to them? Think about the challenge of 2:15, 16 (how we react when we see people in need).
- What role does money (and getting it) play in how you live your life?

- Life is short (1:10, 11). We should make God's will the centre of our planning. We are dependent on Him. What is your approach to planning the future? How does James' view in 4:13-17 affect your views?
- Consider the power of genuine humility: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So humble yourselves before God. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honour" (4:6, 7, 10, cf Pr 3:34).
- Do you live as though the coming of Christ is near (5:8)?
- We are called to look after one another's spiritual health and bring back those who stray (5:19, 20). Are there people you know, who need to be sought out, (forgiven where necessary, in an attitude of restoration, and) brought back into fellowship with God and Christian people? When we live like this, we are reflecting our Heavenly Father and the spirit of Jesus.

Christians live by faith and work by love, in the context of Christian community.