

Men to Men Ministry

Lesson ONE of Ya'akov

Christians' faith in the God should work itself out in a life of obedience.

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James 1:1

James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings.

Let me introduce you to a man of both mystery and wisdom. Mystery in that no one is absolutely sure who James was and wisdom because there are so many parallels between his writing and the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus and the Proverbs of David.

This study is to discover one of the basic truths of faith and our response to that faith. The Book of James provides practical guidance for Christian living, emphasizing wisdom from God's Word, fruitful living amidst hardships, and obedience to Christ's teachings.

James's letter is one of the most quoted books of the entire Bible. It's filled with famous phrases and quotations that often make their way into Christian conversation:

- Faith produces steadfastness.
- God cannot be tempted.
- Every good and perfect gift comes from above.
- Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.
- Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.
- Even the demons believe—and shudder!
- Faith apart from works is dead.
- Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

It is difficult to take one verse from James and say it is more important than all the others. For this writer, if pressed for the key verse of this short pithy book James it would be in James 1:22 **“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”**

Other notable and memorable verses are:

- **James 5:16** “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”
- **James 1:2** “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.

- James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”
- James 2:14 “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?”
- James 4:6 “But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.””
- James 1:19 “This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;”
- James 4:17 “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him is sin.”
- James 3:1 “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgement.”
- James 4:3 “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”
- James 3:14 “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.”
- James 1:22 “You see that faith was working with his works, as a result of the works, faith was perfected.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia states:

“The Epistle of James is the most Jewish writing in the New Testament. As the Gospel according to Matthew was written for the Jews. The Epistle to the Hebrews is addressed explicitly to them. The John’s apocalypse is full of the spirit of the Old Testament. The Epistle of Jude is Jewish too. Yet all of these books have more of the distinctively Christian element in them than we can find in the Epistle of James. If we eliminate two or three passages containing references to Christ, the whole epistle might find its place just as properly in the Canon of the Old Testament as in that of the New Testament, as far as its substance of doctrine and contents is concerned. That could not be said of any other book in the New Testament.”

There is no mention of the incarnation or of the resurrection, the two fundamental facts of the Christian faith. The word ‘gospel’ does not occur in the epistle. There is no suggestion that the Messiah has appeared and no presentation of the possibility of redemption through Him.

Nevertheless, as we read carefully this discourse, James is also full of passages that have left Christians with great question such as:

- Why does James have it in for rich people?
- Does James teach that if you just have enough faith, God will always heal?
- Does James disagree with Paul about the relationship between faith, works, and salvation?
- How does James’ perspective on trials challenge common reactions to adversity?

- How can trials and problems increase our understanding of God’s goodness?
- How does James differentiate between wisdom of the world and wisdom from God?
- Is there a difference between God’s wisdom and all other wisdom?
- Why is doubt so destructive to faith?
- How does James understand temptation and sin?
- How does the metaphor of a “first fruits of His creatures” help explain our relationship with God?
- What does James teach us about the nature of God?
- In what ways does the teaching of James challenge cultural norms about listening, speaking, and anger?
- How can I be a “doer” of words?
- What is James’ understanding of “pure and undefiled religion”?
- How can we help orphans, widows, and those in distress in today’s context?
- How can one keep oneself “unstained by the world” while still living in it?

These are all important questions, and during this study we will address all of them. It helps, however, to realize that the primary message driving James’s letter is that a **Christians’ faith in the God should work itself out in a life of obedience**. As he says in James 1:22, believers in Jesus should not just hear the word and believe it, but they should also do what it says. The gospel of Jesus—which James understands deeply and affirms completely—results in a new life of obedience when a person believes. That’s James’s message, and as we come to understand that, his book will be a stirring exhortation to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

History of the Letter of James

The letter of James is one of the writings that had a very hard fight to get into the New Testament. Even when it did come to be regarded as scripture, it was spoken with a certain air of reserve and suspicion. In the sixteenth century Martin Luther seen as the founder of the Protestant faith, would have ripped it out of the New Testament altogether.

The Latin Church

In the first lists of accepted scripture in 170 AD the book of James was not included. The first inclusion in the Latin world was in 350 AD and attributes it to James the son of Zebedee and further includes it as collection of religious tracts written by the early fathers. So how did the Letter of James become accepted? It was Jerome the creator of the Latin translation to the bible called the Vulgate who solidified the Letter to the Roman church in the fourth century. But even then Jerome doubted it was written by any of the men mentioned in the New Testament but was written in the name of James. It was when Augustine gave his stamp of approval as a writing of worth and proposed the author was the Brother of Jesus was it accepted in the Church.

The final decision was made for the Roman church at the Council of Trent in 1546. This council set the Bible for the Roman Catholic Church. They flatly stated no one could add to the number or take away any. Further they divided the New Testament into two

sections: Proto-canonical, the writings that had been unquestioningly accepted from the beginning, and those who were Deutero-canonical to those who had gradually been accepted and had won their place in the Bible. They totally accepted James into the Bible but were segmented to the second section.

The Syrian Church

The Christians of Palestine should have been the first to accept James into their Book of Books. James was a Jew and part of the history of the Syrian Church. The Syrian church had its own translation of the Bible written by Babbula the Bishop of Edessa about AD 412. This translation was titled the Peshitto. Up to that time there were no written evidence of the Letter of James in existence. This part of the translation was not truly accepted as Scripture in the Syrian church until John of Damascus the presiding Bishop of the church proclaimed James as authentic in the eighth century did it become one of the Scriptures.

The Greek Church

About in the middle of the fourth century, the Greek church leader and first major writer of Church history, Eusebius set upon the task of solidifying the scriptures into three areas: Trusted and accepted, Trusted and disputed, and untrusted and disputed. To this second category Eusebius placed the Letter of James. He accepted it but he also knew well those who did not. It was not until the 367 AD the Bishop of Egypt, Athanasius set for his Greek speaking church which books would be scripture. To Athanasius there was just too many sources that were be preached and taught and there must be list of acceptable writings. In Athanasius' Easter letter to the Egypt, he included the letter of James with any qualification.

The Protestant Church

Martin Luther was especially severe on the Letter of James. In his concluding paragraph of his *Preface to the New Testament*, Luther has this to say:

“the epistle of James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical.”

Further Luther continues in his *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*,

“I think highly of the epistle of James, and regard it as valuable although it was rejected in early days. It does not expound human doctrines, but lays much emphasis on God’s law. Yet to give my opinion, without prejudice to that of anyone else, I do not hold it to be of apostolic authorship.”

Placing It in the Larger Story

James is an intensely practical book, filled with exhortations to Christians about the way they should live their lives now that they have been given new life in Jesus. It is filled with allusions to and quotations of the teaching of Jesus, and it includes more calls to action per word than any other New Testament book. For these reasons, James has been called “the Proverbs of the New Testament.”

James is therefore highly relevant to the Christian life. Unlike many of the other books of the New Testament, James's aim is not to give a theological presentation of the gospel. Rather, he writes his book to those who already believe the **gospel**, and his goal is to help them live faithfully as followers of Jesus.

- **Definition: Gospel – The teaching or revelation of Jesus Christ. The record of Jesus' life and teaching in the first four books of the New Testament telling of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ**

There are many different and seemingly disconnected themes in James—perseverance under trial, riches and poverty, wisdom, the danger of the tongue, prayer, and faith and works. But what ties them all together is James's desire to take the teaching of Jesus and apply it to the Christian's personal life.

The style of this short book is a hybrid of proverbs, sermons, and admonitions.

- **Definition: Proverb - simple, traditional saying that states a well understood truth based on common sense or experience. Proverbs are often symbolic using comparisons and examples.**
- **Definition: Sermon - A sermon is a religious speech or teaching by a preacher, prophet, or a member of clergy. Sermons are based on a scriptural, theological, or moral topic. Elements of the sermon often include exposition, exhortation, and practical application. The act of delivering a sermon is called preaching. In secular usage, the word sermon may refer, often disparagingly, to a lecture on morals.**
- **Definition: Admonition - a piece of advice that is also a warning to someone about their behavior.**

There is little new theology in this Letter of James. It is all about getting up in your business and telling you without any hint of political correctness that your behavior, your efforts are the evidence of your belief. James takes his inspiration from two places: first from the teachings of Jesus, specifically from the Sermon on the Mount and secondly, from Proverbs 1 through 9. James lived both of these influences. When Jesus was ministering in Galilee James the servant was most likely there along with their mother Mary. This writing is full of metaphors and one line admonitions.

- **Definition – Simile – The comparison of two dissimilar things. Usually the phrase or idea includes the comparison words of “like” or “as”. It is used to place two things together and compare their similar characteristics. Example: Jesus is like a stone is a simile because Jesus is not a stone but has the characteristic of being hard and unbreakable.**
- **Definition – Metaphor – a substitution for the item being addressed. It is a fusion of the defining characteristics of both. Example: Jesus is the word. The two items have merged into one idea. Word is the explanation of something and Jesus also is the explanation.**

The Language of James

We must consider the language of James was Koine Greek.

- **Definition: The term “Koine” comes from the Koine Greek phrase ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος (hē koinḗ diálektos), which means “the common dialect.” The Greek word “κοινή” (koinḗ) itself means “common”**

Koine Greek emerged during the Hellenistic period, following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC. It served as a common language across much of the Mediterranean region and the Middle East during the Hellenistic period, the Roman Empire, and the early Byzantine Empire. Koine Greek was the language of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), the Christian New Testament, and most early Christian theological writings by the Church Fathers. It played a crucial role in post-classical Greek literary and scholarly works.

As the dominant language of the Byzantine Empire, Koine Greek further developed into Medieval Greek, which eventually transformed into Modern Greek.

Today, Koine Greek continues to be used as the liturgical language in the Greek Orthodox Church and some Greek Catholic churches. A highly technical language with words, compound words, accents, diverse meanings depending upon context and additional suffixes and prefixes. Much like in English, a word's meaning can change dramatically but the addition of a suffix such as “PRE” in predestination, i.e. there is a place you are going, “destination”, and “pre” meaning you haven't arrived yet and there is an act of the will to go to somewhere.

The authorial possibilities

The book of James was written by a person who identifies himself simply as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). But who was this James?

- **Definition: James - James is an English name that is taken from the Greek name of Iakóbos: pronounced as ee-ak'-o-bos. It is assumed that James was not of Greek heritage but Jewish which would make his Jewish name Yaaqob which is pronounced as yah-ak-obe'. We may well assume the author but the use of the name of James/Lakobos/Yaaqob was of Jewish heritage.**

There are possibilities or candidates for the author. The writer identifies himself only as “**James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.**”

The Greek text actually reverses the order, emphasizing the worth of the persons mentioned: “**of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, a servant.**” The Greek word *doulos* literally means “slave.” James was the kind of servant of God, who had declared: “I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free.”

1. In this list of options of the writer of James is that is not written someone by the name of James at all. It is penned as a pseudonym in the second century.

- **Definition: Pseudonym - A fictitious name that a person assumes for a particular purpose, which differs from their original or true name. This also differs from a new name that entirely or legally replaces an individual's own.**

This Pseudonym explanation has two theories:

- A writer may choose to attach another name to their work for a variety of reasons, some of which are entirely innocent. For example, it is entirely possible that a writer knew the teaching of James very well and created a letter which accurately reflected the teaching of James, and this writer even used snippets of James' teaching. In this case, the Letter of James was not actually penned by James but is an accurate record of his teaching.
 - The second pseudonym theory is the name of James was given to the letter to give credence to someone else's ideas, whether they came from James or not. Usually, any theory of this sort places the writing of the book well beyond the time of any of the biblical James' life, perhaps as late as the second century.
2. The second possibility is that this title was given to a teaching of a single Jewish Rabbi to an allegorical person of the Sons of Israel writing to his 12 sons. The entire book is of a Rabbi named Jacob writing these admonitions to his twelve sons. Each son symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel and each son representing a distinct aspect of Christian life or virtue.
 3. The third possibility is that the author was one of those mentioned directly in the New Testament. The author of this letter identifies himself as James (James 1:1), but at least four men in the New Testament were known by that name.
 - 1) **James, the Son of Zebedee:** He was one of the Twelve Apostles and the brother of John. He was known James the Greater to distinguish him from other men of the same name. This James was killed by a sword as referenced in Acts 12:2 by Herod was Herod Agrippa, and most scholars believe James was killed in AD 44 in Jerusalem. He is mentioned in Matthew 4:21; 10:2-3; 17:1; 20:20-23; 26:37, Mark 1:19-20; 1:29; 3:17; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35, 41; 13:3; 14:33, Luke 5:10; 8:51; 9:28, 54, and Acts 1:13; 12:2.
 - 2) **James, the Son of Alphaeus:** He was also an apostle and referred to as James the Less (or James the Minor). He is mentioned in Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15, and Acts 1:13. He is not referenced to after Acts 1:13 and slipped out of the spotlight of Scripture. Alphaeus as the father of this James was also the father of Matthew also called Levi the tax collector.
 - 3) **James, the Father of the Apostle Jude:** He is mentioned only once in Acts 1:13 as the father of the other Judas.
 - 4) **James, the brother of Jesus:** This James was not an apostle but a significant figure in the New Testament. He was also known as James the Just or James the Righteous. He was the first Christian Bishop of Jerusalem.
 - **Definition: bishop – from the Latin translated from Greek meaning overseer.** He is mentioned in Acts 12:17; Acts 15:13, 21:18, 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12, James 1:1, and Jude 1:1.
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James the brother of Jesus has traditionally been viewed as the author. James was probably the oldest of Jesus' four younger brothers (Mark 6:3). It would have been difficult to be raised with a big brother who was "special". He would have looked up to his big brother as a role model, no matter what Yeshua (Yeh-SHOO-ah) translated as "the Lord as Salvation" did or said, he would be family. They lived together through tough times. This

was a time of famine in the land there was little to eat and less to sell. James suffered at the hands of the Jewish leaders as his brother started his ministry. Probably took up the family business of carpentry.

James was at first skeptical about his brother's claims and ministry (Matt. 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21; John 7:5). But after meeting the resurrected Lord (1 Cor. 15:7). James became a strong believer and counted among the apostles. He oversaw the church at Jerusalem and helped resolve the dispute over Gentiles having to keep the Law (Acts 15:13–21). James was well known to the early church, which may explain why he did not identify himself more fully in his letter. He calls himself simply a bondservant rather than an apostle (James 1:1).

Through the history of the church James the brother of Jesus has been given the titles of James the Just, James the righteous, James the brother of God. He took the place of James the son of Zebedee after his martyrdom in 44 AD. He became the bridge between Peter and Paul.

Date

James gives few hints by which his letter might be dated. Assuming that the brother of the Lord wrote it, it must have been produced before about A.D. 62, the approximate time of that James's death. Certain characteristics suggest that it might have been written very early, maybe even in the late 40s.

James died in AD 62 by stones thrown by the Pharisees, so the letter had to have been written before that. Further, if James wrote his letter after the Jerusalem council of AD 48–49, it's hard to imagine that he wouldn't have mentioned those events. Therefore, the book of James was almost certainly written in the mid-40s. That means that—despite the way the New Testament books are arranged—James wrote his book several years before Paul wrote his letters and only fifteen years or so after Jesus had died and risen again.

Historical Background

James is a general epistle, meaning that it does not seem to be written to any particular church, but rather to all Christian churches in general. This letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the **Dispersion**,” which means that James has Jewish Christians primarily in mind.

- **Definition: Dispersed is the term for populations that originated from the same place to different locations it is also called the DIASPORA or the spreading of the Jews to countries outside of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. This dispersion was to all across the known Gentile world. This word occurs only here and in 1 Peter 1:1, and John 7:35.**

There were two great ‘dispersions;’ the Eastern and the Western. The first had its origin about the time when the ten tribes were carried away to Assyria, and in the time of the Babylonian captivity. In consequence of these events, and of the fact that large numbers of the Jews went to Babylon, and other Eastern countries, for purposes of travel, commerce, etc., there were many Jews in the East in the times of the apostles. The other

was the Western 'dispersion,' which commenced about the time of Alexander the Great, and which was promoted by various causes, until there were large numbers of Jews in Egypt and along Northern Africa, in Asia Minor, in Greece proper, and even in Rome. To which of these classes this Epistle was directed is not known; but most probably the writer had particular reference to those in the East. The phrase 'the twelve tribes,' was the common term by which the Jewish people were designated and was in use long after the ten tribes were carried away, leaving, in fact, only two of the twelve in Palestine."

Themes of James

In reading and reading over again I agree with Findlay that there are five themes or topics found in James. They are addressed without following any outline, they are like a coin dropped in to a water filled clear glass container. They never fall in a straight line.

1. Temptation (1:2-8, 12-18)
2. The Rich and the Poor (1:9-11; 2:1-13; 4:13-16; 5:1-6)
3. Faith and Works (1:19-25, 27; 2:14-26; 3:13-18; 4:1-10, 17)
4. The Use and Abuse of the Tongue (1:26; 3:1-12; 4:11-17; 5:12)
5. Patience and Prayer (5:7-11, 13-20)

I would add one more path found in James:

6. Perfection (James 1:4; 1:17; 1:25; 3:20)

Temptation

James offers a practical explanation of the nature and effects of temptation. Christian ethics require an understanding of the challenges temptation. Temptation is inevitable in this life. The most dangerous of temptations is to be conscious of none. But temptation is not without value. It is the testing of commitment, the purging of purpose. "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance*" (1:2-3, NIV).

Untested faith is unsure faith. Unsure faith is liable to collapse in crisis. Temptation builds faith in those who resist. Temptation concerns issues of right and wrong that relate to righteousness and sin. Temptation is not sin. Only "*after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin*" (1:15, NIV). Clearheaded thinking on these points is important for Christians young and old.

The Rich and the Poor

Early Christianity included wealthy disciples. Examples of the rich include Joseph of Arimathea and Barnabas, as well as prosperous merchants Aquila and Priscilla. Yet now as was then most Christ's followers are numbered among the poor. James does not object to wealth on principle. Nor does Jesus or Paul. The problems of wealth are practical, and they are two-pronged. The wealthy tend to trust their riches. And the wealthy tend to use the power of their wealth to take advantage of those who are poor.

James points out God's concern for the disadvantaged. This concern is evident in both the Old Testament and the New. Affluence, popular opinion to the contrary, is no particular evidence of divine favor.

Faith and Works

His teachings about faith and works have brought much misunderstanding and not a little criticism to James. Martin Luther, for example, will be remembered as having described the letter of James as "*a right strawy Epistle with no tang of the Gospel about it.*" Underlying Luther's doubts about James was the apparent contradiction between James's emphasis on works and Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. It had been Paul's teaching about righteousness by faith that had been Luther's emancipation from the formal ritualism of his early life. And early notions and beliefs are hard to re-examine.

Some have supposed that James was a "Judaizer," deliberately attacking Paul's teaching about salvation by grace through faith apart from works. James was a staunch supporter of Paul and Barnabas at the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). The stand of James was not in opposition to Paul's doctrine at all. As one New Testament scholar wrote, "*James simply demands, in a direct untheological way, that faith shall not be distorted into a substitute for work.*" James insists that faith shall have results.

The Use and Abuse of the Tongue

No treatment of Christian ethics can be complete that does not consider the power and problems of communication. Human speech is one prime evidence of "the image of God" in humanity. It is fraught with great possibilities and with great peril. In his treatment of the use and abuse of the tongue, James reminds us most of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. As incongruous to James as faith without works is a mouth from which comes blessing and cursing.

Patience and Prayer

The practical writing of James for ethical living leads to twin ideas of endurance and on prayer. No Christian virtue has value unless its practice is maintained. James is an undying foe of the "off again, on again" sort of religious life with which many seem content. The underlying idea of prayer is not continual acts of prayer but the attitude of prayer. James would have us learn that God's delays are not denials.

Perfection

The idea of perfection in James follows the definition of the word *téleios* meaning brought to its end, finished or wanting nothing necessary to completeness. For James perfection is closely associated with Ethics. At any given time the ethical thing done can be perfect or complete. It may be seen in retrospect as being less than idea, but at the time it was all that could be done. True Christian perfection is done at the moment but must continue improving.