

Your Guide to the Book of James

Introduction

The book of James is a brief letter—just a few pages in most printed Bibles. That might make it a little hard to find, but it is well worth the search to discover the richness of James’s teaching. While James is short enough to read or listen to in one sitting (a great thing to do!), so much is packed into those few pages that the book can be explored for months or years with still more left to learn. Try reading or listening to the whole book at least once each week during this sermon series, and you’re sure to notice something new every time through!

It is fitting that our church is moving into the book of James following a series on spreading the gospel based on the book of Acts. Acts is a record of Jesus’s first disciples following the Great Commission He had given them:

Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe [obey] everything I have commanded you.** And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:18-20)

We sometimes focus on the “go...make disciples” and forget about the “teaching them to observe everything” Jesus commanded. The book of James helps us with that second part—how to live out the gospel in our ordinary lives. **James insists that true Christians don’t just believe the gospel is true: they live it out.**

As we go through this series, hold the book of James up to your own life as a mirror. Have you spent time learning what Christ commands, and are you obeying it? In what is likely a familiar passage to many of us, James instructs (1:22-25):

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like someone looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of person he was. *But the*

one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who works—this person will be blessed in what he does.

When you look in the mirror of Scripture and pay attention to what it means to obey or observe all that Christ commanded, do you see the truth of the gospel displayed in your attitudes, words, and actions?

Do some parts of your heart and life need a bit of a “makeover” for you to really reflect Christ in all that you are and all that you do?

Let James help you sort that out and help you follow Christ more and more. **The “hearer-doer” will be blessed in what he or she does!**

Who wrote James, and to whom was it written?

The author identifies himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” writing “to the twelve tribes dispersed abroad.” There are several men named James in the New Testament, but the only likely James is **James the brother of Jesus**. Jesus’s brother James has been accepted as the author nearly unanimously throughout church history, and there isn’t much reason to question it.

“The twelve tribes dispersed abroad” doesn’t give us much to pin down the recipients. Two options seem most likely:

1. *Literally: Jewish Christians scattered throughout the region.* The letter makes many references to the Old Testament and Jewish metaphors as if James expects the readers to be familiar with them. The term “dispersed abroad” was also commonly used to refer to Jews living among the Greeks in areas outside Palestine.
2. *Metaphorically: Christians scattered throughout the region.* Speaking to Christians facing trials and temptations, James emphasizes the future when God’s kingdom will come in its fullness, and he encourages believers to live righteous lives, much as the Old Testament prophets encouraged Jewish believers when they were in exile. The “twelve tribes” thus can be interpreted as an analogy that compares God’s people of the Old Testament who

were scattered among the nations during their exile to Christians scattered throughout the region in James's day. Christians under the new covenant, like the Jews under the old covenant (see Jer. 29-30), could look forward to a day that God would gather them together into His eternal kingdom and establish a perfect and lasting justice for His people—a powerful consolation in difficult times and a motivation to persevere in doing good.

Some topics in the letter suggest that many or most of the recipients would have been somewhere in the middle between rich or poor, perhaps more on the poor side. For example, James encourages them to care for widows and orphans (among the poorest, most vulnerable people in the ancient world) and issues a stern rebuke for anyone showing favoritism towards wealthy people over the poor.

The letter was likely a circular letter, meaning it wasn't written to a single person or congregation but was meant to be circulated among the churches. The intended recipients were **all believers (who may have been mostly Jewish converts) in the churches that it would reach.**

What kind of book is James?

James is hard to categorize neatly because it has characteristics of several types of writing. The book is in **letter** form but is significantly different from other letters in that there is not much personal information given either about the writer or the recipients and it doesn't have a typical closing. Unusual as it is, it is clearly a letter with a sender and designated recipients.

James has been called the "wisdom literature" of the New Testament—similar to Proverbs or Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. Some consider it to be a form of "diatribe" (a form of Greek rhetoric used for instruction and debate) or "parenesis" (loosely structured moral instruction drawing on traditional material, using repetition, and having general applicability). It certainly features those types of elements but still doesn't fit fully into any one category. A final option broad enough to include all the literary elements is to view it as a **homily or collection of homilies of pastoral instruction and encouragement.**

Key Themes

- **Kingdom living.** Perhaps the overarching theme is “kingdom living.” James insists that real, saving faith is more than a belief that the gospel is true. The kind of faith that saves is a faith that results in living like citizens of God’s kingdom. Christ is Savior *and Lord*, and James echoes Jesus’s words in John 14:15: “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” James’s instructions all fall under the category of keeping Christ’s commands—living as citizens of His kingdom under His kingship.
 - *Faith and works/hearing and doing (1:19-27; 2:14-26).* If you’re thinking, “But wait! Paul says we’re ‘saved by grace through faith’, ‘not of works’! How can James say we’re saved by grace *and* works?”, you are not the first to see the tension. James and Paul use the terms differently, though. James’s point is that genuine faith is demonstrated by actions, and if faith isn’t accompanied by actions, it might be mere belief—something even the demons have (2:19).
 - *Trials and temptations (1:2-18; 4:6-10; 5:7-11, 13-20).* In a way, the whole book is about trials (tests of faith) and temptations. James identifies the source of temptation to do evil and instructs believers about various temptations, but he also gives advice on navigating tests of faith. Among others, wisdom from God (1:5-8; 3:13-18), practicing humility (4:6-10, 13-16; 5:16), and prayer (1:5-6; 4:2-3, 8; 5:13-18) are key pieces to persevering through trials and temptations.
 - *Discipleship and repentance.* James recognizes that “we all stumble in many ways” (3:2). Thankfully, after all his rebukes and instructions, he closes with “If any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, let that person know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (5:19-20). Repentance and calling fellow believers to repentance is an important aspect of kingdom living, which is good news for those who might otherwise despair over the ways they have fallen short of kingdom standards.
- **“Neighbor love.”** “Neighbor love” looms large in the book of James as well. Jesus identified the two most important commands as “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-

38, Mark 12:29-31; quoting Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18). James calls the second “the royal law” (2:8), and much of his teaching relates to obeying it.

- *Favoritism/impartiality.* Believers should not treat rich people any differently from poor people (2:1-12). James affirms the dignity of the poor (1:9; 2:5-6); warns the rich against haughtiness, misuse of wealth, selfishness, and mistreating others (1:10-11; 2:6-7; 5:1-6); and calls on believers to extend mercy and aid to those in need (2:13; 3:15-17), especially widows and orphans (1:27). These passages echo Old Testament concerns for impartial legal justice for everyone, regardless of wealth, status, or ethnicity; fair treatment of workers; and benevolence toward people in need, especially widows, orphans, and sojourners.
- *Speech.* Believers must control their tongues. James encourages believers to be “slow to speak” (1:19) and says that the religion of those who can’t control their speech is “useless” (1:26). He elaborates on the dangers of talking badly about others (3:3-12) and appeals to Genesis 1:27—that all people are created in the image of God—to call believers to treat all people with dignity, guarding against speaking ill of others (3:9; 4:11-12; 5:9).
- *Concern for assisting people in need.* James *questions the salvation* of professing Christians if they neglect to help those in need (1:27; 2:15-17). He is not alone, though. The apostle John says essentially the same thing in 1 John 3:17-18: “If anyone has this world’s goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God’s love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.” True believers should have hearts and hands open to people in need.

Outline

James's loose structure makes it possible to outline in a number of different ways. This outline is adapted from an overview of James's structure in D. A. Carson's *Introduction to the New Testament* (p. 620-21).

- I. Opening/greeting (1:1)
- II. Trials and Christian maturity (1:2-28)
 - a. Trials
 - i. Finding meaning/purpose in suffering (1:2-4)
 - ii. Praying (with faith) for wisdom (1:5-8)
 - iii. Applying Christian principles to poverty and wealth (1:9-11)
 - iv. Reward for endurance (1:12)
 - b. The root of temptations
 1. God is not tempted by evil/doesn't tempt (1:13)
 2. Temptation stems from evil desires, leading to sin and death (1:14-15)
 - c. God is good
 - i. Don't be deceived (1:16)
 - ii. God gives good gifts (1:17)
 - iii. God does not change (1:17)
 - iv. God gives us new birth (1:18)
- III. True Christianity is seen in works (1:19-2:26)
 - a. Loose speech/anger (1:19-20)
 - b. Accept God's word (1:21)
 - c. True receiving of the word results in doing what it says (1:22-27)
- IV. Dissensions within the community (3:1-4:12)
 - a. Improper speech (3:1-12)
 - i. Blessing and cursing from same mouth (3:9-10)
 1. Words about God and those bearing the image of God
 - b. Dissensions (3:13-4:3)
 - i. Wrong kind of wisdom (3:13-18)
 1. Evil; rooted in envy and selfishness (3:14-16)
 2. Contrasted with "wisdom from above" (3:13,17-18)
 - ii. Frustrated desires (4:1-3)
 - c. Warning about a compromising type of Christianity (4:4-10)
 - d. Exhortation about speech (4:11-12)
- V. Implications of a Christian worldview (4:13-5:11)
 - a. Take God into account in all planning (4:13-17)
 - b. God will judge the rich who are wicked and reward the righteous (5:1-11)
- VI. Concluding exhortations (5:12-20)
 - a. Don't take oaths (5:12)
 - b. Pray (especially for healing) (5:13-18)
 - c. Look after each other's spiritual well-being (5:19-20)