



the letter from James (part 1)



don't just sit there

# James—don't just sit there

In some ways, this letter from James seems like the odd one out in the New Testament. Martin Luther called it the “epistle of straw”. The emphasis in the other letters is on being right with God not through what we have done, but through what God has done for us in Jesus. But James comes at it from a different angle. While James and Paul had a common foundation on how we're right with God (grace), James's letter talks to God's people in much the same way as Jesus does in the Gospels. In fact, as we'll see, much of what James says is what Jesus says. And the heart of his message is this: it's not good enough to say you're one of God's people—you need to look like it. **Don't just sit there. Do.** Not a bad word for us today.

**Derek**



# Some background to James

## **Who wrote it?**

There are three people named James mentioned in the New Testament. The Apostle James, son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3); another Apostle James, the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John (Matthew 10:2); and James the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). It's most likely the third James, Jesus' brother. He's a guy who is hardly spoken of in the Gospels, and when he is he's hardly prominent or celebrated (John 7:5). But after Jesus' resurrection, and in the formation of the early church, James becomes a central figure. In Acts 12:17, 15:13 and 21:18, James appears to be the key leader in the central Christian church in Jerusalem. When Paul writes, he often acknowledges the central role of James (1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9–12). *So, when we come to read this letter from James, we're hearing from a blood relative of Jesus who once doubted, but then after seeing the resurrected Christ, was willing to die for him.*

## **When was this letter written?**

Most people would put it between AD 48 and AD 62. The lower end (AD 48) was because this is the first point at which we know James was prominent in the New Testament Church (Acts 15:13–21), and this letter is written with some authority. The upper end (AD 62) is when we know James was martyred because of his faith in his brother. So we can't be absolutely sure, but it's somewhere within this timeframe.

## **Who's it written to?**

James says in the first verse that it's written to "the 12 tribes in the Dispersion". That is, James is writing to Jews who held to Jesus as their Messiah (2:1), but who were scattered throughout the Roman empire. James, the leader of the Jewish Christian Church, writes to remind them what a life following this Messiah looks like.

## **Does it go against what Paul says?**

Often the verse that's in contention is James 2:24, as it seems to go against Paul's articulation of salvation by faith (Ephesians 2:8). But it's also the overall writing of the letter, in that it fails to talk about the resurrection, and it doesn't mention grace at all. We'll talk about this more as we go through it, but it's worth considering that James is writing to people who are already Christians. He's not instructing them what it looks like to be right with God—he's instructing them how to live right under God.

## **What to look out for.**

So James is a book full of little proverbial sayings, nuggets of wisdom and practical application. In fact, if you look closely when reading James, you'll see him repeating ideas and phrases of Jesus from the Gospels. In your own time, have a look at these comparisons:

James 2:2–4 // Luke 20:46; James 2:8 // Matthew 22:39–40; James 2:13 // Matthew 5:7; James 3:18 // Matthew 5:9; James 4:9 // Luke 6:25; James 5:2 // Matthew 6:19–20; James 5:12 // Matthew 5:34–37.

*These studies are much less dense than previous studies. James is a little easier to understand than Song of Songs, so there's more time to wrestle with the text and discuss how it applies to you in your situation.*

# TRIALS

James is a letter that seems (at times) to jump from thought to thought. It's a little similar to Proverbs in that way—little nuggets of wisdom and advice thrown out there, waiting to be picked up, unpacked and applied.

In this first section of James, he begins by talking about what wisdom looks like in the trials of life. The question is not 'Will I face trials?'—we'll all face trials. It's 'How will I face the trials that are inevitably coming my way?' And for Christians, 'How do I understand them with Godly wisdom?'

## JAMES 1:1-18

<sup>1</sup> James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ:

To the 12 tribes in the Dispersion.

Greetings.

<sup>2</sup> Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, <sup>3</sup> knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

<sup>4</sup> But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

<sup>5</sup> Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without criticizing, and it will be given to him.

<sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. <sup>8</sup> An indecisive man is unstable in all his ways.

<sup>9</sup> The brother of humble circumstances should boast in his exaltation, <sup>10</sup> but the one who is rich should boast in his humiliation because he will pass away like a flower of the field.

<sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will wither away while pursuing his activities.

<sup>12</sup> A man who endures trials is blessed, because when he passes the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.

<sup>13</sup> No one undergoing a trial should say, "I am being tempted by God." For God is not tempted by evil, and He Himself doesn't tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup> But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desires. <sup>15</sup> Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.

<sup>16</sup> Don't be deceived, my dearly loved brothers. <sup>17</sup> Every generous act and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights; with Him there is no variation or shadow cast by turning. <sup>18</sup> By His own choice, He gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures.

## FOOTNOTES

*1:1a James, the brother of Jesus.*

*1:1b This is probably to the Jewish people scattered throughout Gentile lands who spoke Greek and were influenced by Greek culture.*

*1:8 Or 'A doubting', or 'A double-minded'.*

*1:12 Lit. 'trial', used as a collective.*

*1:12 Other manuscripts read 'that the Lord'.*

*1:13 Or 'evil persons', or 'evil things'.*

*1:18 = the Gospel.*

# DISCUSSION VILLAGE<sup>5</sup> C H U R C H

1 - What's the significance, particularly for James the brother of Jesus, to describe himself as a 'servant (slave) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'? To what extent can this—and should this—be said of every Christian?

2 - The three most important words in James 1:2–4 are joy, perseverance and maturity. In your own words, what's the logical connection between these ideas?

3 - Is there any contradiction between the statement that God 'gives generously to all without finding fault' and the qualification that the double-minded person 'should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord' (1:5–8)? If not, why not? Put James's logic into your own words.

4 - Being careful to note the context, what do you think James means in verse 8 when he describes the doubter as 'unstable in all he does'?

5 - Skimming through the rest of James 1, what exactly do you think James means by the 'high position' (1:9) of the poor believer?

6 - In your own words, what exactly is the 'word of truth' (1:18) and what role does it play in new birth?

## LIVING IT

Spend some time considering some of the implications of this passage for our lives, for our community, and for the challenges in our society.

## PRAY

Share some things to pray for each other.

Pray for each other and your friends.

# DOERS

As with much in the first chapter of this letter, James introduces themes that he'll unpack in more detail later. Having just spoken about wisdom and how it relates to trials and maturity in life, he now turns his attention to emphasising the need for action in the Christian life.

For James, wisdom from God isn't merely about knowing what God wants—it's doing it in everyday life.

## JAMES 1:19-27

<sup>19</sup> My dearly loved brothers, understand this: Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, <sup>20</sup> for man's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup> Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and evil, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save you.

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. <sup>25</sup> But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but one who does good works—this person will be blessed in what he does.

<sup>26</sup> If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, then his religion is useless and he deceives himself. <sup>27</sup> Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

## FOOTNOTES

1:21 *Lit. 'evil excess'.*

1:21 *Lit. 'save your souls'.*

1:23 *Lit. 'at the face of his birth'.*

1:26 *Other manuscripts add 'among you' after 'anyone'.*

1:27 *Or 'before the God and Father'.*

# DISCUSSION



1 - It's been suggested that the 'perfect law of freedom' (1:25) and the 'word of truth' (1:18) both refer to the only writings that would have been available at the time—the collection of traditions about Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection (later written down in the Gospels.) What's the significance of this both for reading James and for the Christian life?

2 - Why do you think James describes the word as the law that 'gives freedom' (1:25)?

3 - James uses the word 'religion', which is something Christians often avoid these days. Why is that, and how should we understand what James is saying?

4 - Why does not controlling your tongue (1:26) make our religion 'useless'?

5 - James says that caring for the poor and avoiding worldly pollution is the life which God accepts as 'pure and undefiled' (1:27). What do you think James means? In what way does this behaviour make our religion 'pure and undefiled'?

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# FAVOURITISM

One of the biggest problems (it seems) in the churches James was writing to was economic favouritism. He hints at it in 1:9–11, 27, but then returns to it in force in chapter 2.

So having just put out there that ‘pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world’ (1:27), James is first going to deal with the inconsistency of saying you follow the law of freedom but then impose boundaries where they shouldn’t be.

## JAMES 2:1–13

<sup>1</sup> My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>2</sup> For example, a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in. <sup>3</sup> If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here in a good place,” and yet you say to the poor man, “Stand over there,” or, “Sit here on the floor by my footstool,” <sup>4</sup> haven’t you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

<sup>5</sup> Listen, my dear brothers: Didn’t God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? <sup>6</sup> Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don’t the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? <sup>7</sup> Don’t they blaspheme the noble name that was pronounced over you at your baptism?

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if you keep the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. <sup>9</sup> But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all. <sup>11</sup> For He who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you are a lawbreaker.

<sup>12</sup> Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom. <sup>13</sup> For judgment is without mercy to the one who hasn’t shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

## FOOTNOTES

*This passage has a number of references to the Old Testament ‘Torah’, that is, the first 5 books of the Bible from Genesis through to Deuteronomy.*

*2:8 See Leviticus 19:18.*

*2:11 See Exodus 20:13 & 14; Deuteronomy 5:17 & 18.*

# DISCUSSION VILLAGE<sup>9</sup> C H U R C H

1 - In 2:1 James describes Jesus as 'our glorious Lord Jesus Christ', which is literally translated 'the Lord Jesus Christ of glory'. Unpack in your own words exactly what you think James means by this description. What does Jesus' glory consist of?

2 - Read 2:5–7 again. Is Christianity biased against the rich? Why or why not?

3 - What is the significance of describing the command to love as 'the royal law' (2:8)? Why is this command, above everything else the Bible teaches, *royal*?

4 - There's a lot of talk in these verses about keeping the law and breaking the law. Is this legalistic? Why or why not?

5 - Read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). What connections can you see between this parable and the teaching of James in 2:8–13?

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# TRUE FAITH

The reference to ‘doing mercy’ (charity) in James 2:13 provides a clever transition from one section to the next. It concludes James’s teaching about our treatment of the rich (2:1–12) and introduces his teaching about our treatment of the poor (2:14–26).

This is a challenging for us who are rich *and* who claim to follow Jesus. As Jesus would put it, it’s a question of ‘where our treasure lies’.

## JAMES 2:14-26

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can his faith save him?

<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way faith, if it doesn’t have works, is dead by itself.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I will show you faith from my works. <sup>19</sup> You believe that God is one; you do well. The demons also believe—and they shudder.

<sup>20</sup> Foolish man! Are you willing to learn that faith without works is useless? <sup>21</sup> Wasn’t Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was perfected. <sup>23</sup> So the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness, and he was called God’s friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup> And in the same way, wasn’t Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by a different route? <sup>26</sup> For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

## FOOTNOTES

*2:14 Or ‘Can faith’, or ‘Can that faith’, or ‘Can such faith’.*

*2:18 The quotation may end where shown, at the end of verse 18, or possibly at the end of verse 19.*

*2:18 Other manuscripts read ‘Show me your faith from your works, and from my works I will show you my faith.’*

*2:23 See also Genesis 15:6.*

# DISCUSSION

1 - Look at 2:14. What connections can you see between this verse and what James has said so far in the epistle?

2 - Summarise in your own words the version of 'faith' James is criticising in 2:14–19. How does it compare to true faith?

3 - In your own words, what exactly does James mean when he says Abraham's faith was perfected (completed) by what he did? (2:22)

4 - Read Ephesians 2:8–10. What response would you give to the charge that James 2:24 contradicts the teaching of Paul? (See also Paul in Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 3:4–8.)

5 - How would you describe the purpose of 2:20–26 within the epistle of James as a whole?

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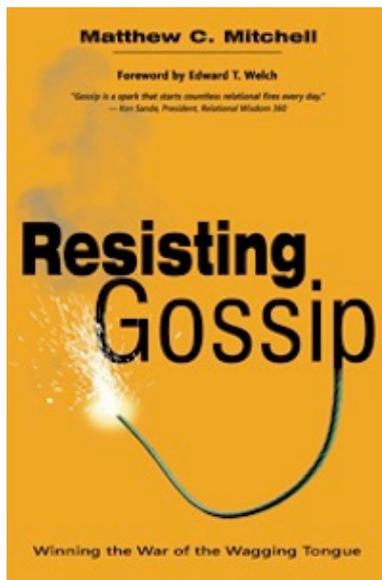
# THINGS TO READ |

The majority of questions in these studies come from John Dickson's book which is out of print, 'James, the wisdom of the brother of Jesus'. It's a great book, and if you can buy it somewhere, do. It's easy to read and got some great insights.

If you're looking for something a little meatier, then grab Douglas Moo's commentary on James ('The letter of James', Pillar NT Commentary). Doug Moo is my favourite commentator.

The bible text in these studies is from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, and used within copyright. It's a good translation that strikes a good balance between holding closely to the text, while being readable.

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If you're looking for a book to read as a group this term, here's my suggestion. 'Resisting Gossip' by Matthew Mitchell. This is an issue that James picks up on in his letter, and which is something which can be incredibly alluring and destructive in communities.

You can pick it up on Amazon Kindle for around \$12. It's something worth reading not just by yourself, but as a group you can talk about it with.

Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness.

**(James 3:13)**