

JesusOnline Equip

Ministry Resources Hub

James

A free resource from JesusOnline Ministries.

Read or share online: app.jesonline.com/post/93662-0-james

JesusOnline Equip · Ministry Resources Hub · equip.jesonline.com

Free media and discipleship resources for pastors, leaders, and growing disciples.

James

A. Overview and Summary.

1. The book's title comes from the author's name James, who is recognized as Jesus's half-brother, along with Jude. He and Jesus' other siblings did not affirm Jesus as the Messiah until after His death and resurrection (John 7:5). However, James later became a pillar in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9). According to the first-century historian Josephus, James was martyred in 62 AD. The Apostle Paul affirmed him as one who had personally seen Christ in His resurrection (1st Corinthians 15:7). Scholars believe that the book of James is one of, if not the earliest written book of the New Testament canon about 44-49 AD.
2. James writes to Jewish recipients who had been dispersed as a result of persecution, most likely from Herod Agrippa. Because of its Jewish recipients, the book leans towards a Jewish interpretation. Martin Luther considered the book of James of lesser importance than Paul's epistles and at one point even called it a "book of straw". But he preached from the book of James at least five times in his career, showing a change in mindset after 1519.
3. James is a book of direct statements on wise living reflecting the outworking of the Holy Spirit in such statements as "what does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" (2:14-15) or "faith without works is dead" (2:20b). What the reader should understand is that James complements justification by faith as preached by the Apostle Paul with the necessity of showing the reality of salvation in a believer by their works. Paul writes of this in Ephesians 2:8-10: "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them".

B. Chapter One.

1. After his greeting to the 12 tribes in dispersion (see overview), James gives a word about trials, patience, and wisdom: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (1:2-5).

2. He continues with a variety of instructions. First, about the rich and lowly. The lowly will glory in his exaltation, but the rich will fade away in his pursuits (1:9-11). He goes on to address temptation: “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (1:12-15).
3. James then gives the qualities needed in trials: “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (1:19-20).
4. He gives his first word about acting out the faith: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (1:22-25).
5. He closes the chapter with this word: “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (1:26-27). James lived in a time of religion. He was born into Judaism with its multiple commandments. The era was fraught with idol worship. So, he gives a simple word about “pure and undefiled religion before God” which is simply “to visit orphans and widows and keeping oneself unspotted from the world”.

C. Chapter Two.

1. James opens the chapter with a caution against favoritism. He shows the hypocrisy of treating a rich man with esteem and a poor man with contempt. He reminds his readers by saying, “Hasn’t God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (2:5b).
2. He lifts up what he calls the “royal law”: “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as

transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (2:8-10).

3. He then gives words about faith without works: “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? So, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2:14-17).
4. He continues in this manner to emphasize: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works’. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (2:25-26). Many have seized upon these verses and condemned James for putting works in such a high status. But he is right. If someone declares his faith, there should be fruit to validate it.

D. Chapter Three.

1. James issues a strong word for those who desire to be teachers: “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (3:1). There are many who desire to teach, but may not have the capacity, or are teaching falsely. If more would take this verse to heart, it would do much to correct that situation.
2. He segways into a word about the tongue: “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things” (3:2-5).

3. He continues with words of caution about the tongue: “See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God” (3:5b-9).
4. He closes with another word about wisdom: “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:16-18).

E. Chapter Four.

1. He presents the thought that lust and ungodly desire result in strife: Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (4:1-4).
2. He writes about pride and humility: “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you”. (4:6-8). He closes that train of thought with: “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (4:10).
3. He gives a word about judging before going on to words about self-strategies apart from God: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’” (4:13-15).
4. He closes the chapter with a profound statement: “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (4:17).

F. Chapter Five.

1. James opens the final chapter with a scathing word against the rich who are corrupt: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you” (5:1-6).
2. He continues with a word about patience and endurance before going on to prayer: The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (5:16b-18).
3. He closes the book about the concept to bring back one who has erred: “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (5:19-20).

G. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it on.

1. James references the “Royal Law” (2:8). In the previous verses, James discusses preferential treatment of the rich and poor. Then he gives the manifestation of the royal law as loving your neighbor as yourself. In doing so, he quotes Leviticus 19:18 and Jesus in Matthew 22:39. This command should guide the honor we show to every person, regardless of their stature in the community. Can you say you are fulfilling this royal law?
2. Do you understand the argument that faith is validated by works? Would you agree with Martin Luther that James is a book of straw, or do you see value in what James says about works?
3. Do you desire to be a teacher of the Bible? If so, do you take to heart the admonition that teachers will be held to a higher standard?
4. Do you guard your tongue? Are you able to control it or does it control you?
5. Have you felt you lack wisdom? Have you asked for it?

6. There are essentially two types of sins: sins of commission and those of omission. What is your aptitude towards sins of omission after reading what James says? (4:17).
 7. When tempted, do you submit to God and resist the devil to have assurance that he will flee? (4:7).
-

This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations (JoshuaNations.org)