

SERMON SERIES ON JAMES INTRODUCTION, STUDY NOTES, AND SERMON TOPICS

After completing a long series on the book of Exodus, we turn to a very practical book of the New Testament, the Epistle of James (Epistle is a Latin term that means a letter). As a book, James is actually one of the most debated in the history of Christianity. Early in church history the book was slower to be accepted as Scripture primarily because the author was never considered one of the Apostles. Books penned by those commissioned by Christ as Apostles were accepted as the very word of God quickly because Jesus invested in these leaders the very authority He has as God. This includes the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, John, the letters written by Paul, Peter, and John. Other books took a little longer to be universally accepted in the church as Scripture, the very Word of Christ. But by the fourth century every book we have in our New Testament was being distributed, read, and taught as Scripture, including James. The larger issue that has led to James being questioned is the teaching on justification in chapter 2, and the question on if it disagrees with Paul's teaching that justification is by faith alone (Romans 3:20-26, Romans 5:1, Ephesians 2:8-9). In these passages Paul agrees with the overall storyline of the Bible that we are made right with God by faith alone in Christ alone. Works are not the basis of our justification. We are saved only by what Christ has done, and not by anything we have done. But James 2:14-26 seems to argue that we are not justified by faith alone, but by faith plus our works. The Reformer Martin Luther who was instrumental in the church coming back to this central Biblical understanding of the Gospel had a significant struggle with the New Testament letter of James, even calling it "an epistle of straw" and hinting that he wished it wasn't in the Bible. The primary reason for his issue was two-fold. First, the epistle to James does not have a lot to say about the work of Jesus in the atonement and application of redemption. Second, the passage on justification seems to muddy the water on the doctrine that is clear elsewhere, and it was being used by the Catholic Church at the time to argue against Luther and the doctrines of justification by faith alone.

So does James create a contradiction with Paul and other passages about justification? Luther said, "Justification is the article by which the church stands and falls." In other words, at the heart of the Gospel is the question, "How can fallen, sinful, and depraved people ever be right with God (Justification is a legal term that means our sins are forgiven and we are brought into relationship with God)?" The Biblical answer is that God secured our salvation in eternity past through Election, Christ obtained our salvation through His perfect life, substitutionary death, and resurrection. And that the Holy Spirit applies redemption by making dead hearts alive through the preaching of the Gospel. It is all God. As a follower of Jesus we are participants in our redemption when we repent and believe. But this only happens because of the work of the Holy Spirit enabling this faith. But it is faith in Christ alone that brings justification. So Luther's argument is that if we move away from the doctrine of justification by faith alone the church will lose everything in the Gospel. You need to know that the Elders completely agree with this conclusion. So what do we do with James as he seems to contradict this?

I don't think the answer is really that difficult (we will give a thorough exposition on this when we do the sermon on this text). Simply put, Paul and James are actually

arguing the same point, but they are answering two different questions. Most of Paul's writings are arguing the central question of how a person is justified, and he is giving us a hearty theology of what the Gospel is. In other words, Paul's argument is specifically explaining how God makes a person right with Himself, how God forgives, how God reconciles, how God redeems. The answer is that the work of Christ alone secures these things and they are applied to our lives by faith in Christ alone. But Paul is also clear that true faith results in a new self that will grow in holiness and will do works (see all of Romans 6, Ephesians 2:10). James on the other hand is addressing the early church who is seeking to apply the Gospel and already has people who are condoning a sense of easy-believism, faith in Christ as Savior without any sense that Jesus must be Lord and King. Getting fire-insurance without bowing the knee to Christ. So James is not seeking to explain what the Gospel is, but he is proclaiming to those who are followers of Jesus what the Gospel always does. James is going to show us that a person who has truly met Christ and has become a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ will begin to have His values, begin to see life change, will grow in their understanding and doing of the Word, will live as changed people. So in chapter 2 as it fits in the flow of the book, James is not arguing that a person is made right with God by their works, but that their works show that they are right with God. The issue here is fruit and root. Paul teaches us that the root of our justification is faith in Christ faith alone. But James reminds us that the fruit of justification is works and a changing life that is described in this practical little book. If there is no fruit it is a sign that there is a real problem with the root. But true faith producing justification will show the nature of the root by the beauty of the fruit it produces.

So why study James this summer? We have spent a lot of time showing the character of our God and showing how Exodus is a template that shows us how God saves His people, acting on their behalf. Exodus is a great story of justification by faith alone. So now we want to work on our discipleship, looking at a lot of very practical issues laid out by James. James is so practical, simple to read, full of wisdom for life, and straightforward in our application. James is going to help us look at very real areas of our lives and figure out how to live in this world as redeemed people. James is going to show us what our faith in Jesus will look like in our daily lives. So the book is timely and timeless, and as we press in to the ideas and passages in James it should shape our values and change our lives as the people of God.

Author

Like most letters in the New Testament, the author is identified in the first verse, "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ." So we know the author is James, but which James? From the nature of much of the language of the book we can know for certain that those receiving the book are fully aware of the person writing and the authority this person holds. He does not give further explanation of his role or office, and throughout this letter the author speaks to the people as a loving pastoral figure who is known by the readers. But he does this as one speaking with a level of authority commanding adherence to his teaching. This leads us to three possibilities from the New Testament period.

The first is James the brother of John, the apostle. He was among the fisherman

called by Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, and was considered in the inner-circle of disciples. But this James was beheaded by Herod in Acts 12, around 44 AD, before the book was written. Another James, the son of Alphaeus was among the twelve apostles. But nothing else is really known about this James and he does not have a significant role. The third possibility is the James identified in the Gospels, the book of Acts, and in Paul's letters as the brother of Jesus. Yep, you read that right, this James is the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary.

[54] and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? [55] Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? [56] And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?"
(Matthew 13:54-56 ESV)

[18] Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. [19] But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.
(Galatians 1:18-19 ESV)

While there are a few theories that seek to give some other explanation of the description of James as the brother of Jesus, the best choice is to realize that Mary was a virgin until the birth of Jesus, and that after this she and Joseph lived as a normal married couple, and as a family had at least six other children (four named boys in the Matthew passage and at least two girls - sisters). Think about this, what would it have been like to grow up as Jesus' little brother. Along with the rest of his brothers, James did not believe that Jesus was God during his earthly life (John 7:3-5). There is even a story of Jesus' mother and brothers coming to find Jesus, probably to do an intervention and bring him home during His ministry. They thought Jesus had pretty much gone off the deep end and had lost his mind. But something changed the entire trajectory of James's life. His brother was cruelly arrested and crucified on a Roman cross. His mother attended, but there is no mention of James and the brothers. Crucifixion brought shame on the family, so it is very likely that the event of Jesus' death angered James and the other brothers, leaving them feeling betrayed. Whatever their feelings, three days later Jesus rose from the grave. And Jesus appeared to his brother James, visibly, in person.

*[3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. [6] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. [7] **Then he appeared to James**, then to all the apostles.*
(1 Corinthians 15:3-7 ESV)

Seeing his brother resurrected changed everything! James came to realize that his

own brother was in fact the God of the universe, the creator of heaven and earth, the sovereign Lord of all. Forty days after the resurrection James and the rest of his brothers join his mother, the twelve apostles, and about 120 total people waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:14). He goes from skeptical brother to believing follower waiting for the mission of God to explode. As the story of the explosive growth of the early church is told in the story of Acts we find quickly that James becomes significantly important. By Acts 7 the church in the central city of Jerusalem has grown to a group of multiple thousands, maybe as many as 15-20,000 believers in the city, all of them Jewish. But a persecution (led by Saul who will later be known as Paul) causes people to scatter and flee everywhere. By Acts 12 he is singled out by Peter as a person of importance. As we follow the story (and some important evidence outside the Bible) it becomes clear that James is an elder in the church of Jerusalem, and is the primary leader in the city. The Apostles scatter, partly because of persecution and partly because of mission. But James stays in Jerusalem and leads the church in this city, which is primarily Jewish. He is known by Jewish Christians everywhere.

Acts 15 tells us of an interesting event called the Jerusalem Council. By this time Paul has been converted and is preaching the Gospel to Gentiles. Christianity is spreading all over the Roman Empire, and the purpose of God is being fulfilled. God's plan of redeeming people from every nation, every people is full steam ahead. But there is a point of struggle with the growing Gentile nature of the church and the Jewish roots. The big question is how much of the Jewish Law must those with Gentile background who convert to Christianity embrace? Must they be circumcised (that would be an awkward ask in a preaching invitation)? Do they have to give up eating bacon and stay in their living room on Saturday? It seems funny to us, but for the first century church this became a big question. To address this question the apostles and elders of the early church gathered in Jerusalem to search the Scriptures and talk about it. This is a pivotal event in the history of Christianity. One side led by Pharisees who had become Christians argued strict adherence to the Law by all who sought to follow Jesus. In other words, they wanted Christianity to remain a Jewish thing, and Gentiles could be Christian if they also became Jewish. Paul argued that God had received uncircumcised Gentiles without reservation, pouring His grace into their lives. He argued that this was in line with the eternal purpose of God revealed in the Old Testament, to bless all nations through the descendants of Abraham, but the mission was multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. What is interesting for our discussion is that when the question came to a head and a decision was to be rendered, it was not Peter, or one of the original twelve that handed down the decision. It was not Paul or his companion Barnabas. It was James who rendered the decision accepted by the council (take time to read this story in Acts 15 this week). He speaks and the word is settled. And it appears that James is the one who writes the letter to be sent with Paul and his traveling pals. In fact, linguistic studies of this letter and the letter of James we are about to study shows several similarities in phrases and ideas in the two letters. Here is the point, by this time James is one of the most influential leaders in the early church. His presence in Jerusalem was vitally important, but his influence reached way beyond there even to the point that Paul and Peter defer to his words. This influence is explained further in Paul's letter to the Galatians in chapters 1-2.

James's influence came both because of who he was, but also because of his

dedication to his brother as Lord. Church history tells us that those around James gave him two nicknames. First of all, he is called “James the Just”. This is a reference to the reality that James lived a disciplined and righteous life that was visible to the people around him. The second nickname was “camel knees”. That’s kind of funny, and might be considered a putdown. But what is being conveyed in this little nickname is that his knees had been flattened because of all the time he spent on them in prayer. So as we read this little letter, think about this. We are reading and studying the words of the very brother of Jesus. He grew up with Jesus, rejected Jesus in his ministry, and then followed Him after the resurrection. He went from seeing his brother as a nut job to seeing Him as Lord and God. And his belief in Jesus as resurrected Savior and Lord led to great persecution and eventually martyrdom in 62 AD. There are several very early witnesses to the death of James including first century historian Josephus (who also tells us that James was Jesus’ brother). James was taken by the Jewish religious leaders to the top of the Temple in order to have him quiet Jewish Christians, but when he got there James proclaimed the divinity of his brother. So they threw him off the temple thinking it would kill him, but it didn’t. James stood in his pain and continued to preach. Some listened while others threw rocks at him until one person in the crowd with a club hit James in the head killing him.

But his voice is not silenced, and his amazing message will challenge us over the next couple months.

Audience

Verse 1 tells us that James is addressing the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” The word “dispersion” here is the Greek word “diaspora”. This was a term used at the time of the New Testament to refer to Jews who were dispersed all over the world as a result of the Babylonian captivity 600 years in the past, and subsequent events that led to the scattering of Jews all over the world. But early Christian writers had come to believe that national Israel found their greater fulfillment in the people of God made up by the church. So for James the twelve tribes refers to the fullness of God’s people all around the known world. So this letter is really to the entire church, but most of his original readers were probably from the realm of his greatest influence in the church, Jewish Christians in the Middle East.

James is one of the letters called “Catholic Epistles”, meaning that they were not for a specific church as Paul’s letters tended to be, but are written to the church universal or the church catholic (Catholic means universal).

Date and Events

The possibilities range from the mid-40’s AD through James’s death in 62. But most scholars believe the letter pre-dates the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, which took place in AD 49. So more than likely the letter was written between 45-48, which means it was penned between 12-15 years after Jesus’ resurrection. The scattering of the Jewish church as well as the conversion of the first Gentiles to the Gospel was within ten years of this writing, which means it wasn’t too distant past. And the missionaries of the Apostle Paul were just beginning. Christians in Jerusalem and in the Roman world were already getting persecuted by both non-believing Jews and Romans. But the

letter is also written during a period where there are as many as 500 people still living who had seen the risen Jesus, and thousands who experienced the beauty of the rapid and supernatural spread of the early church in Jerusalem and beyond.

Types of Literature

Simply put, James is a letter. It is in the form of an ancient letter similar in this way to the letters of Paul, John, and Peter. These letters were written to be copied and spread from church to church and then to be read in its entirety to the entire church, maybe as a sermon or as something to be read while the church enjoyed a meal together.

But James's letter is also different from any other letter. It is a very Jewish document, showing the influence of Judaism in James's thought and life. The letter has much in common with the ancient Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament found in books such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. In fact the book of James has often been called the Proverbs of the New Testament. Furthermore, the flow of the teaching in James actually follows the pattern of Jesus' teaching, specifically in places like the Sermon on the Mount. And this letter also seems on some level to be an exegetical explanation of the Law of God found in Leviticus 19, as James builds on themes from this text.

Key themes for James

The primary theme of James is living out one's faith, being a doer of the Word and not just a hearer. James calls the follower of Jesus to demonstrate the authenticity of their faith in the midst of all the real life issues and struggles that all believers face, including trials, temptation, self-control, favoritism, wealth and poverty, work, the tongue, and anger. The following is a list of major themes as explained in the ESV Study Bible Introduction to James.

1. God is seen as a gracious giver, the unchanging Creator, merciful and compassionate, a Judge, the one and only God, a jealous God, a gracious God, and a healing God. (1:5, 17–18; 2:5, 13, 19; 4:5–6; 5:1–3, 9, 15)
2. Wisdom comes "from above" and enables one both to withstand trials and to bring peace rather than discord. (1:5; 3:13, 17)
3. God allows tests and trials (1:2–4), but temptation comes not from God but from self and Satan. The required response is patient endurance. (1:3, 13–14; 4:7; 5:7–8)
4. The primary trial is poverty and oppression from the rich. The poor are the special focus of God's care and must be cared for by his people and not shown prejudice or ignored. The wealthy are condemned for presumptuous pride and for stealing from the poor. (1:9, 27; 2:1–5, 15–16; 4:13–17; 5:1–6)
5. Apocalyptic themes are prevalent in terms of both future judgment and reward. (1:12; 2:5, 12–13; 3:1; 4:12; 5:1–7, 9, 20)

6. The power of the tongue to destroy or to bring peace dominates the middle section. (3:1–4:12)
7. The ethical mandate to go beyond hearing the word to living it out in daily conduct is made explicit early on and is implicit throughout the letter. (1:19–27; 2:14–26)
8. Prayer is the proper response to trials, but it must not be self-seeking. It is to be central in life not only when afflicted or sick but also when cheerful. God has great power to heal, both physically and spiritually. (1:5–7; 4:2–3; 5:13–18)
9. Faith, in its relationship to both works and justification, does not contradict but supplements Paul's teaching. James and Paul are united in teaching that justification comes only by the grace of God through faith but will of necessity result in works. If there are no resultant works, there was no justification in the first place. (2:14–26)¹

Bibliography of Resources

In other words, here is a list of resources I will be using in my study, and recommend if you would like to do further study of the book of Exodus.

The New Bible Commentary, D. A. Carson, R. T. France - **Note, we recommend this commentary for everyone. It is an accessible whole Bible commentary written by some of the best Christian theologians of our time.**

The Letter of James: The Pillar New Testament Commentary by Douglas J. Moo

James: Reformed Expository Commentary by Daniel M Doriani

The Message of James: The Bible Speaks Today by J. A. Motyer

James: The New American Commentary by Kurt A. Richardson

Hebrews and James: Holman New Testament Commentary edited by Max Anders and Thomas Lea

Themes from James (audio lectures) by R. C. Sproul (available from ligonier.org)

¹*Introduction to the Letter of James*, ESV Study Bible, Crossway Bibles, 2008. P. 2388.

OUR SERMON AND READING PLAN

We would like you to join in with us in reading and studying this book. Here is how we are outlining and preaching the book, with the passages being covered and the themes for each week. We would love to have you read the text before coming to Genesis each week and interact with James's thoughts together with us. Our desire in preaching this book is to help you know the Word of God better so that you can better understand the Gospel and apply its implications to your lives.

June 21 - Sermon 1 - *James* (James 1:1)

*Introduction to James, his audience, and the book itself

June 28 - Sermon 2 - *Trials* (James 1:2-8) - Weston

*The purpose of trials and the correct response of joy

July 5 - Sermon 3 - *Temptation* (James 1:9-18)

*Temptation as a problem is universal, but your temptation is personal.

July 12 - Sermon 4 - *Do* (James 1:19-27)

*Do the word, don't just hear

July 19 - Sermon 5 - *Prejudice* (James 2:1-13)

*Rich and poor is the setting, but any form of favoritism in the church is sin.

July 26 - Sermon 6 - *Works* (James 2:14-26)

*James is going to help us see the important relationship between faith and works.

August 2 - Sermon 7 - *Mouth* (James 3:1-12)

*The tongue gets us in more trouble than we know what to do with.

August 9 - Sermon 8 - *Wisdom* (James 3:13-18)

*We are told that there are two types of wisdom, but we should only seek one.

August 16 - Sermon 9 - *Humility* (James 4:1-12)

*Pride makes us like the devil, humility makes us like Jesus.

August 23 - Sermon 10 - *Boasting* (James 4:13-17)

*Most of our boasting flows from the sense of self-sufficiency.

August 30 - Sermon 11 - *Riches* (James 5:1-12)

*The rich often find their true security in their wealth rather than in the riches of heaven

September 6 - Sermon 12 - *Prayer* (5:13-20)

*Ole camel knees reminds us that everything else in this book has to be rooted in our prayer lives, both individually and with God's people.