

## **“THE LETTER OF JAMES.”**

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**Scripture Text: James 1:1; Mark 6:1-6; John 7:1-5**

**Prayer:** Holy Father, as we come afresh to your Holy Word, I humbly ask you to make me a conduit, a clean vessel, through which you would be pleased to glorify yourself, exalt the Lord Jesus, magnify the Scriptures and edify your saints. Remove every hindrance, sin and distraction and open our hearts to receive and love and obey your Word. Come Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

### **Introduction.**

As we come to the book of James this morning, please be clear, what we read here is God’s personal voice speaking to us. He has something to say to us. Come hungry. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church and to you. God is always speaking through His book to His people. Let him who has ears to hear, hear.

### **Introduction to the Letter of James.**

James is a great book, a unique book in the NT. Just as there is no other book like Revelation which we are just starting on Sunday evenings, so there is no other book in the NT like James.

It’s probably the first book written in the NT. It’s called the Proverbs of the NT. It’s a lively book, intensely practical. This is a down to earth book, with no use for speculation and talk. James is not a book of ideas or theories. This is down and dirty real religion.

As a book of practical wisdom it calls for action. This is a do this, don’t do that sort of book. It’s a book about putting our faith into practice every day and becoming godly, mature men and women. James is not a hard book to understand, it’s a hard book to put into practice.

This book is a gift from God to us to help us, or in the words of Peter, “keep us from being ineffective and unfruitful in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (II Peter 1:8).

### **Who is the author of this letter?**

OK, it’s a trick question, the right answer is the Holy Spirit is the author.

**II Peter 2:20-21** ... no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

## **Who is the human author? What do you know about him?**

There a number of men with the name James in the NT. We know it wasn't James, the son of Zebedee, brother of John. He was martyred by Herod shortly after Jesus resurrection and ascension (Acts 12:1-5).

Most scholars, ancient and present, agree this James is the half-brother of Jesus who was the pastor of the Jerusalem Church. This is remarkable because if you remember your Gospels, Jesus' family wasn't too thrilled with Jesus.

**Mark 3:20** Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. 21 And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "***He is out of his mind.***"

**John 7:5** *For not even his brothers believed in him.*

How many of us know of family situations where there is a favorite son or daughter, one who is elevated above the rest? What kind of tensions are there in that family? Especially if the favored one is unwise and self-promoting like Joseph was with his ten older brothers.

***What changed that James became a man of faith and a follower of Jesus?***

**I Corinthians 15:5-7** 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. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

**Galatians 1:18-19** 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 2:9** When ***James*** and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

It was the resurrection that changed James' heart. But a man raised from the dead should change our lives, a man who comes back from the dead to save us from our sins should get our attention. The resurrection awakens us from the dead and make us alive. Everything good in this life and the life to come is because of a risen Savior.

So James was a Jew from Nazareth, raised in the traditions of Moses, and after the resurrection became a Christian believer and among the early followers of Jesus. He rose to leadership in the Jewish Jerusalem Church and was highly regarded as a pillar in the early church.

Ancient tradition tells us that James was such a great man of prayer that his knees were like camels knees. He is believed to have died a martyrs death, when not only did he not recant his love for Christ, but rather pressed to proclaim it more strongly.

*So if this letter is written by a brother to Jesus, what's the first thing you notice about how this letter starts out?*

**James 1:1** James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

If you were the brother of Jesus, how would you start a letter? If you knew Jesus as only a few could, if you had eaten at the same table, shared the same house, played in the same places, grown up together how would you write?

“James, born of the sacred womb of Mary, sibling of the Savior of the world, confidant of the Messiah.” It's noteworthy that he doesn't exalt himself or his status or position.

Not an apostle, not senior pastor of the Church of Jerusalem, but servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He would rather be a servant than a brother. It's no dishonor to be the servant of God. In fact it to James the higher honor was to be Christ's servant not Christ's brother.

Remember the words of King David:

**Psalms 84:10** I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

Remember how Paul also counted all earthly titles and honors worthless compared to belonging to Christ and suffering if necessary for Him.

What did Jesus say about who his brothers and mother were?

**Matt. 12:50** Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

Let us humble ourselves and embrace the honor of being a servant of Jesus and of each other. Let our boasting be in our weakness and His greatness and goodness. The most exalted position any of us can boast about is that we have been saved by God's grace. Speaking of which.

**Is James reluctant to preach the Gospel of grace?**

Some have criticized James over the centuries for not having much Gospel, not much grace, not much Jesus. And some have said James contradicts Paul and suggests a salvation by works.

James is definitely different. Consider this.

Half the verbs in James are imperatives, meaning commands, 59 commands in 108 verses. If I write a religious letter and most of the verbs are in the imperative, what impression could that give you about the religion I am writing about?

That could give the impression that the gospel is about doing, about our efforts, our works. If I do these things then I will be saved and go to heaven.

Is James writing another Gospel? Is faith being or doing? Believing or acting?

## What's the difference between indicative faith and imperative faith?

To answer that we have to go back to eighth grade grammar and remember the difference between indicatives and imperatives.

“The Bible is on the table.” That’s an indicative statement, a simple declaration of fact.

“Put the Bible on the table.” That’s an imperative, a demand or a command to do something.

In the Bible indicatives say what has been done. Imperatives say what must be done.

The Gospel is the Grand Indicative. It tells us what has been done for us. The cross is Christ’s triumphant indicative, He did it all.

If we put the imperatives before the indicative of the Gospel then we end up with attempts to earn our salvation. “I have been crucified with Christ” is indicative, now I must live like it, act like it, show it.

Understanding and remembering this will help us as we study this letter, it will keep us from falling into a works-religion mentality.

In his classic book *Christianity and Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen warned the fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity is that liberalism is all about the imperative, what you must do, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative, what God has done.

The imperative without the indicative leads into legalism, trying to earn God’s favor by our good works. The indicative without the imperative leads into license, I’m saved by Jesus so it doesn’t matter what I do.

Putting the indicative first is very important to keeping James in proper perspective. James is calling us *to become what we already* are in Christ.

I am loved by God, I am justified by His grace, I am adopted into His family, I am filled with His Spirit. God is not waiting to see how I do before He decides to love and accept me. You heard Von Golder last week right, God already loves you and accepts you. We love and obey God because He already first loved us.

My love and obedience are my response to what He has already done for me. In fact my actions reveal a righteousness that’s from God, it’s not my own righteousness. Apart from Christ I am nothing and can do nothing, but in Christ I can do all things through the power of the Word and the Spirit.

This is a very contemporary, relevant issue as the church steers from one ditch to the other. In some of our Reformed circles we have grown up with a strong sense of works and works righteousness. But now in the some Reformed churches there is an over emphasis on grace, grace, grace. Gospel, gospel, gospel.

There is a shunning of law, and works, and righteousness and holiness and judgment.

James is part of the Gospel, not just faith but repentance, not just grace but good works, not just justification but sanctification. We are saved to do good works.

In Christ there are no vines without sap and without fruit. Faith is not an idle grace.

James is going to ask us to act like what we already are. The old man, the old sin nature is dead, now act like it.

### **To Whom Did James write?**

To Christian Jews who have been scattered around Asia from several dispersions. There was the dispersion of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722BC. Then the two tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah were exiled by the Babylonians in 586BC.

The ten tribes never really returned. The few remaining northern kingdom Jews intermarried with the invading peoples and became the Samaritans, sort of half-breed Jews. The two southern tribes returned after 70 years in exile and rebuilt the city, the walls and the temple.

More Jewish Christians scattered out of Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of the Christians in Acts 8. These Jewish Christians found themselves alienated from their race and from their culture, rejected by Jews and by Gentiles.

Scattered, exiled, without a true home in this earth they suffered many temptations, trials and troubles, difficulties, faith challenging things.

Countless millions of Christians are living as refugees on earth. God is their God. Their God is the kind of God who raises up servants like James to minister the word of God to them.

If you feel driven away, know that God is faithful to all His promises. He is our God and we are His children wherever we are. He will gather all who are His to Himself.

### **What is the theme of the Letter of James?**

**James 1:4** And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect [mature] and complete, lacking in nothing.

**James 1:22** But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

The central theme of James is maturity, spiritual maturity. There were some in the church then as now who had a bare faith, an unfruitful faith that they passed off as sufficient, a kind of faith where good works were neglected.

The passion of James is for us to take our faith to heart, wear it on our sleeve and turn it into shoe leather.

## **Application and conclusion.**

I want to conclude with a challenge to all of us. I know it may seem like a radical suggestion but don't dismiss it quickly. I invite you to join Phama, Zach and me in memorizing the book of James. I know it seems crazy.

James is five chapters, 108 verses, under 2000 words depending on the translation you use. The first chapter is the longest and it goes down from there. It's shorter than the Sermon on the Mount, so I know it can be done.

At a verse a day you could have it done by the end of January. People who memorize large portions of Scripture have learned some tricks that really help. Here is a way you can memorize James in three months.

For the first month read James out loud once or twice a day. Then write it out by hand once. Then take a month to memorize it, that's about four verses a day. Then repeat it out loud each day for a month. For about 20 minutes a day you could have the entire book of James memorized in three months. You could also record yourself reading it and listen to it in the car and repeat along.

Phama and I are going to try and speed up the process by memorizing as much of James as we can while we drive from Ohio to Lynden next month.

So chose your translation, maybe print it out. I have a printed copy of the ESV version. I would be happy to make a copy for you, or make a copy of the NIV if you prefer that.

Now some of us will say we can't do this because we have a bad memory and I understand, I have a hard time. But having a bad memory is actually the reason why we work hard to memorize things, so we can get them to stick. I have to force my brain to remember and with a simple system and some real effort we can do it.

So why should you do this?

Because Philippians 4:8 tells us to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise.

Because the Psalmist says it's a way to keep from sinning. "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).

Because we will have ready access to God's Word to comfort or counsel others or give a reason for the hope that is in us.

Because it pleases God when we honor His Word and take it to heart and show our love for it.

Because God speaks most clearly through His Word. Because what we hide in our hearts will come out our mouth. Because His Word is life and truth and hope.