

## **Book Of James**

### **Part 1 – Overview**

The Book of James has long been connected to James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem in the three decades following Jesus' death and ascension.

Josephus, the ancient Judean historian reports that James was killed in the year 62 at the order of the High Priest Ananus II within a brief window of opportunity between the death of the Roman governor and before the arrival of his successor. This was considered a shocking abuse of power by many in Jerusalem and when the new governor (Albinus) arrived, they complained and Ananus was removed from his position.

The letter itself is not written to a specific individual or community but seems meant as a kind of general letter to Christian believers outside of Jerusalem. As we read in Acts, the followers of Jesus faced serious opposition in Jerusalem and Judea which occasionally led to real oppression up to and including death (Stephen). Acts also reports that many followers of Jesus began to leave Jerusalem and settle in other cities. It is most likely that it is to these communities that James is writing. Given that there is a general focus on the Law (at least as reinterpreted by Jesus), these communities were made up of Jewish followers. Most scholars place the writing of this letter fairly early, probably in the early 50's.

James is quite short, only 108 verses across five chapters, but can basically be divided into three parts. The letter opens with a short greeting and brief flurry of advice on some matters of faith(ch1). The middle section contains a series of short homilies giving advice on Christian ethics (ch2-4:10) and closes with another series of brief admonitions.

Though Jesus himself is barely mentioned, much of what James writes has direct parallels in the sayings of Jesus found in the gospels (which weren't written yet in his lifetime). Much of the letter is presented as an appeal to "common" sense and seeks to proactively answer potential objections in his points; in this way many scholars suggest it draws heavily on the example of the wisdom tradition in the Hebrew scriptures (i.e.; Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job).

Thematically, James key point is that our lives continually offer us opportunities to either embrace or reject the will of God, and that the way of Christ is more focused on how we enact our choice for God's will in our lives than it is about intellectually

assenting to agreed truths. Its basic message is this, you can choose life or death, but choosing life has to have real impacts in the lives of the people around you.

James view of the life of faith is deeply rooted in understanding that Christianity is a group effort; that faith is enacted in community. James also touches on the perils of wealth inequality and the importance of wisdom as a means to discern God's will.

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### Part 2 – Chapter 1

- v1 The attribution is to someone named James, who claims to be a servant of both God and Christ. This attribution is actually unique in the New Testament, where authors usually claim only one or the other (or “the Lord”).

That James doesn't bother to identify himself further is one of the arguments for it being James of Jerusalem as any other James would have added a signifier given James preeminence.

The letter is written to the “twelve tribes in Dispersion.” Which is just a poetic way of saying Jews who live outside of Judea. Jewish people had long been building communities across the Mediterranean basin, and as we read in Acts, as followers of Jesus began facing oppression in Jerusalem many of them fled to resettle in these communities.

- v2-27 The rest of this first chapter offers advice on a number of subjects, but all related to answering the question “how do I follow Jesus.” which was (and is) an important question for people who were seeking to differentiate what was unique about following Jesus within Jewish identity.

- v2-4 Clearly, the followers of Jesus are facing some resistance from their following Jesus and here James reminds them that holding onto faith, though difficult, is not without its advantages.

- v 5-8 James cautions against letting doubts (beliefs) deter your commitment to the way of Jesus (actions).

*Though the church has long taught against the temptations of doubt, to some extent, doubt is a necessary prerequisite to faith. The key takeaway for me is that the church is better off allowing some of entertainment of doubts about beliefs while insisting on commitment to continuing the ministries of Jesus. My experience is that doing Jesus work tends to reinforce faith, but it rarely works so well the other way around.*

- v9-11 In other words, where your treasure is, there your heart will be so; build up treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not consume.

v12-16 This is actually a significant departure from previous Jewish understandings of temptation. Here, James says that temptation arises within us and can either be fed or starved.

v17-18 The importance of cultivating generosity as spiritual discipline

v19-21 Faith should be lived in humility; love cannot be embodied through our anger, fear, or hate.

v22-25 Probably the most famous verses from this book “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” Just as the image in the mirror is a flattening of reality, those who do not embody faith express only a very shallow faith.

v26-27 In other words, our religion is not just about participation in ritual but in the ways that our participation in ritual affects our day-to-day choices AND that those choices should be aimed at the welfare of the whole community, and especially of its most vulnerable members.

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### Part 3 – Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins the series of longer teachings on Christian ethics

- v1-7 The passage begins with a question that is clearly a critique of things that are happening in Christian assemblies. The basic point here is that distinctions drawn in the wider world should have no place within the Christian assemblies. This isn't to say there aren't hierarchies within the church just that they shouldn't be based those of the world, and especially not economic (or class) ones.
- v8-13 This passage builds on the issue of allowing worldly distinctions into the church; showing how doing so violates the spirit of Jesus command to love our neighbors. But it goes on to illustrate that doing *some* good does not cancel out the evil we do; all sins are equal because all have been equally addressed by Christ's atonement. There aren't little sins and big sins, just sins.
- v14-26 This passage expands the earlier admonition about faith in works from the previous chapter. Though many have posited Paul's message about justification through faith alone to be a contrast with James' teaching that faith without works is dead; I think they are really just talking past one another. Both understand faith to be absolute trust in God and both would expect that absolutely trusting God would surely have noticeable knock-on effects in our lives. So yes, we can't *earn* God's favor through our actions, but if we truly seek to embody the love of God as shown to us by Jesus' example we can't help but do works of love and mercy.

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### Chapter 3

This short chapter is largely concerned to consider how our speech not only reflects our relationship with God, but also has a potentially considerable affect on the faith of others. I think we can see parallels between James' writing and Jesus teaching on defilement.

Here is Jesus' teaching from Matthew's gospel (it is also in Mark)

"It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "do you not know that the pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into the pit."

But Peter said to him, "explain this parable to us." Then he said, "are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" *Matthew 15:11-18*

v1 Teaching is one of the roles kept by the disciples according to Acts when they set aside the first seven deacons, so teachers were, from the very beginning accorded a great deal of respect and held to high standards.

v2-3 This both acknowledges the fallibility of humans while also holding out a pretty high standard to aim for (perfection). The gist here is that learning to control how you respond is a necessary first step in building a holy way of life.

FYI, a bridle is a the leather framework that connects the bit (a metal cylinder in a horses mouth) to the reins, the straps which a rider uses to control a horse.

v4 Now we switch metaphors to sailboats. BTW, sailboats and horse bridles are unique metaphors in scripture, used only by James.

v5 In both of James' metaphors he shows how small devices are used to control much larger things. In the same way he suggests, that mastery of the tongue can lead to control of much larger forces.

v6-9 Drawing on the close of verse 5, James introduces another metaphorical lens for thinking about the tongue – fire. Frankly I think he’s drawing the point out a bit, but it is true that only small spark is necessary to start a large fire capable of engulfing a whole forest.

James goes on, expanding on his fire metaphor to great rhetorical affect, namely showing, much as Jesus did in Matthew 15 above, that tongue, almost uniquely, drives the bulk of our actions and other’s reactions and that ill-used words are a special temptation. In other words, sticks and stones may break your bones but words can destroy your soul.

In our world today, we see this power at work in the generation of outrage by right-wing media and the power of social media to rupture relationships and communities.

v10-12 In the questions James presents, he wants to show that we can’t have it both ways; that we can’t be hateful or hurtful in speech and claim also to be agents of God’s love. Again returning to Jesus, we are defiled – unholy – if we give speech to our darkest selves.

v13-17 James now moves beyond his argument in favor of moderating speech as a spiritual discipline and shifts into talking about the spiritual discipline of attaining wisdom.

Wisdom in the ancient world was not about intelligence or reason or philosophy so much as it was about mastery. Solomon is wise because he has mastered the proverbs and always acts in accordance with their teaching. Likewise, in Chronicles all the craftsmen and artists responsible for the Temple are described as being wise because of their mastery of their various crafts.

James understanding of wisdom seems very similar, in that the wisdom from God is about mastery of acting according to God’s will. Those who attain this kind of wisdom do *works*, it *yields* fruits, and can be described as a *harvest*. In other words, this wisdom is shown through action. But this wisdom can’t be learned in the same way one learns a craft; it can only be gifted through God’s grace and is attainable only through faith – through a complete trusting of God in every situation as in the example of Jesus.

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### Chapter 4

James now moves from a somewhat theoretical framework for following Jesus and begins to address how his ideas about faith as an activity impacts the life of the community of Jesus' followers.

v1 This is a rhetorical question, unlike some of Paul's letters where he is addressing specific disputes and congregations. On the other hand, the universality of this epistle suggests that Jesus' followers from the very beginning have, at times, struggled to live in love for one another.

v2-4 Again, rhetorical (and kind of extreme hyperbole). Hopefully early Christian communities weren't filled with murderers. But the larger point here is that *communal* conflict is derived from *individual, inner* conflict. We fight because we are at war within ourselves.

v5-6 The first quoted verse is not actually found anywhere in the Hebrew scriptures, so it isn't clear where James may have drawn this from. The quote in verse 6 is from Proverbs 3:34 and is used in 1Peter to argue for submission to the authority of the church elders.

Quote sources aside, James seems to be making the point that pursuit of the glory the world gives is, at best, a distraction from the way of Christ, and at worst, imperils ones soul.

7-10 James closes out his argument about the source of conflict with some pastoral advice. The key phrase here is found in v8, when James calls those who cause disputes as "double-minded." Here then, in James estimation anyway, is the source of all sin – double-mindedness or as Jesus describes the same condition; hypocrisy. In the life of faith, when our inner motivations and our outer actions (or words) get out of sync, we move away from God and open up a pathway for evil to enter in.

v11-17 The chapter closes out, shifting away from the longer arguments about ethics and enters into the closing series of short admonitions.



v11-12 Justice and divine judgment are the through-line for the whole of the scriptural witness, and Jesus reinforces that each of us is to be held to account for the content of our lives. These verses are very reminiscent of Jesus' teaching about removing the log from one's own eye before judging the speck in another's.

Further, there is a great distinction here between those who *judge* the law and those who *do* what the law asks. This is really the heart of Jesus' conflict with religious authorities, the issue isn't the content of the law; it's whether or not we seek to hold to account only ourselves or others.

v13-17 This is basically a warning to those who seek glory or riches in this world; it's a bit of mashup between Jesus' parable of the rich young man/ruler and his teaching about not worrying about the future.

When the young man asks what he needs to do to attain eternal life, Jesus answers; "keep the commandments" and Jesus answers with a paraphrase of the ten commandments and when the young man says he has done this; what else? So Jesus tells him to sell everything, give it to the poor and store up treasure in heaven instead.

And in the teaching about worrying, Jesus reminds his listeners that God provides for all the creatures of the earth and will do likewise for us, so instead of worrying and planning we should instead strive for the kingdom of God.

So then, the "boasting" that James speaks of has to do with our priorities and how much we trust God. Do we really expect God to provide as Jesus says or do we hedge our bets? Do we trust God enough to take whatever comes our way and give thanks and live into grace or are we too results oriented?

Admittedly, this seems an almost impossible ask and most of us would consider someone who really lived that way as foolish, but I think that says more about our being mired in systemic sins that seem inescapable than it does about the validity of Jesus' teaching.

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### Chapter 5

Chapter 5 continues the series of short admonitions that began in chapter 4 verse 11. It contains three short teachings; on the responsibilities of wealth, on endurance in faith, and on how members of the church should support one another.

v1-6 James draws on Jesus's teachings that echo the prophets to warn those of wealth.

We could paraphrase this teaching as "to whom much is given, much is expected."

v1-3 James here draws on the metaphor Jesus uses as recorded in Matt 6:19-21

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

The early church believed Jesus' return was imminent and that time for repentance and reformation was short. This sense of urgency explains the stark imagery James uses; he is trying to "scare them straight."

We can also see echoes of Jeremiah's condemnation of the rulers of Jerusalem in his day, whose neglect of the welfare of the whole community was believed to have directly led to god's judgment against them that resulted in the destruction of the city and the taking into exile the aristocrats and Temple authorities.

*Let me go to the rich and speak to them; surely they know the way of the LORD, the law of their God." But they all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds. Therefore a lion from the forest shall kill them, a wolf from the desert shall destroy them. A leopard is watching against their cities; everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces—because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great. Jer 5:5-6*

v4-6 James continues by naming the abuses the unscrupulous wealthy have visited upon the laboring classes; explicitly saying they are culpable for Jesus' execution in v6.

These verses clearly echo Jesus' sermon on the plain recorded by Luke (6:24-26)

*"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you*

*will mourn and weep. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

These are pretty straightforward condemnations of the wealthy, that echo both the teachings of Jesus and the words of the prophets. In ancient times the wealthy brought down destruction on the whole community because of their selfish self-dealing, and Jesus himself warned that the same was coming again. Two points I would add are that it isn't wealth, itself, which is condemned but the misuse of it. Secondly, if Jesus and the apostles didn't believe that it was possible for the wealthy to amend their behavior they wouldn't have bothered to try and warn them. What is clear is that, like the rich young man whom Jesus tells to sell everything he has, they don't hold out much hope that the wealthy will, in fact, bother to listen.

v7-20 After reassuring the church that those who have exploited them will get their due, James now shifts to words of reassurance in the final two teachings.

v7-12 The second teaching in this chapter is a call for patience and perseverance. As mentioned above, many early Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetimes. Jesus himself seemed to suggest this as recorded in Matthew 24:32-35

*"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

I would suggest that Jesus is actually speaking of how his death and resurrection would tip the balance against the power of evil. Nevertheless, many have linked His words to the eschaton (the return of Jesus) and the earliest NT epistles clearly communicate the same.

As time wore on though and the apostles began to die, the sense that the final reckoning would not be coming soon began to take hold, many believers surely began to lose some of their zeal and sense of commitment. James here is speaking to alleviate this anxiety and to assure them that following Jesus was still worth the effort.

This passage may be the origin of the phrase the "patience of Job," even though Job wasn't really all that patient – he did endure in his faith in God though (while also questioning God's plan), which is really what James is getting at.

James closes out this question with a nearly direct (if unattributed) quote from Jesus

*And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. Matt 5:36-37*

v13-20 This final section continues to offer reassurance and to call upon the community members to support one another. Important for us is that James calls upon all the members to minister to the congregation.