

[1]
An Intro to James: Faith that Works
James 1:1
September 13th, 2015, Jeff Germo

Today we are going to begin a new book study on the epistle of James. And I have to tell you that I'm really excited about this series because James is unique in the New Testament. Theologically it has been quite a controversial book over the centuries. As a matter of fact, several theologians thought that it shouldn't be included in the canon of scripture. Martin Luther, the great leader of the Reformation from the sixteenth century, dismissed it as a "right strawy epistle," meaning it lacked any depth. And I suppose compared to Paul's *magnum opus* to the Romans or Galatians one could argue that case.

The main bone of contention with the letter is chapter 2:14-26, and especially verse 24 where James says,

[2]

James 2:24 (ESV)

24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Now that would be enough to make the hair stand up on the back of the neck of any good Baptist. No wonder they wanted to throw this book out. And they would be right to disregard it if they took this single verse outside the context of the whole, because the Bible tells us very clearly that we are not justified by works.

[3]

We are saved by God's grace alone through faith and "***not as a result of works, so that no one may boast,***" as Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8, 9. We will see as we go along, though, that James does **not** contradict Paul's writings, as some have thought. James compliments Paul's letters. The Bible would be incomplete without James. It is a profoundly important book for our time. And as a matter of fact, Paul, in Ephesians 2:10 says we are saved **for** good works. The good works flow out of our faith. If we are really following Jesus there will be real works of righteousness.

James is about "making it real". It's about making real what we already know.

Some of us here grew up in the church, and we were raised with some ideas about what the nuts and the bolts of the Christian faith were. We have wrestled with how to live out our faith in the world. What does it actually mean to live lives separated unto God – holy, set apart? James calls us to a holiness that is lived out in this world, but which sets us apart from it, or as he puts it in 1:27; "***to keep oneself unstained from the world.***"

Christians down through the years have struggled with how to do this. What does it mean for the Christian to be ***in the world but not of it***, as our Lord prayed for His disciples? James also says that "***friendship with the world is enmity with God?***" Does that mean we should live lives so separately that we can have no influence on the world in which we live?

Where is the balance? What does it mean to be different?

Does it mean we wear different clothes, or wear a cross around our neck to differentiate us, or a WWJD bracelet, or have a little fishy on our bumper, or a bumper sticker that says, "Christians aren't perfect, they're just forgiven?"

Or maybe deck your car out with signs like this one?

[4]

Is this what it means to be set apart for God? I sure hope not.

Let me read you an excerpt from the introduction to a commentary on James by Alec Motyer.

[5]

"Those who can look back through thirty or forty years (this was written in 1985) of Christian experience will recall that teaching about separation from the world used to be far more prominent then than it is today. Those who became Christians at any point up to the mid-1940s were carefully (and with loving intent) made aware by their seniors what was proper for a Christian not to do, where not to go, how not to dress.

[6]

We must not doubt the serious and pure intention which lay behind this teaching, nor mock what was so plainly meant for our good; yet we were fundamentally misled. We were drilled in a reactive holiness: whatever happened to be the current fashion in the 'world' (i.e. society outside the Christian fellowship) must be contradicted by the Christian. We were called simply to react against surrounding social norms."

If those of us who grew up in the church in the last thirty to fifty years talked we would be able to come up with quite an extensive list of dos and don'ts that we were taught were marks of a Christian. And we talked about these kinds of things when did our study in Galatians.

John Fischer, in his book "Real Christians Don't Dance," had this to say:

[7]

So is this it? This is what it comes down to: real Christians don't dance? Moses parted the water for this? Rahab tucked the spies away in her closet for this? Jael drove a tent peg into the head of Sisera for this? Jesus died and rose again, martyrs were sawn in two, and the Church has prevailed for almost two thousand years against the gates of hell so that Christians today can live out this ever important testimony to a waiting, watching world: real Christians don't dance?¹

Well, as Motyer said in his commentary, we shouldn't mock the well-intentioned efforts of those who went before us because it is a very real struggle even for us today. How do we live our lives set apart to God in the world?

Motyer goes on to say that when we look around **today** at the church, that reactive holiness or separation from the world ***"has led [us to a counter reaction] to a forgetfulness of the concept of separation, and for very many Christians what goes in the world goes in the church. If everyone does it, why should not the Christian?"***

¹ John Fischer, *Real Christians Don't Dance*. 1988,

So, perhaps the pendulum has swung too far the other way so there is sometimes an imperceptible difference between a Christian and a pre-Christian, or a churchd and an un-churched person. James addresses this tension very decisively. His letter is about responding obediently to the Word of God, as opposed to reacting to, or against the world.

[8]

It is about where our faith meets our life.

James is easily the most practical book in the New Testament. Most of Paul's letters begin with some sort of theological treatise to lend some background to what he is about to write, which is great. But, James doesn't do that. Immediately following his greeting in verse one, he jumps in with a practical imperative, "Do this...", and he does not stop giving practical applications right up until the very last verse. Some have called James "The New Testament Proverbs" because that's how it reads. There are 54 imperatives in James – "do this", "don't do that," which is another reason that some have wrongly thought it to be legalistic. But, we're going to find out that it is clearly not, and that the **doing** and the **not doing** comes out of the being. It comes from faith.

James wrote:

[9]

James 2:18 (ESV)

18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works."

To which he responds, "***Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.***"

[10]

In other words, **if you have real faith, if Jesus is really in you, you will have works produced by your faith. You will be going through a continual metamorphosis of character – becoming more like Jesus.**

[11]

The book of James is about **real faith** being lived out in a **real world** producing **real works** of righteousness, **so that others will see Jesus in us and join him in his kingdom work.**

This letter was written for such a time as ours. It compliments Paul's writings in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians. And not only that, but it parallels the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Can I suggest that over the next few weeks you read James over several times in one sitting? It's only five short chapters, so it won't take you very long. But, before you do that, read through the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7, and then read James with that background from the teaching of Jesus, and you will notice some similarities between the two teachings.

I'll just give you a few examples this morning to sort of prime the pump for you.

[12]

- **Both Jesus and James teach about keeping joyful in the middle of suffering.**

[13]

- They both speak about the importance of extending forgiveness and mercy.
[14]
- James and Jesus teach similarly about fruit being born out of faith.
[15]
- And that you can recognize a Christ-follower by the fruit they bear. If there is no fruit, then they really aren't following Christ.
[16]
- They each speak about the folly of taking oaths and breaking them.

James is far from legalistic. He actually echoes the teaching of Jesus. He is all about making your faith real. Making real what you already know. If I was going to paraphrase how his thesis statement might look, it would be:

[17]
"If your faith is real it will look like this..." And then he spells it all out. Or, **"This is what Christian maturity looks like..."**

Today I just want to give you an introduction to the book. We are going to look at verse 1 only this morning. There is so much to discover here.

[18]

James 1:1 (ESV)

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

The letter begins in the typical fashion for letters written in those times. He begins by stating who the letter is from and who it is written to.

So, **who is James?**

The only thing that he tells us here is that he is ***"a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."***

There are four people with the name James in the New Testament, and only two stand out enough to be considered as the writer of this letter. James expects his readers to know who he is. He doesn't give any other information about himself, such as where he is from, or who his father was, which would be the case if he was not well known. So, there are really only two possibilities: 1. James the son of Zebedee who was called along with his brother John to be a disciple of Jesus early in his ministry. He was the most prominent of the James', but it couldn't have been him because he died as a martyr, Acts 12 tells us, in about AD 44, likely before this letter was penned.

And then there was James, the younger brother of Jesus. (Matt. 13:55; c.f. Mark 6:3)

[19]

All the evidence points to this **James, the half brother of Jesus** as being the writer of the epistle that bears his name.

[20]

Which is quite amazing since, in his early years he, along with his other **siblings thought that Jesus was out of His mind** (Mark 3:21; John 7:5). And here, in verse 1, James calls himself the servant of his brother. He has done a total turn around. To me that gives real validity to the Gospel. James, more than any of the other writers of the New Testament, knew the humanity of Jesus.

They were kids together. They would have slept together in a small one or two room house with the rest of the family. They ate together, played together, learned the Hebrew ways together, apprenticed together as carpenters under their father. If anyone would know whether or not Jesus was a charlatan, or out of his mind, it would be James. And yet, he calls his older brother, Jesus, his Lord, and he Jesus' servant. That, to me, is amazing.

It also could explain why there is such a parallel in this letter with the teaching of Jesus. They probably talked about these kinds of things while they were growing up.

Here are some other factoids about James.

[21]

He was one of the people that **Jesus appeared to between his resurrection and ascension**¹ Corinthians 15:7 tells us. Now, I would imagine that this was one of the clinchers for James. If he didn't believe before this, he certainly would have had when he came face to face with his risen brother after he had been crucified in front of his eyes.

[22]

Acts 1:14 has **James and his siblings and mother with the other disciples devoting themselves to prayer** after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

[23]

James became the **leader of the Jerusalem church** after Peter had been released from prison in Acts 12:17.

[24]

And he apparently **chaired the council at Jerusalem**. Recall from Acts 15, where some Judaizers were teaching the Gentile Christians that they had to be circumcised to be saved. So, Paul and Barnabas and some others went to have a meeting in Jerusalem where James was the bishop and they came up with a simple solution.

James was kind of a later bloomer, but as R. Kent Hughes wrote, "He flowered well." We've just seen he went from being a skeptic to a devoted follower and worshipper of his brother. He lived his life helping those who were under his care to become more like his brother, Jesus. The fourth century historian Eusebius records the testimony of Hegesippus, that James

[25]

"used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling...so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, and kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people." James was sold out for Jesus, so much so that he was martyred for his faith in about AD 62.

So, that's James, the man.

[26]

James 1:1 (ESV)

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ... There is so much there isn't there!

When was the letter written? It was written while the church was still Jewish. There were no Gentile Christians at that time. That's interesting, isn't it? Many people think that Jesus started a new religion. That's not true. The Christian faith was then, and is now, Jewish. The Christian faith is a continuation of what God was doing through the Jews.

Paul and Peter both addressed Jewish and Gentile Christians in their letters.

[27]

James only **addresses the 12 tribes**, and those who called Abraham their father as he wrote in **2:21**.

So, the letter was penned sometime between AD 45, and 48, before the church accepted Gentiles into the faith, which makes it the earliest of the New Testament books. It was written before any of Paul's letters, which puts an interesting twist to the controversy about the faith versus works argument.

[28]

James is **one of the "universal" letters**, meaning it wasn't addressed to a specific individual or a church. **It was a circular letter** that was to be circulated and read in the meetings in the synagogues where they met in the early days, and later in their homes.

We won't take that any further, except to point out that they had not started meeting in house churches when the letter was penned, but were **still worshipping in their local synagogues** (2:2 gk. is "synagogue").

What else do we know about who James was writing to?

[29]

Well, we already know that **they are Jewish Christians, meeting in synagogues**.

[30]

We noted that **they had been scattered because of persecution after the stoning of Stephen**, which meant that they were **living as foreigners**, outside of their homeland. They likely had everything taken away from them and had to start all over from scratch, in a new town or city, trying the best they could to take care of their families with few resources. Just think about what is happening in Syria right now with refugees scattering all over the world and you can get a pretty good idea of what it was like for these first Christians James was writing to.

They had probably faced persecution from both Gentiles and from their fellow Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and I would imagine they were, understandably, tempted to give up because of their hardship.

And it's in the middle of all this that James, the brother of Jesus, the Bishop of Jerusalem, writes to the Jewish Christ-followers, scattered because of persecution, and encourages them in a very pastoral way, to live out their faith in practical ways even when it's tough. And he gets very specific and tells them what Christian maturity looks like. We're going to be looking in depth at this in the coming weeks, but it can be summed up like this, in closing.

In 1:26-27 he says there are three markers of Christian maturity.

[31]

James 1:26-27

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

So, James says that there are three marks of Christian maturity.

[32]

1. A mature Christ-follower will be **able to control their tongue**. In other words, they will keep themselves from gossip and slander, and from being verbally abusive, and they will listen more than talk (1:26).

[33]

2. A mature Christ-follower will **care for the needy**, or as Jesus said, “look after the least of these” (1:27a)

[34]

3. A mature Christ-follower **will live a life of personal purity** (1:27b)

James says this is what maturity looks like, and the rest of the letter, from chapter 2 on, explains in detail what this looks like for the Christ-follower. And over the next several weeks we are going to dig in and discover for ourselves what it means to be mature. What does the process look like? And, what does the final product look like?

And as we look at God's Word, the Holy Spirit is going to speak to us, me included, and it's very important that we have our hearts prepared and ready for what he is going to say. The temptation for us is to think about someone else that this would be good for, but God wants to speak to each of us very specifically about ways we need to surrender to him.

For some of you he may speak directly to the inability to keep a tight reign on your tongue. Maybe for others it will be to look outside yourself and care for the needs of those who are less fortunate than you are. And finally for others the Holy Spirit may stick his probe in your heart and gently reveal some areas in your life that do not honour the name that you bear as a Christian. It will likely be a combination of all three.

But, you know what? We are all in the same boat. We are all in process. We each have areas in which we need to grow and surrender to God. One thing we do know, the Holy Spirit will speak, and we need to make sure that when he does, our hearts are soft and ready to listen, and obey.

[35]

Remember, if there is no fruit, there is no faith. **Real faith produces real fruit.** That is the main message of James.



Faith that Works
James 1:1
Week of September 13th, 2015

Objective of this study: To grasp the main message of James, that ***Real Faith Produces Real Fruit.***

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read Matthew 6:9-13 meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

How are you feeling about digging into James?

Word/Work (60-90 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read all of Matthew 5 - 7, *The Sermon on the Mount*.
3. Read all of James.
4. What stood out for each of you?

This week read James every day, asking the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. Read also The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7.