

Authorship

Author identifies himself only as “James” (1:1). The likeliest James is James the brother of Jesus (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-26; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 2:9,12) (traditional).

James was respected for his devoutness, but his criticism of the elite’s oppression of the poor aroused opposition.

Setting

Date probably before AD 50. The message in this book addressed tensions that culminated in full-blown war with Rome in AD 66. Some believe his followers edited his material and re-released some of it after his death in the wake of the war or leading up to it. James was killed about AD 62.

Audience

Jewish Christians, perhaps Jerusalem believers scattered after Stephen’s death

Theme:

James emphasizes vital Christianity characterized by good deeds and faith that works.

Verse by Verse Study

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

“James” is an English substitution for the name “Jacob.”

Twelve tribes—James could have been referring to all God’s people who were scattered.

Trials and Temptations

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Consider it . . . (other translations) What does count or consider mean to you? How do you consider it joy when you are going through something?

adelphoi (Greek) sometimes translated brethren. Newer translations say brothers and sisters. This isn’t changing the text, as *adelphoi* as a plural often referred to the community.

“Trials of many kinds” The same word is used here and in v. 12, although here it is referring to external hardships as opposed to v. 12 to “inner impulse to evil” or temptation. The writer assumes the readers will understand the nuance.

In Hebrew and Greek the word for “trials” is neutral but also refers to attackers. The testing or trial can be linked to Satan, temptation, testing.

Testing . . . produces perseverance. What do you think about this comment? How does that work? Can you give an example?

Hebrew culture (and sometimes today) refers to trials and difficulties as the result of some internal fault.

4 Let perseverance (endurance) finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The Interpreter's Bible commentary says: "James had a different ideal of happiness because he holds a different theory of the meaning and purpose of life. The purpose of life cannot be accomplished by the attainment of ease or luxurious comfort, but only in the achievement of Christlike character."

Psalm 66:10 - 12 speaks of God's testing his people like silver and then leading them to a spacious place.

Proverbs 3:11 - 12 contains perhaps the classic statement of this idea

We should not settle for just being "okay" or constant, but strive toward completion. It isn't just about "keeping the commandments (Mark 10, the rich young ruler), but about becoming more like Jesus each and every day.

Matthew 5:48—Be ye perfect

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave (the surge) of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Wisdom vs knowledge. What is the difference?

Without doubt-- Ephesians 4:13 - 14, where Paul speaks of our maturation as Christians, until we are no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine.

It is therefore more likely that James means a faith that manifests itself in action. (NIV application commentary)

Double minded-- Psalm 12:2 speaks of the double heart: "Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception [lit., heart to heart]."

9 Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, 10 and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. 11 For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

Why do you think there is a dichotomy here between lowly (poor) and the rich? What are the markers of the difference between the two? Could this also be an encouragement to the poor/meek/lowly that the markers of this world aren't what really count? Matthew 5-6

Poor/lowly	Rich/Powerful
Have nothing	Cavalier, devil may care
Humble in circumstances	entitled
Insufficient resources	No understanding of others
Poor	Selfish
Persecuted/low self-esteem	No patience
Exploited	Ungodly priorities

James talks about the ephemeral nature of riches/possessions. Why are we so prone to put such emphasis on them?

Mark 10: 17-22 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" 20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money[c] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Are riches the problem or our attitude toward them?

Matthew 19:23-26 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" 26 But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

Trial and Temptation

12 Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Crown of life—not authority, but a reward.

Temptation—standing up to various temptations—what does “temptation” mean to you?

13 No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. 14 But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; 15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved.

One’s own desire--

Jeremiah 17:9-10

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?

10 I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Psalms 37:4 Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.[f] 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

19 You must understand this, my beloved:^{19a} let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

Quick and slow—What does this say to you? What does “quick to listen” mean?

Read Proverbs 10:19

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.;

15:1 Folly is a joy to one who has no sense, but a person of understanding walks straight ahead.

17:27-28

27 One who spares words is knowledgeable; one who is cool in spirit has understanding.

28 Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.

Why are we quicker to speak than to listen?

Romans 12:19: Romans 12:19

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

What is the “righteousness that God desires”?

What is the difference between “God’s righteousness” and our “self-righteousness”?

Anger produces sinful acts James 1:26, 3:1-2 and violence James 4:2-3; Matthew 5:21-26

Genesis:49:5-7 Simeon’s anger

21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

Rid yourselves—take off, send away,

How do we do this?

Receive with meekness

What is meekness? Jeremiah 31:31-34

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves^(b) in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

What is the difference between doers and hearers? Romans 2:13

How do we “forget what we are like”? 1 Corinthians 13:12

What is the “Perfect Law”?

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The practice of “pure religion” is described here as the control of speech, acts of charity, and resisting temptation.

“The word “religious” (threskos) appears only here in the New Testament, though its root word (the noun threskia) is found elsewhere in the New Testament. It can refer to both the inner and outer qualities of worship; generally, however (as here), it points to external ceremonies. Paul uses it to refer to the worship of angels (Col. 2:18).” (NIV Application Commentary) . . .

“but a “religion” that results in such behavior has insufficient ability to shape the heart and is, therefore, worthless or futile (*mataios*).” (NIV Application Commentary)

How can this be? Can you identify “religious” activities that, according to this comment and these verses, are futile? How do we “deceive” ourselves?

Speech

Ps. 34:13: Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

“I said, ‘I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence’ ” (Ps. 39:1).

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

How do the words we speak have such strong consequences?

True Religion

Care for orphans and widows and the alien

“He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18).

“Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa. 1:16 - 17)

Keep from being polluted

Although it can be interpreted in many places with different meanings, here James is referring to the “world” as a place of evil and danger.

John 16:33 I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

John 17:14–16 ESV 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual[b] worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect

1 My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

Acts of favoritism--

Leviticus 19:15 -- 15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.

Proverbs 18:5 -- 5 It is not right to be partial to the guilty, or to subvert the innocent in judgment.

Other passages for study (Ex 23.3; Deut 1.17; 16.19; Proverbs 24.23; 28.21)

What are some acts of favoritism might have been occurring? What are some that you have seen or experienced?

How does showing favoritism cast doubt on our faith in Jesus?

2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

"Into your assembly," word is *synagogue*, likely used by the church

Unlike today, poorest people had only one tunic and perhaps not a cloak.

Story about Nigerian official at church.

Why is it so easy to show favoritism?

2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Many people in synagogues sat on benches, with the most prestigious seats on the raised platforms (see note on Mt 23.6); given limited seating, however, in some synagogues the poorest may have access only to the floor. stand . . . Sit. Although the setting in vv. 2–3 is not exclusively legal, it may be of interest (cf. vv. 4, 6) that Jewish legal texts condemn judges who make one litigant stand while another is permitted to sit. These hearings often took place in synagogues (v. 2), which doubled as community centers. NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible.

Roman courts favored the rich; in the second century, this preference was even written into laws, as it also was in many other legal collections such as those from the ancient Near East. Judges were of higher social rank and did not ordinarily trust persons of lower class, who were thought to act from economic self-interest when they brought accusations against persons of higher class. (ibid)

5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

Where in the Bible do you remember Jesus talking about giving honor to the poor?

How have you seen (or experienced) the poor (or "less than") being exploited?

8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11 For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

mercy triumphs over judgment (v. 13):

What does this say to you? How does mercy triumph over judgment?

Faith and Deeds

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

v. 14—Can such faith (without deeds) save them?

NIV Quest Study Bible says: Both are “belief” in one sense of the word. But legitimate faith goes deeper than “right thinking”; it includes “right living.”

How are we saved? What does it mean to believe?

Ephesians 2:8-9: 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Galatians 3:11: 6 So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 7 Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. 8 Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” 9 So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

What did Abraham do when he believed?

10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”[e] 11 Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.”[f] 12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.”[g] 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”[h] 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Clearly, Paul taught that salvation is by grace through faith, which God provides, alone and not by keeping the Law. And James isn’t contradicting him.

Expositor's Commentary: Faith that saves requires faith that proves itself in the deeds it produces. These deeds do not earn merit before God; rather, genuine faith is a concomitant of regeneration and therefore affects the believer's behavior. Faith that does not issue in regenerate actions is superficial and spurious.

Mission in the Church

15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Again, James is referring to the congregation and to the inequities there. In our context it would be referring to the community, as we have many churches and many brothers and sisters.

The propositional statement seems to imply that "it isn't my responsibility. Go take care of yourself. Get someone else to help you."

How do we do this in our society?

- Maybe by saying, "I'll be praying for you," as a cliché rather than a firm commitment?
- Maybe by excusing ourselves from supporting outreach ministries to the poor and needy either locally or overseas by declaring, "I don't have much to give. Someone else can do it."
- Other ideas?

18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Is it an either/or proposition? Can deeds alone save us?

Show you my faith BY my deeds.

Expositor's: He implies that faith cannot be demonstrated apart from action. It is an attitude of the inner person, and it can only be seen as it influences the actions of the one who possesses it.

Demons believe: That the demons are afraid of God is evidence that their belief is a thorough conviction. However, their response is also evidence that their faith is not saving faith.

Is my faith a thorough conviction? Has my life changed because of that believe? Is my whole inner being changing and expressing itself outwardly in a changed life?

Two Examples

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless[d]? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"[e] and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

Faith was made complete—what does that mean to you?

Galatians 5:6: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

v.. 24—considered righteous—this doesn't relate to salvation but to recognition by the church. Our righteousness spiritually comes from God alone

Romans 4: 4 Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. 5 However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

Clearly salvation isn't by works but by faith.

25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?
26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Expositor's: James does not imply that deeds are the actual life principle that gives life to faith, but only that faith and deeds are inseparable.

How do we bridge the gap between judgmentalism and recognizing true faith?

How do we know if we are living true faith?