

Lessons We Can Learn From James

James 1:1

Intro

Of all the books in the New Testament, James's letter is certainly one of the most quoted books of the Bible. It's filled with famous phrases that often make their way into Christian conversation:

"God cannot be tempted."

"Every good and perfect gift comes from above."

"Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."

"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only."

"Even the demons believe—and shudder!"

"Faith apart from works is dead."

"Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

James is a very practical book, filled with exhortations to Christians about the way they should live their lives. It is filled with references and quotations of the teachings of Jesus, and it includes more imperatives per word than any other New Testament book. For these reasons, James has been called "*the Proverbs of the New Testament.*"

James is therefore highly relevant to the Christian life. Unlike many of the other books of the New Testament, James' aim is not to give a theological presentation of the gospel. Rather, he writes his book to those who already believe the gospel, and his goal is to help them live faithfully as doers and followers of Jesus.

Who wrote the book?

Who was James? There are several men in the New Testament by that name. We know that this James was not the apostle James, the brother of John, because he was martyred in A.D. 44, too early for this epistle. The vast majority of scholars agree that the author of James was the half-brother of Jesus. After Jesus' virgin birth, Mary and Joseph were already married and had other children. We read in Matthew 1:25 that Joseph had no union with Mary until she gave birth to a son. Also in Luke 2:7 it says that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. From these passages we understand that Mary had other children with her husband Joseph.

We read in Matthew 13:54-56, "*Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?' they asked. 'Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?'*" In this passage we assume that James was the first born son of Joseph and the second born of Mary.

James was not a follower of Jesus during Jesus' time on earth. Apparently he did not believe in Jesus as Lord until after the resurrection, when the risen Saviour appeared to him. We read in John 7:5, "*For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*" Also 1 Corinthians 15:6-7 we read, "*After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles...*" This James is the half-brother of Jesus who apparently believed in Jesus after His resurrection.

James also became the leader of the church in Jerusalem in the years following the Day of Pentecost (Acts 15:13-29; 21:17-25; Galatians 2:9). He became known as “James the Just” or, “Righteous” because of his well-known commitment to Christ and to godliness.

Bond Servant, Servant of God

James could have bragged by opening the letter, “James, the brother of none other than Jesus Christ. I grew up with Him! I knew Him long before He became famous! Hey guys, I have connections!” But James (1:1) and his brother, Jude (Jude 1:1), both opened their letters by calling themselves bond-servants of Jesus Christ.

Bond-servant means, “Slave,” and refers to those who are the property of their masters. They had no rights. They lived to do their masters’ will. James adds, “*a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*” By mentioning God and Jesus Christ on equal terms, and adding “Lord,” the Old Testament word for God – James affirms the deity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God, He is LORD!

James called himself a bond-servant of God, an appropriate name given the practical, servant-oriented emphasis of the book. Why is this concept of bondservant so important? For one thing as Jesus taught, no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). James before his new birth by grace through faith had been a slave of sin, but now by virtue of his spiritual birth James had become a slave of Christ.

To be a bond servant meant that James laid down his will and life to serve Christ. It meant he had no business of his own, no time of his own and was now devoted to his Master, Christ. He was dependent upon Christ and obedient to Him.

We too, as followers of Christ, are bond servants, laying down our rights, our will and devoting our time and strength to serve Christ as our Master and Lord. It’s like what the Apostle Paul said, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*” (Galatians 2:20).

Being a bondservant of Christ is not drudgery. His “burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). Also, we have this promise: “*Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life*” (Rom. 6:22).

Purpose of James

James wrote this letter to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. These were the Christian Jews who were persecuted during the time of Saul later called Paul. It is believed that James wrote this epistle after the persecution that took place in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 8. It was following Stephen's death in 35 AD.

The purpose of James writing this Epistle was to expose hypocritical practices in believers’ lives and to instruct them the right Christian behaviour.

So what are the lessons we can learn from James’ letter to Christian believers? There are at least what I call **5 Big Themes** in James.

1. Living Out Our Faith

It is not enough to talk the Christian faith we must live it. The key verse of James Epistle is found in James 2:18, *“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.”*

It is genuine faith that will produce good deeds. And James supplies practical advice and counsel on living the true Christian life. We need to make sure that our faith is more than a Christian statement but that it should result more in action. Jesus said, *“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matt. 5:16).

2. Trails and Temptations

Every believer in life will face many trails, afflictions and temptations. No one is exempt because even our Lord Jesus faced them. But James teaches us how we are to face them. We are not to resent trails when they come because God will supply all that we need to face adversity and challenges. God will give us patience and keep us strong in times when we are tested and tried. When we overcome these trails and temptations we will grow in maturity and in strong character.

3. The Law of Love

As believers in Christ we are saved by God’s grace and not by observing the law or the rules. Jesus gave us a direct command, *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”* (Matt. 19:19). We are called by Christ to love and serve those around us. We are to be examples of Christ’s love and to love sacrificially. When we demonstrate love to others we are overcoming our own selfishness.

4. Watch Our Words

Another major theme that James teaches is that we are responsible for the results of our destructive words. We need to think before we speak and allow God to give us wisdom and self-control over our tongue. The wisdom of God helps control our speech and helps in the control of our actions too.

5. Our Attitude About Wealth

Another theme that James deals with is that Christians should not compromise with worldly attitudes about wealth. The reality is that worldly wealth fades away in the end. Believers ought to store up God’s treasures through sincere service. We are all accountable for how we use what we have. We should not hoard our riches, but be generous toward others.

Also we must not show partiality to the wealthy or be prejudiced and snobbish against the poor.

Conclusion

More than any other book in the New Testament, James places the spotlight on the necessity for believers to act in accordance with their faith. How well do your actions mirror the faith that you proclaim?

As we journey in the coming 15 weeks through the book James, we will focus on those areas that he mentioned: your actions during trials, your treatment of those less fortunate, the way you speak and relate to others and the role that money plays in how you live your life.

Allow the Holy Spirit through the book of James to encourage you to do good, and transform your life to emulate the character our Lord Jesus Christ. That’s who James was a bond-servant, to the Lord Jesus Christ. May we too be faithful bond-servants to our Lord.