

STREET SMART Series

Introducing James

Unlike most books of the New Testament, the letter of James is best known for the people who don't like it. It's seen as a scalawag among the obviously Christ-centered letters of Paul and the love-concerned writings of John. People like love. They like Christ. They don't like James.

James is harsh and dogmatic. We feel the sting of his words even today—"Don't be deceived," "You foolish man," "You adulterous people," "Now listen." We find James hard to take for good reason.

Of all the people who do not like James, Martin Luther is probably the most famous. Compared to the other solid New Testament writings, James, he felt, was full of straw—empty, hollow. He virtually relegated the letter to a position of lesser Scripture. He believed that it taught salvation by works. And that would never do for Martin "Salvation-by-Grace-Alone" Luther. Because of Luther's feelings and those of others like him, Protestant Christians have tended to ignore this book.

Yet the early church saw it as a book bearing apostolic authority and, more importantly, as a book that bore God's authority. James spoke a needed and empowered word to the churches. Thus it was included in the New Testament canon alongside Paul and John, carrying equal weight with their writings. Because it has been avoided and because it bears the full force of God's Word, James deserves our special study.

And what does it have to tell us? James is practical. Take problems. James knows nobody's life is perfect. So he doesn't tell us how to live trouble free, but how to live when troubles hit. Do we complain? Or do we use them as an opportunity for growth?

Take words. We all talk. And sometimes we say things we wish we hadn't. James helps us use words more carefully, more constructively. Do they hurt others? Do they advance God's kingdom? Are they truthful? Are they loving?

Take money. It flows around us (despite our protestations concerning tight budgets and taxes). Do we withhold it when others are in need? Do we put more value on worldly things than on the things of God?

Take time. If we have enough money, we know we never have enough time. We do all we can to get the most out of each hour of each day, filling our calendars with activity. But do we miss God's will and perspective in the midst of our schedule making?

James is practical—maybe too practical! So expect this study to be difficult—not because it will be hard to understand but because it will be all too easy to understand.

Who is this fellow James who makes us so uncomfortable? There are several people in the New Testament called James, including two apostles. Though they have never been completely certain, most church scholars have believed that a third man, James the brother of Jesus ([Matthew 13:55](#); [Mark 6:3](#)), wrote this letter. While he probably joined the others in Jesus' family in rejecting Jesus during his

earthly ministry, James certainly started following Jesus after his resurrection. In fact, James soon became the head of the church in Jerusalem.

He probably led the first church council in Jerusalem ([Acts 15](#)), which decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before they could be saved. This is an important factor in assessing James's view of faith and works (which is to be noted in light of [James 2:14-26](#)).

Yet James was aware of the very Jewish make-up of the church in Jerusalem and required Paul to squelch the rumor that he, Paul, was telling Jews to abandon the law of Moses. James himself apparently followed Jewish law closely, enough so that he was known as James the Just. He died a martyr in A.D. 62.

James addresses his letter to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." The twelve tribes could refer to Jewish Christians which through exile, enslavement and trade were spread throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. More likely it refers simply to Christians since the New Testament compares the church to Israel ([Galatians 6:16](#) RSV; [1 Peter 2:9-10](#)). In any case, the letter is not addressed to one specific congregation, as Paul's letters were. It is therefore called a general, or catholic, epistle.

Dependable or Double-minded?

[James 1:1-18](#)

No pain. No gain. Or so the saying goes. Athletes remind themselves of this to get their best possible performance. Sometimes they have to go through grueling training. Without it, there is no improvement. James suggests it is the same for Christians.

1. "Getting in shape is simple. Just eat right and exercise regularly." Why do you find this easier said than done?
2. Read [James 1:1-18](#). Why does it seem strange that we should "consider it pure joy" whenever we "face trials of many kinds" ([James 1:2](#))?
3. How are perseverance and maturity developed in us by enduring trials ([James 1:3-4](#))?
4. What difficult experiences have increased your perseverance and maturity?
5. How might trials expose our need for God's wisdom ([James 1:5](#))?

6. Under pressure, how does the faithful Christian ([James 1:5-6](#)) contrast with the person described in [James 1:6-8](#)?

7. In the context of trials and perseverance, why does James contrast rich and poor Christians ([James 1:9-11](#))?

8. In what ways do you tend to rely on your possessions?

9. How are temptations different from trials ([James 1:2-16](#))?

10. What role does God play when we face trials and when we face temptations ([James 1:2-16](#))?

11. How is God the ultimate example of goodness and dependability ([James 1:16-18](#))?

How is this a source of joy and hope for you?

12. Think of trials or temptations you are currently facing. How can this passage encourage you to depend on God?

13. Take time now to talk to God about your needs. Ask him to help you be like him in his goodness and dependability.