



# James

*James teaches us what it means to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.*

## Introduction

Since the Reformation, the Epistle of James has vexed theologians and baffled scholars. The debates have worked to suppress James's stature within the canon and its influence on the church. Quite simply, James has not gotten the respect that it deserves. Protestant theologians have struggled with the document's emphasis on doing good works and its insistence that faith alone cannot bring salvation—stances that seem to put the letter in conflict with the apostle Paul's teaching about justification by faith, and that led Martin Luther to make his famous evaluation of James as an "epistle of straw."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, scholars argue endlessly over whether the letter was actually written by James the brother of Jesus, as tradition holds.

But such concerns can lead us off the trail in our quest for this short yet rich epistle's meaning for us as disciples of Christ. If we chase these questions too insistently, we risk losing track of the central themes of the letter: friendship with God, the gift of divine wisdom, personal and spiritual integrity, and steadfast devotion even in times of trial. These latter ideas are the ones worth pursuing, as pertinent for the life of faith today as they were when "James"—whoever he was—wrote the letter two millennia ago. You can read about the old debates in the text boxes in this handout. However, most of our attention will be focused on the topics of central concern to the insightful author of this undervalued epistle.

## Choosing Roads— and Friends—Wisely

Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and



If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (Jas. 2:15–17)

there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt. 7:13–14). Jesus was urging his hearers to follow the way of devotion to God rather than the way of devotion to the values and pleasures of the world.

James, too, supposes that we must choose between these two ways of life. Indeed, the overarching purpose of the Letter of James is to help readers understand the full significance of the choices that lie before them and make the right one. Readers must choose not just once but again and again, for authentic and meaningful conversion is never a one-time event. *Repeatedly* we must decide to find the source and purpose of our life in God rather than in the world.

James characterizes life lived in and for God as *friendship with God*. The friend of God is one who trusts in God as the giver of life, wisdom, and blessing, even when circumstances seem to contradict that view. Abraham was a true friend of God because of his unflinching devotion even when severely tested (2:23). By contrast, the way of life that James rejects—"friendship with the world"—is governed by desire for worldly benefits, and invests hope of salvation in material possessions and status. The craving for such worldly offerings has as its outcome, not salvation, but envy, selfish ambition, and

## WHO WROTE JAMES?

The author introduces himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas. 1:1). Several persons by the name of “James” are mentioned in the New Testament but scholars agree that it is “James the Lord’s brother” who is meant (for other references to this James, see Mark 6:3; Matt. 13:55; Acts 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). Yet some scholars dispute the authenticity of the attribution. They think it is improbable that a first-century Palestinian Jew (who probably spoke Aramaic as his first language) wrote a document showing the polished Greek and the influence from ancient rhetorical practice that are evident in the letter. For this and other reasons they conclude that the document was actually written later and *ascribed* to James, perhaps to give it more authority.

Other scholars counter that by the first century, Palestine had been subject to heavy influence from Greek and Roman cultures. Therefore a native Jew could feasibly have acquired the Greek literary and linguistic skills to produce this epistle. Further, the document shows thematic connections to the teachings of Jesus (especially as presented in Matthew), yet lacks developed doctrine about the person and work of Christ. This combination of traits suggests that the document was written early in the life of the church, near to when Jesus walked upon the earth and before theologians had developed elaborate Christologies.

Does it really matter who wrote the letter? Its worth for those seeking a closer walk with God is tremendous, whoever its author may have been.

favoritism toward the rich and powerful. At its most uncontrolled such desire leads to war and destruction (1:14–15; 3:16; 4:1–3).

In 4:4 James contrasts the two ways of life before us in shockingly harsh terms: “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” The metaphor of “adultery” derives from the Old Testament prophets, who used it to rebuke Israel for infidelity to God. Like the prophets, James is

reprimanding not outsiders but those who *profess* devotion to God yet *act* in ways contrary to a life of faith. Such inconsistency of word and deed marks a person (or an entire community) as duplicitous, or “double-minded.” Double-minded people are “unstable in every way” (1:7). Why? *Because they don’t know what they really want.* They are torn between the desire for God and the desire for the world. Their own psyches become split, with one part doing whatever it wills and the other part—the part that knows better—looking the other way.

James invites his readers (including you) to be part of a community of believers spread far and wide who live as the restored people of God (the “twelve tribes”: see 1:1). As members of this fellowship you will have to choose, again and again, to renounce double-mindedness and find the source and meaning of your life in God. Meanwhile, the world will continue to tempt you with objects of desire that promise blessing or escape from affliction and that demand your time, hope, and money. If you accept James’s invitation, you will have to acknowledge again and again that investing your trust in such transitory objects means spiritual death (1:11). You will have to believe with undivided hearts that only God can bestow life (1:18).

## A Perfect Life

“No one is perfect.” We learn that saying when we are children. Yet, does not Jesus call us to “be perfect,” even as God is perfect (Matt. 5:48)? So also James begins his epistle with a call to perfection:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect [Greek: “perfect result”], so that you may be mature [Greek: “perfect”] and complete [Greek: “whole”], lacking in nothing. (Jas. 1:2–4)

James assumes that we will all face afflictions that will try our faith in God’s goodness. But *how* will we face them? That is the question. James urges us to do so with joy—not because we are masochists and love pain but because we trust that God will enable us to persevere even in adversity. The next verse reads, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (1:5). Divine wisdom—the wisdom to see our lives in a godly way, and to order our priorities accordingly—is what



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enables us to live faithfully and joyfully even through sorrow and pain. The one who prays for this wisdom is already on the way to “perfection.”

Thereafter James proceeds to sketch out the shape of the “perfect” life—the life lived in friendship with God. He aims to win readers over to this life. Many of the important ideas mentioned briefly in the first chapter will be taken up at greater length later in the epistle, including:

- Perseverance in trial makes one perfect and triumphs over evil.
- God gives wisdom to those who seek it with whole hearts.
- God’s wisdom, found especially in the Word, gives life to God’s people and makes them perfect in God’s sight.<sup>2</sup>
- God’s wisdom is practical, enabling its recipients to persevere in trial, do works of love, and exhibit unity of words and deeds.
- Those whose chief allegiance is *not* to God or God’s Word put their trust in a perishing world and will face God’s judgment for lives characterized by arrogance and envy.
- Many think that it is God who tempts them with worldly goods, pleasures, and acclaim, whereas in truth they are led astray by their own raging desires.
- The double-mindedness of such persons hinders their love of neighbor and leads them to practice slander and other misuses of speech.

These ideas and the style in which they are presented would have been familiar to James’s first-century readers, who were likely Christians who had converted from Judaism. For example, the condemnations of the rich in chapter 5 reflect the biblical tradition of the prophets as well as the rhetorical pattern of the diatribe, a style cur-

rent in James’s day. Furthermore, some of these accusations were conditioned by conventional teachings about the usual consequences of *envy* and *arrogance*. Because we are not as familiar with such traditions as James’s readers would have been, his rhetoric might seem unduly harsh to us. Did he think that his own readers were guilty of the sins he condemned? Perhaps he supposed that some readers would, indeed, see themselves in his condemnations and so repent—and that others would be moved to examine their own consciences, do works of love and faithfulness, and renew their own friendship with God.

And you? How will you respond?

## True Religion

James, more than any other writer in the New Testament, insists that our faith must *show itself*—not in empty expressions of piety, but in acts of love and justice toward the sorts of people addressed by Jesus in his ministry—people not highly regarded by the socially, economically, and spiritually powerful. This focus on kindness and justice made James a favored book of the great slave-turned-abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Douglass often quoted James in his speeches. Sometimes Douglass was accused of undermining religion because he condemned southern preachers for their support of slavery. He turned to James to defend his own vision of true religion, as in this moving passage from a speech given to a cheering crowd at a church in London in 1846:

I love the religion of our blessed Saviour. I love that religion that comes from above, in the “wisdom of God, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” I love the religion that sends its votaries to bind up the wounds of him that has fallen among thieves. I love that religion that makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction. I love that religion that is based upon the glorious principle, of love to God and love to man; which makes its followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by. If you demand liberty to yourself, it says, grant it to your neighbours. If you claim a right to think for yourself, it says, allow your neighbours the same right. If you claim to act for yourselves, it says, allow your neighbours the same right. It is because I love this religion that I hate the slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in the southern states

## WAS JAMES REACTING TO PAUL?

The age-old dispute about the relationship between the author of James and the apostle Paul hinges on observations about James 2:14–26. When the author of James wrote that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24), was he deliberately rejecting Paul’s argument that a person “is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:28)? And when James presented Abraham as justified by works for his offering up of Isaac (Jas. 2:21–24), was he countering Paul’s treatment of this patriarch as the paragon of faith-based salvation (Rom. 4:16–25)? The arguments and terminology seem close enough to suppose that James was reacting to Paul or vice versa, but the relationship between these two writers may have been more complicated than it first appears. For example, one may have been responding to a second- or third-hand version of the other’s teaching. In any case, they use their shared terms (especially “faith” and “works”) and the example of Abraham in different ways, which complicates any effort to compare their remarks.

Whether or not he knew Paul’s teachings, James shaped his argument about the need to demonstrate one’s faith around his *own* distinctive concerns—especially his concern that one’s speech always be consistent with one’s actions. For James, a person professing devotion to God but not acting upon it lives a duplicitous (“double-minded”) life and will fall under God’s judgment.

of America. It is because I regard the one as good, and pure, and holy, that I cannot but regard the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. Loving the one I must hate the other, holding to the one I must reject the other, and I, therefore, proclaim myself an infidel to the slave-holding religion of America.<sup>3</sup>

You may have noticed the allusion to James 3:17 at the outset of the passage. Note also how Douglass refers to

James’s definition of true religion: true religion fosters care of orphans and widows (James 1:27). Douglass also alludes here to Jesus’ teachings, such as Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) and his insistence that one must choose between two masters (Matt. 6:24). Douglass saw the deep compatibility of James’s and Jesus’ instruction, and insisted that we must conform our religion to that instruction, even if it costs us dearly. Douglass achieved great fame but as a consequence of his activism the law pursued him for much of his life.

Douglass did not read his New Testament in the abstract, and neither should we. Ask yourself: which religion do you love? Not which church do you attend, but which religion do you serve in your heart of hearts? Does it revere the gods of this world, the gods of status and consumerism and rampant desire for more of everything? Or is it a religion that serves the law of liberty summarized by Jesus’ saying “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (James 1:25; 2:8, 12)? Is it a religion that fosters impartiality toward all, even those outside society’s favored and privileged circle? Does it bring liberty to those held captive by bonds of prejudice and injustice? You are free to choose which sort of religion you will serve. To make no choice at all is to choose by default, for when it comes to friendship with God neutrality is not an option. But those who choose rightly will reap a harvest of righteousness (3:18).

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Preface to Luther’s German Bible of 1522. Interestingly, later editions omitted this expression.
2. For James, “the Word” would have been Torah, or what Christians call the Old Testament, especially as summarized in the command to love God and one’s neighbor.
3. This passage from Douglass’s speech “American Slavery, American Religion, and the Free Church of Scotland” is quoted from Margaret P. Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass, Darkness, and the Epistle of James* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 36–37.