

Introduction to the Book of James

Sermon 1 in the James Series

James 1:1

Today we begin a series in the Book of James.

In this series we will feel a great deal of tension.

It is written in a Christian as an exhortation to Christians.

However, James does not pull any punches – and he exhorts us to an obedience – that if we are serious in our self-examination – we know we can never attain in this life.

That troubles many.

Historically, it has troubled many.

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A. Luther and the Book of James

Alpha Omega Ministries – James Swan

One the most popular quotations from Luther is the infamous "epistle of straw" remark, directed at the canonicity of the book of James. It really is amazing how frequently this citation appears.

Six points – I'll mention two of them

This quote only appears in Luther's original 1522 Preface to the New Testament. After 1522, all the editions of Luther's Bible dropped the "epistle of straw" comment, along with the entire paragraph that placed value judgments on particular biblical books (Hebrews). It was Luther himself who edited these comments out. For anyone to continue to cite Luther's "epistle of straw" comment against him is to do him an injustice. He saw fit to retract the comment. Subsequent citations of this quote should bear this in mind.

It is true Luther had a contextual problem with the content on James. He saw a contradiction between Paul and James on faith and works. Some conclude Luther missed the harmonization between these two Biblical writers, but this isn't true

*either. Luther's great biographer **Roland Bainton** pointed out, " 'Faith,' he wrote, 'is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. **We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith** ' " [Here I Stand, 259].*

In The Disputation Concerning Justification, Luther answered this spurious proposition:

Major Premise: Faith without works justifies,

Minor Premise: Faith without works is dead [Jas. 2:17, 26].

Therefore, dead faith justifies.:

...We say that justification is effective without works, not that faith is without works. For that faith which lacks fruit is not an efficacious but a feigned faith. ... It is one thing that faith justifies without works; it is another thing that faith exists without works. [LW 34: 175-176].

And that is the type of harmonization that I will follow throughout this exposition.

B. Introductory Observations

1. We believe the Book of James IS inspired and is part of the Word of God.
2. We do not believe that James could be presenting “another gospel” since it is inspired.
3. James is practical and pastoral more than theological and technical.
We can consider it a NT wisdom Book – similar in many aspects to the Book of Proverbs in the OT.

Paul is the great theologian of the church.

James is a great pastor in the church – and his exhortations are not at odds with Paul – as we will see – but they are the other side of the coin.

Faith will always produce fruit – 30 – 60 – 100 fold – Jesus and Paul say the same.

So faith w/o works is dead – it is not real faith at all – which is living.

Works without faith is legalism and heresy, and trying to win favor with God by works/righteousness IS NOT what James teaches at all.

We are to be Christ-like.
Our hope is in what Christ has done for us.

4. Christians need the gospel – where is the gospel in James?

It is there – but not in an overt and open way.
But James IS NOT the only Book in the Bible
And James SHOULD NOT be read in a vacuum.

We do James no justice as we import the comfort of the gospel into these passages which tell us what we should do – even though we know we are fully incapable of doing them.

Instead of lying under a load of condemnation
We should flee to Christ, remember the imputation of his righteousness and rest in the truth of HIS FULFILLING all righteousness on our behalf.

5. James is not a legal book and too much is made of 2nd Temple Judaism.

He is Jewish.

We will find ideas from a Palestinian Jewish perspective – but he also presents ideas from a Hellenistic Jewish perspective.

This should not surprise us – for the James who writes this book was a pastor to those who called Jerusalem home – as long as Hellenistic Jews from all over the known world who moved to Jerusalem.

It's not a legal book. Nowhere does he try to bind Jewish ceremonial laws upon us – in fact – we will see it is just the opposite.

I. The Author

A. His Identity

1. Various theories

James the Apostle – Peter, James and John.

Almost certainly not true – he died far too early as a martyr.

Another Apostle -- James the Son of Alphaeus – James the Less.

Again – we know practically nothing of this apostle.

There is no credible church tradition to tie him to the authorship.

An unknown James

While this is possible – it is certain that his readers knew his identity.

2. The Almost Universally Accepted View

-- James the Just.

-- The son of Joseph and Mary.

-- Nick-named “Old Camel Knees” because of the callouses built up on his knees from the amount of time that he spent in prayer.

3. His self-description 1:1

James – his audience obviously knew him.

A bondservant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ

Bondservant a favorite description Paul uses of himself.
OF GOD – AND – the Lord Jesus Christ

This is unusual – but it is very helpful.

While it’s not overtly Trinitarian – it certainly shows that James considered his half-brother to be the Messiah – the Lord – and we can even see Jesus being put on the same level as God the Father – which for a devout Jew – is an amazing revelation – especially for your own half-brother.

II. His Audience 1:1

Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion

To a primarily Jewish audience.

James considered himself a minister primarily to the Jewish people just as Paul was primarily a minister to the Gentiles.

My belief --

A pastoral letter to exhort and encourage those especially who were once a part of the Jerusalem congregation, but in God's providence had been scattered – beginning with the martyrdom of Stephen.

James was a pastor in a church that wasn't composed solely of Palestinian Jews – but had a large Hellenistic Jewish population – as we saw in Acts 6 – and in this letter James shows that he understands Greek and the Greek mindset very well – although he himself was raised in Galilee.

III. What We Know about Him from other Scriptures

A. A Brother of the Lord

Matthew 12:46-49; 13:55;

John 2:11-12; 7:1-5

For even his brothers (including James) did not believe.

B. His Conversion -- **1 Cor. 15:3-8**

C. His Ministry

Acts 12:17

Acts 15:13

Acts 21:18

D. His Apparent Controversy with Paul

Gal. 1:19

Gal. 2:9-10 – remember the poor – a reoccurring theme in James.

Gal. 2:11-21 – men FROM James

IV. A Few Observations from the Book of James itself

A. James 2:20-24

We will go over this in detail – but rest assured, James IS NOT writing against what Paul says of Abraham in Romans 4. It is highly unlikely that James had read the Epistle of Romans – as it is likely Romans was written AFTER the Book of James.

James is stating a truth that Paul himself believed deeply.

If there IS a particular error that James has in mind, it is likely a perversion of what Paul taught.

Romans 3:8; 6:1

We should preach a gospel of God's grace that is so free and so apart from any hint that we can make ourselves right with God by works that some MIGHT misunderstand us and think we are antinomians.

But, we should have standards and a desire to serve God that is so strong – that our life exhibits fruit – and if it doesn't – how can we say the tree is even alive.

Every Christian bears fruit – or he is no Christian at all.

Some 30 – 60- 100 fold

There is no such thing as a ZERO FOLD Christian.

Every Christian has a changed heart – or his heart has never been changed at all.

Maybe Paul best summarizes his agreement with James in **Philippians 2:12-13.**

B. 3:1 – Humility and a Pastoral Heart

Brethren

Be not many teachers

C. A book of Exhortation and Wisdom

Conclusion: James appears to be a peacemaker. That is a tremendous quality in a leader. To have strong and firm convictions, yet at the same time – listen to all sides and try to bring the truth home to bear on any controversy.

Not just to debate a point to win an argument – but to truly care for the person with which you are dealing.

And James is certainly a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.
A humble man and a true pastor.

In fact, against pride or legalism, he exhibits just the opposite in this very pastoral and practical book.

It's one that is needed in our day of easy believism.

It is one that needs to be correctly understood in our day which also holds to a very man-centered/works-righteousness form of salvation.

