

# James: A Chapter-by-Chapter Study

## Introduction

The author identifies himself as James in the opening sentence of the book but does not elaborate beyond his association with Jesus. The apostle James was martyred in 44 AD which would leave only the brother of Jesus with enough stature to warrant a letter that the churches would respect and a book in the New Testament. Most scholars date this book to the late 50's to early 60's AD, but there is some debate about whether it could have been written as early as the late 40's AD or not.

James, the brother of Jesus, is mentioned in both Matthew (13:55) and John (7:2-5) and did not believe the wild claims his older brother made. It was only after Jesus' resurrection that James became a follower and a Christian. James is mentioned prominently throughout the New Testament by Paul and Peter. He is considered a pillar of the early church.

This letter opens with the intended recipients being the scattered twelve tribes. Most take this to mean that it is for the Jewish converts to Christianity, but some scholars make the argument that the word "scattered" could mean converts everywhere regardless of race or beliefs.

The book of James is often considered as one of the defining descriptions of a Christian life and even Christian doctrine. It is filled with tidbits of wisdom for dealing with everyday life.

## Chapter 1

### V1

The first verse is the identification of the author and a standard greeting to the recipients of the letter. After this, James wastes no time in addressing the attitude of his audience.

Although the opening line seems simple enough, there is much to be taken from it. As the brother of Jesus, James could have declared this and received immediate recognition. Instead, he humbled himself as one of the many Christians who follow Jesus. James is setting the example, not making demands.

### V2-4

James carefully chooses his words in this passage. The audience is already being persecuted simply for being Christian, so facing trials is nothing new. The original Greek that James uses here is to *greet as pure joy*, the same root word for his greeting to the reader in verse 1. They are to greet persecution the same way he greets them.

James also uses the Greek word *hypomone* for the word patience or endurance in verse 3. This is an active type of patience, not just waiting for something to happen. This would ask a sailor lost at sea to keep treading water until help arrives, to persist through the turmoil.

James is careful to make sure that the reader knows that faith is tested by trials, not created by trials. Trials occur so that our faith can be displayed to others and to ourselves. James also states that unlike faith, patience is produced by trials as long as it is accompanied by faith.

James also ensures that the reader realizes that patience is a requirement for being Christian. If patience doesn't outlast the temptation, no matter how much patience one has, it is useless. Patience is what allows a person to persist through persecution.

## **V5-8**

*When do you find yourself needing wisdom the most? In times of ease or times of distress?*

Some may see this passage as James changing the subject from the previous verses, but wisdom is necessary to know how to deal with persecution. James ensures the reader that God will grant wisdom to those that ask. Wisdom is used to discern whether to persevere during a trial or to overcome a trial. James also adds the phrase “without reproach” (NKJV/NASB) so that his audience knows that they can continuously and repeatedly ask God for wisdom without fear of “overburdening” God with requests. However, James makes one caveat to requests for wisdom: faith. In order to receive wisdom, one must trust that God will provide wisdom.

## **V9-11**

James makes his argument for greeting trials with this passage. Just as someone who is poor, homeless, or ill rejoices when something good happens to them, so should people who are wealthy, healthy, and taken care of rejoice when something bad happens to them. There should be no difference in the way Christians praise God during times of trial or blessing. The message behind this statement is that this life is temporary and fleeting. If someone is blessed, thank God that they are blessed. If someone is going through a trial, thank God that this trial is not eternal.

## **V12-15**

James adds to the Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-12) in verse 12. Not succumbing to temptation will reap rewards in Heaven. God does not tempt us, but He allows us to be tempted to prove to ourselves we are stronger with God and so that God can reward us for our faithfulness.

## **V16-18**

Satan is out to not only tempt us, but to deceive us in any way possible. Just as he did with Eve, Satan will make temptation appealing and desirable. But this is the sinful nature of our hearts speaking. All good things are provided by God. God’s goodness is unwavering, constant, and reliable.

*What does James mean when he refers to himself and his readers as “first fruits” (verse 18).*

There is some debate concerning the verbiage used here, but most scholars believe that James was referring to the first generation of Christians. Just as Deuteronomy 26:1-4 states that the Israelites produced a harvest sacrifice to God upon entering the Promised Land for the first time, the first generation of Christians would be used to bless the Gentiles and allow the Christian faith to spread to all people, not just those from a Jewish background.

## **V19-25**

It is often noted that listening is a great example of patience. Teaching oneself to listen has the added benefit of teaching patience. By listening and being patient, anger is more controllable. Patience, wisdom, and listening are attributes of God.

James also tells the reader to replace sin and evil with the Word of God. Accepting the Word with a teachable heart can defeat the sinful nature of oneself. But James also warns that simply reading and listening to the Word is not enough. One must act on the instructions found in those teachings. Many people listen to teachers, but in this era in particular, someone who listened to a teacher, followed them

and tried to live their life according to that teacher's example was then called a disciple. Jesus wants disciples. Not just students. James offers another blessing at the end of this passage to those that become disciples and live their lives according to the teachings of Jesus.

### **V26-27**

*Why would restricting the words from one's mouth be important to James and to Christians?*

The previous passage shows that listening leads to patience and shows a sense of self-sacrifice on behalf of the listener. But James adds onto that thought in these verses by adding hypocrisy to the list of sins that need to be addressed. Speaking without actions or worse, judging while not practicing what one teaches is one of the worst offenses to God. This is the opposite of servitude. Listening to the Word and then acting upon the instructions to serve others shows where one's heart truly lies.

## **Chapter 2**

### **V1-7**

James does not mince words in the opening of chapter 2. Jesus did not discriminate, neither should Christians. It is easy to judge a person based on outward appearances, which is what James uses for examples of discrimination. Favoring a wealthy person over a beggar is exactly the kind of judgement that a Christian should shun.

Verses 5-7 show how contrary this is not only to the heart of God, but to our own benefit. Rarely does showing favoritism to a rich person pay off to anyone but the rich. But being kind to the poor gains us friendship and gratitude. Jesus lived His life according to this very principal. His closest friends were the poorest, least educated, or even most despised people of Jerusalem and the surrounding region.

### **V8-13**

*Why is showing favoritism to some people considered a sin?*

James continues with his viewpoints on being judgmental in this passage. Showing partiality is a sin against God. The message of the Word of God at its very core is to love God and love *all* others with all your heart. Showing love to only some and not to all means that God is not first in your life. Showing favoritism shows a self-serving heart.

James reiterates his statement that judgement is a sin by reminding his readers that there is no distinction between sins. All sin is disobedience of God; therefore, all sin is evil. James closes this passage by proclaiming that mercy is greater than judgment and that judgment contains no mercy.

### **V14-19**

This passage is often a source of confusion to non-Christians and new Christians alike. The Apostle Paul states in Ephesians 2:9 that Christians are not saved by works but by faith. These two passages seem to contradict each other. However, James is not saying that one's actions do anything for one's salvation. Instead, he's saying that actions can be used as a barometer of faith. Trying to get into Heaven by "being good" does nothing. In this case, our heart is in ourselves and not God. But if we truly love God and follow the teachings of Jesus out of our desire to serve Him, then our actions can show God's love to other people. It is entirely possible for two different people to perform the same acts of kindness and still have only one of them be a Christian. It's the motivation behind the actions that count. James reminds us that our faith without actions is the same as actions without faith.

## **V20-26**

James aims this passage directly at his Jewish readers by using Abraham as an example of faith paired with works. Abraham had faith in God that He would do right by His servant. But Abraham demonstrated that faith by acting on the commands of God. As Christians, we may not be able to show our faith to anyone. But we can demonstrate our faith by our actions. Saying we have faith means nothing unless we live our life by that faith as Jesus did.

James cleverly uses another example from the Old Testament to bring the teachings of this chapter full circle. The story of Rahab appears in Joshua and tells how a gentile prostitute demonstrated her faith in the Hebrew God by helping the Jewish spies sent into her city. The Jewish readers would take great pride in seeing Abraham as an example of great faith, but their pride was rebuked when they may have realized that they could be judgmental to a gentile prostitute. James put a female gentile prostitute on the same level of faith as the Jewish patriarch.

## **Chapter 3**

### **V1**

James produces some extremely sobering perspectives in this first sentence of the chapter. A person's ego may desire to be a leader for the respect, prestige, or power that comes with leadership, but few people want the responsibility. Just as there are great responsibilities that come with great power, there are great consequences for abuse or even failure to use that power. It has often been noted in the military that everyone wants a medal, but no one wants to do what it takes to get a medal. James is reiterating that same thought here. A pastor or teacher who leads their students astray is not only responsible for his soul, but all his followers, as well.

### **V2-12**

Although this passage can be applied to anyone, the beginning notes that this continues from verse 1, meaning that this is directed at people in leadership positions of the early church. To "stumble in word" means to have an uncontrollable tongue. Teachers and authority figures have a platform where their voice can be heard above others. It is easy to let ego and power take over and use that platform for personal gain. Being a humble teacher and speaking only truth takes practice and self-control.

James goes on to compare how one of the smallest parts of the human body that can have so much influence is similar to a spark that precedes a fire, a bit in a horse's mouth, or a rudder that steers a ship. A spark must be controlled, or it can lead to a wildfire with devastating results. A ship is a large object but can be aimed in any direction with the mere turn of a wheel. Small things can have large impacts.

James is reminding the reader that the tongue is the output of the brain. What a person is thinking can be discovered by listening to that person. Where a person's heart truly lies can be revealed by the words of the mouth. If someone is filled with hate and rage, their mouth will reflect that. Practicing self-control, anyone can learn to remove evil thoughts from their brain and words from their tongue and replace them with words of love and affirmation. This type of self-control does not happen overnight. Allowing God's Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts and tongues is what sets Christians apart from the rest of the world.

### **V13-18**

James continues his address to teachers and leaders by telling them that not only do they have to be in control of their words, but they need to be in control of their conduct in life. The wisdom found in the teachings of Christ is that loving God and loving others is the meaning of life. This wisdom should resonate with the actions of all Christians, but especially teachers of God's Word. A self-seeking heart is the opposite of a loving, sacrificial heart. Someone living their life for themselves is filled with evil whether they realize it or not. A self-serving heart is short sighted and ignores the eternity that lies beyond this earthly existence.

James lists the characteristics of this Godly wisdom as pure, peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, merciful, impartial, and without hypocrisy. These traits should be visible in all Christians lives, but teachers and leaders should be mature enough in their Christianity that this wisdom is on full display.

## **Chapter 4**

### **V1-3**

James opens this chapter with not only an accurate depiction of the world, but also a reality that is unfortunately found in many churches. Those that seek God don't have the problems that come from being selfish. Even though many will ask God for things, their heart must be in the right place if God is to answer. Is what we're asking for because of our desire to help others or our desire to help ourselves?

James also points out the futility of seeking to satisfy ourselves with earthly pleasures. Whatever we have or obtain, it will never be enough to truly satisfy.

### **V4-10**

James rebukes his audience in an Old Testament fashion in verse 4 recalling phrases from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. Man's selfish desires contradict what God wants from us. These same desires are what led to the downfall of Israel and Judah in the aforementioned Old Testament books. God is jealous of our attention and our own desires can squelch the Holy Spirit within us if we let it.

It should be noted that some translations open verse 4 by addressing adulteresses *and* adulterers, but James had a dual meaning by simply using the feminine term. One, during this era addressing an audience of men and using the feminine pronouns would be seen as a rebuke and even an insult. Two, this would also call back to the Old Testament terms where God speaks to His chosen people as His bride and He the groom.

Verse 6-10 present the solution to our selfish nature. God gives us grace. The same Holy Spirit that we often seek to ignore in favor of our own lusts can offer us the patience and grace to overcome our temptations and selfishness. Our submission to God and resistance to temptation is how we as individuals can begin to heal our own little parts of the world. Pride is often the biggest obstacle in completely submitting to God.

### **V11-12**

Submission to God means allowing God to be the judge of ourselves and each other. By judging others, we supplant God and put ourselves in His rightful position. Speaking ill of someone, in this case, gossiping behind their back in the original Greek, not only puts us in God's place, but also doesn't directly confront the person being gossiped about. This is a two-fold sin.

### **V13-17**

This passage is another that is often taken out of context. James does not intend for us to not plan ahead or be wise with our money or belongings. What is intended is to live like we are in charge of our own fate. We should not save up simply to hoard what we have or earn. We should not live like whatever we have will go with us to the afterlife. We should not live like there are no eternal consequences for our actions. Everything that we do, earn, or own should be treated as a gift from God.

James closes this chapter with a harsh reminder of the responsibility of those that know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. If we know that there is good to be done and we do not do it, this is the same as doing evil. With great power comes great responsibility. Knowing Jesus is a great power.

## **Chapter 5**

### **V1-6**

*Why would James call out the wealthy in this passage?*

James is not saying that being wealthy is a sin. James is saying that those who have much to lose will often turn their backs on Jesus and their own eternity to live comfortably in the now. This would be even more true in the era of James' letter when Christians were being fatally persecuted. Being rich could sometimes buy a way out of persecution from Rome.

It is a common saying that "money is the root of all evil." This has proven to be true throughout the centuries. Although money isn't the only distraction from God, it is the most common.

James is more directly speaking to those that have put their wealth not only before God, but their fellow man. The way they live their lives here will reflect poorly on them for eternity. The comforts of the world, while desirable, are temporary. Eternity is a long time to pay for that comfort. Especially comfort that is obtained at the expense of others.

The phrasing used in verse 4 is intentionally worded. James calls God the Lord of Hosts (NKJ) or Lord of Armies (NASB). This speaks to a God that is ready to do war against evil.

### **V7-11**

James' speech to the greedy comes to an end with a reminder to the persecuted Christians to be patient. The comforts of this world may elude them, but the peace and comfort of eternity is their reward. The metaphor of a farmer waiting for harvest is fitting as the farmer doesn't know the exact date of the harvest or even how plentiful it will be. But a farmer works steadfastly in the faith that a harvest will happen.

James continues his address to Christians by reminding them that times of persecution can often cause internal strife. Not only are we to be kind to those that persecute us, but we should be kind to those that stand with us! Do not take out frustrations on those that are going through the frustration with you.

James calls out to the Jewish converts once again by invoking the name of Job. But even if God doesn't restore your earthly wealth like He did Jobs, the eternal reward is far superior.

## **V12**

James uses this verse to reiterate a teaching from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It was not uncommon for someone to say they would do something and then not do it. Oaths or promises were required for a true statement to be made. Both Jesus and James are reminding Christians that they need all their words to be true, not just their bound oaths. Actions of the heart need to be reflected in the words of the mouth.

## **V13-18**

James begins this passage by identifying ways for Christians to show kindness to each other as opposed to being frustrated with each other (v9). Walk through life with each other; enjoy the good times and commiserate in the bad times.

*What does it mean to be anointed with oil and how does it help the sick?*

Verse 14 introduces an interesting and often debated concept in the modern church. The anointing of oil has different meanings to different denominations, churches, and people. Most scholars believe that understanding the context of what is being said will offer more clarity. During this era, oil was used as a means to cure serious diseases. Egyptians used it in attempts to cure the plague. Later, Europeans used oil as a successful way of curing dropsy. What James is telling the Christians of his time to do is to seek medical treatment. Because of this verse, some churches and denominations still perform a ritualistic anointing with oil as a symbol of faith that God will provide a cure for their ailment.

Verse 15 offers even more debate when added to verse 14. There is no clear definition of whether James is talking of physical illness being healed or if he is writing about eternal forgiveness from our illness of sin, but most scholars believe that he is writing of the latter.

James reminds Christians to not only confess our sin to God, but to confess it to one another. This passage is the source of the concept of having accountability partners. Christians that hold each other accountable are less likely to act on temptation. There is strength in numbers.

James again invokes the name of a well-recognized Jew for his audience and reminds them that Elijah relied upon prayer. Elijah sought after God with his whole heart and his prayers were answered in such a way that even the weather did his bidding!

## **V19-20**

James closes his letter with the calling for all Christians to watch out for one another. The Gospel should be shared with everyone, but we should also continuously seek strength from God and each other so that no one goes astray. We should seek Jesus with all our hearts, all the days of our lives.

## **References**

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/james/>

[https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik\\_david/study-guide/james/james-1.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/james/james-1.cfm)