

Sunday Morning Message

October 10, 2021

Faith in Action

Introduction to the General Epistle of James

Text – James 2:18 - 24

Congregational Reading – James 2:18 – 20

Introduction to the Letter

Key Verse

"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:20)

Introduction

1. The Writing

John Calvin is famous for saying, "Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone". I am not in agreement with John Calvin on some Scriptural issues, but I agree with that statement, and I believe it is the main idea contained in this letter of James. *The Epistle of James* is a very practical letter containing so many nuggets of truth that would prove to be very instructional and beneficial to the early Jewish believers shortly after the time of Pentecost, and also to all other believers, Jew or Gentile, since the time it was written, which was likely very early in the transitional time of the first century, probably before the Jerusalem Council (AD 49) referred to in Acts 15. The Letter refers to the "assembly" in James 2:2, which is the Greek word συναγωγή (*synagōgē*), meaning that at this time the early church was still assembling in synagogues, or at least referring to their assembly as a synagogue. The word "church" (ἐκκλησίας from ἐκκλησία – *ekklēsia*) is also used in this epistle (5:14). *James* was probably the earliest New Testament writing.

James is a Jewish letter, written initially to Jewish believers, which seems to indicate that it was written during what has been referred to as "The Pentecostal Period," before the time that Gentiles were included in the church. It may have been specifically written to people like the many Jewish converts on the Day of Pentecost that were living in various parts of the Roman Empire (Acts 2:8 – 11).

"(7) And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? (8) And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? (9) Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, (10) Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, (11)

Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God." (Acts 2:7-11 KJV).

Shortly after Pentecost many Jewish believers were "scattered abroad" (Acts 8:4; James 1:1) because of the persecution in Jerusalem.

"(1) And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. ... (4) Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." (Acts 8:1, 4)

Dispersed Jews faced unique problems: they were persecuted by Gentiles because they were Jews, and they were also persecuted by Jews because they were Christians. James will introduce this letter by encouraging them through their trials.

Key Verses:

There are many great verses in this epistle including: 1:5; 1:25; 2:19; 2:20; 3:6; 4:14; 5:16

2. The Writer

There has been much discussion through the years as to who wrote this epistle. He identifies himself as James (1:1), but which James is he? There are several men in the Bible with the name James. There is James the brother of John and son of Zebedee (Mark 3:17). He is not a likely choice as he was martyred in 44 AD by Herod (Acts 12:2). There is also James the less (Mark 15:40); and James, the brother of Judas (Luke 6:16).

The writer to James is most assuredly James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3).

"(55) Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?" (Matthew 13:55)

"(3) Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him." (Mark 6:3)

James was not a believer prior to the resurrection (John 7:1 - 5). Phillips states this regarding the unbelief of James while the Lord was still alive:

James apparently rejected the Lord's messianic claims. No doubt, he felt keenly the hostility of his Nazarene neighbors toward Jesus after the incident when the Lord declared boldly who He was (Luke 4:16–30). James seems to have become alarmed at the growing hostility of the Pharisees toward the Lord's claims. Rumors were being

circulated that Jesus was insane. The authorities accused Him of being in league with Beelzebub (Matt. 12:23). So the Lord's brothers, accompanied by Mary, sought to interfere in His work and bring Him back home out of harm's way (Mark 3:31; Matt. 12:46; Luke 8:19). The Lord's only response was to declare that those who responded to His message were more truly His mother and His brethren than those who were His by natural ties (Mark 3:34; Matt. 12:49).

As time passed, the hostility of James and the other brothers of the Lord seemed to grow. Six months before His death they sneered at Him and offered Him some advice, which He rejected (John 7:2–5). John says that “neither did his brethren believe in him” (v. 5). Possibly James was the ringleader in this domestic tragedy. Is it surprising, then, that at His death the Lord Jesus committed the care of His mother, not to His brother James but to the apostle John?

All of this rejection was changed, however, after the Resurrection. The Lord appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). James was instantly transformed from an unbeliever to a committed believer. James then seems to have rounded up the family and led his brothers to faith in Christ. In any case, the whole family was in the Upper Room soon afterward (Acts 1:14). The apostles passed over James as a possible successor to Judas, and they chose Matthias by lot (Acts 1:15–26). Just the same, James was in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost.¹

James definitely had a change of heart after the resurrection. Apparently the Lord made a special appearance to him (1 Corinthians 15:7):

"(7) After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles." (1 Corinthians 15:7)

He was with the disciples in the upper room in Acts 1:14. He eventually becomes the leader of the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17), and presides over the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13 - 19; Galatians 2:9).

"(9) And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision." (Galatians 2:9)

"(13) And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: (14) Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to

¹ John Phillips, *Exploring the Epistle of James: An Expository Commentary*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), Jas 1:1.

take out of them a people for his name. (15) And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, (16) After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: (17) That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. (18) Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. (19) Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:" (Acts 15:13-19)

Note - When a comparison is made between this letter, and the vocabulary used by James in the Jerusalem Council, certain similarities are apparent in the style of writing. (Compare James 1:1 and Acts 15:23 - *greetings*; James 1:27 and Acts 15:14 - *visit*; James 2:5 and Acts 15:25 – *beloved*; James 2:10 and Acts 15:24 – *keep*; James 5:19, 20 and Acts 15:19 – *turn* and *convert* are from the same Greek word ἐπιστρέφω - *epistrephō*)

At the conclusion of Paul's third journey, he delivers an offering to James and the Church at Jerusalem that was collected during his travels through Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 21:18).

"(17) And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. (18) And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present." (Acts 21:17-18)

We have no record in the Bible, but tradition tells us that James was martyred in A.D. 62. The story is that the Pharisees in Jerusalem so hated James' testimony for Christ that they had him cast down from the temple and then beaten to death with clubs. The story also relates that James died, as did his Saviour, praying for his murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."² Tradition also tells us that James was a man of prayer, and was referred to as having knees that were calloused like a camel's.

3. The Theme – Faith in Action; Faith with Shoes On; Productive Faith

According to Charles Ryrie, there are "references or allusions from 22 Books of the Old Testament and at least 15 allusions to the teachings of Christ as embodied in the Sermon on the Mount"³ The Sermon on the Mount has been referred to as "rules for the redeemed," and teaches how a saved person should live. It specifically expresses what will be expected in the conduct of believers during the time of Christ's earthly kingdom.

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 335). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

³ Ryrie, Charles (1986). *The Ryrie Study Bible*. Chicago: Moody Publishers

Compare these passages from James to the Sermon on the Mount:

James 1:2—Matthew 5:10–12

"(2) My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;" (James 1:2)

"(10) Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (11) Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. (12) Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

(Matthew 5:10-12)

James 1:4—Matthew 5:48

"(4) But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." (James 1:4)

"(48) Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

James 1:5—Matthew 7:7–11

"(5) If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." (James 1:5)

"(7) Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: (8) For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. ... (11) If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matthew 7:7-8, 11)

James 1:22—Matthew 7:24–27

"(22) But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." (James 1:22)

"(24) Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: (25) And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. (26) And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: (27) And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:24-27)

James 4:11–12—Matthew 7:1–5

"(11) Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. (12) There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" (James 4:11-12)

"(1) Judge not, that ye be not judged. (2) For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. (3) And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? (4) Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? (5) Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5)

James 5:1–3—Matthew 6:19–21

"(1) Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. (2) Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are motheaten. (3) Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days." (James 5:1-3)

"(19) Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: (20) But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (21) For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

4. Does James Contradict Paul?

Historically, there have been some theologians that have had a hard time reconciling *The Book of James* with the writings of the Apostle Paul. Luther doubted the canonicity of *The Letter of James* because it contained, in his view, little of the gospel message. "The book received its harshest treatment from Martin Luther. Luther emphasized Paul's doctrine of justification by faith so strongly that he had difficulty accepting James (cf. Rom. 3:27–30; James 2:20–26). Luther regarded James as an "epistle of straw," but he did quote it approvingly on several occasions."⁴

⁴ Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 516.

The key verse in this Letter is James 2:20, which says "... faith without works is dead", and is stated repeatedly in chapter two, and is emphasized by the tone of the rest of the letter. Some have tried to divide James from the Apostle Paul by claiming that there is a contradiction between this letter and the writings of Paul. *Galatians* and *Romans* both clearly state that a man is justified by faith, and not by the works of the law (Romans 3:28; 4:1 – 3; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:11; 3:24).

*"(28) Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."
(Romans 3:28)*

*"(1) What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?
(2) For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. (3)
For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for
righteousness." (Romans 4:1-3)*

*"(1) Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus
Christ:" (Romans 5:1)*

*"(16) Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus
Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ,
and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."
(Galatians 2:16)*

*"(11) But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall
live by faith. ... (24) Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we
might be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:11, 24)*

Paul clearly states that justification is not by our works or through the deeds of the Law. James, on the other hand states plainly that Abraham was justified by works:

*"(21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon
the altar?" (James 2:21)*

So, was Abraham justified or made righteous by his works, or was it through his faith in God? The key to understanding this dilemma is found in v. 22 where James also points out that faith preceded the works, and works perfected the faith:

*"Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?" (James
2:22)*

So, James is not saying that a person is saved by faith, but he does clearly teach that true faith will be followed by works. In other words, if a person is genuinely saved; if he genuinely has the Holy Spirit of God living inside of he, he will be a different person; one that desires to live in obedience to the will of God.

"(14) For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: ... (17) Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:14, 17)

Conclusion

The Book of James will not teach us much about how to be saved, but it will show how saved people should live. We will learn about how to endure trials and afflictions through this Letter. We will get help regarding resisting temptations. We will see from this Book that a Christian should control his tongue and the words that he says. This is an extremely practical Book that contains principles on a variety of important topics including: how to have wisdom, how to prayer, what to do with the Word of God, how to handle money, how to be impartial regarding the wealthy and poor, and much, much more.

This little Letter is worthy of your reading it often, and it will benefit you greatly to diligently study it, and most of all your obedience. As James tells us himself, we need to be *"(22)... doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving [our] own selves. (23) For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: (24) For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. (25) But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."* (James 1:22-25)