Icon

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JAMES

*True faith is visible in life*

WRITTEN

Late 40s AD

KEY VERSE

*"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

2:17

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Exhort to a life of discipleship with integrity

PURPOSE

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many people named James in the Bible. The author of this letter was most likely the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55), who eventually became one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13, 21:18, Gal 1:19, 2:9). He was also called "James the righteous". A common suggestion for dating is the year 45-49, in which case it is perhaps the oldest writing in the New Testament.

1:1 says that it is written to *"the twelve tribes scattered among the nations."* This sounds like Jewish recipients. He does not specify any specific geographical area, so it is probably a rather general letter he is writing, intended for several congregations outside Israel.

James' letter can be called "wisdom literature", like Proverbs in the OT. He writes "in circles", which was not unusual for a Jew (we find the same style in Proverbs). Therefore he visits the same topics several times: Wealth, trials, the tongue, wisdom, and practicing what you believe in. In addition to being inspired by Proverbs, he also draws a lot from Jesus, especially from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. The main problem he addresses is *"a divided mind"* (4:8), and how this affects many areas of life.

James is best known for saying that faith without works is dead (2:17, 26) because true faith in God is manifested in works. There is no contradiction between James and Paul here. It is important to note that they do not have the same definition of *"faith"*: James says that even the evil spirits *"believe"* (2:19) and is therefore speaking more of a general belief that God exists, not saving faith. He also wrote to Jews who all believed in God. For Paul, who writes to Gentiles with a completely different background, the good works are a consequence of faith, they are "included" in his definition of faith (e.g., Rom 6:19, Tit 2:14, 3:8,14).

The icon that is used as an illustration for the Epistle of James stands out slightly, as it is not based on the contents of the letter, but instead on James' epithet "The Righteous".

*"Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching."* C.S. Lewis

*"Integrity is 'Choosing courage over comfort; choosing what is right over what is fun, fast or easy; and choosing to practice our values rather than simply professing them'"* Brené Brown

### WHICH JAMES?

1. James, son of Zebedee and brother of John. One of Jesus' three closest ones. Died in the year 44 (Acts 12:2), probably too early to have written this letter.
2. James, son of Alphaeus, also an apostle. Mentioned only in the apostle lists and perhaps in Mark 15:40 as "James the younger". He would probably identify himself a little more closely if he was the author (as Luke 6:14-15 does).
3. James "the Lord's brother" (Gal 1:19), Jesus' (perhaps older) biological half-brother (Mark 6:3), Acts 1:14). Not one of the 12 apostles, but still called an apostle in church history (as in 1 Cor 15:5-7?)

### JAMES, THE LORD'S BROTHER

Mentioned as the author of the letter from the end of the fourth century (Hieronymus and Augustin).

Leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18)

One of the *"pillars"* (Gal 2:9). Had authority in the early church together with especially Paul, Peter, and John.

Stoned to death in 62 AD.

**Similarities with James's speech in Acts 15:**

* The same greeting in Acts 15:23 as in James 1:1. Otherwise only in Acts 23:26 in the entire NT.
* *"bear my name"* in Acts 15:17 (Amos 9:12) and a similar expression in James 2:7 (NLT). An unusual expression.
* *"Brothers, listen to me"* (Acts 15:13) with a similar expression in James 2:5.

### THE CANON OF THE LETTER

First mentioned by name in the early 200s by Origen, who calls it "Scripture". Otherwise seldom mentioned in the first centuries.

Perhaps it was used less by Gentile Christians because of its Jewish character? The content also provided little ammunition for the discussions in the old church.

Debated in the 4th century due to the authorship question. (Which James? Is it “apostolic”?) If it were less used, it would also be less known.

Luther called it "a straw letter" but did not remove it.

*"It is important to stress that James was not rejected, but neglected."* Douglas Moo

### WHO DID HE WRITE TO?

*"The Twelve Tribes"* (1:1)

Mentions synagogue (2:2 ASV) and that "there is one God" (2:19, from Deuteronomy 6:4)

*"scattered among the nations"* (1:1): Diaspora.

* Used in Acts 11:19 about those who were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch because of the persecution after Stephen's death.
* If James was already the leader of the church (at the latest by Acts 12:17), it would be natural for him to write a letter to them.

Probably a general letter to Jewish Christians scattered around the Roman Empire.

### WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

* No Jew-Gentile problem, especially regarding the law (the late 40s)
* Suggestion: Last part of the 40s. In that case, perhaps the oldest writing in the NT.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE READERS?

They have trials (1:2-4, 12), were mostly poor, and were oppressed by the rich (2:6-7, 5:4-6).

Live a little too "worldly" (4:4, 1:27)

* favors the rich (2:1-4)
* uncontrolled speech (3:1-12, 4:11-12, 5:9)
* worldly wisdom (3:13 - 4:3)
* arrogance (4:13-17)

A "dualism" between belief and way of life

### DUALISM IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

* Merely listen to the word, but do not do what it says.
* Worship God but do not tame the tongue.
* Follow Jesus who came for the poor but discriminate among themselves and show special attention to the rich.
* Have faith, but do not show their faith by their deeds.
* Praise God but curse human beings.
* Pray but want to spend what they get on their pleasures.
* Serve God but are friends of the world.

### PROPOSAL FOR STRUCTURE

Intro: 1:1-11 The main themes will be trials, dualism, and wealth.

1:12-18 Trials (= temptations)

1:19-27 Dualism. Hear the word but do not do what it says. Do not tame the tongue.

2:1-13 Wealth. (Dualism: favoring the rich).

2:14-26 Dualism. Faith must be shown by deeds.

3:1-12 Dualism. The tongue.

3:13-4:12 The solution.

4:13-5:6 Wealth. Warning to the confident and rich.

5:7-20 Conclusion.

## 4 POINTS FROM THE INTRO:

1. They are under pressure from their surroundings.
2. Trials produce perseverance, which has completeness as its goal. (=integrity)
3. They can ask God for wisdom if they need it in their trials. (Wisdom = practical knowledge about how to live according to God's will.)
4. Don't doubt = don't be divided (*dipsychos*: *"double-minded"*). The problem is not that one lacks faith, but that the mind is divided between God and the world.

What comes out of you when you are under pressure?

## TRIALS = TEMPTATIONS (1:12-18)

Trials (v. 2) and tests (v. 3) are both repeated in v. 12.

Blessed is he who perseveres. Maybe those who do not persevere blame God and claim that they had no chance?

v. 12: It is not about being good enough, living righteously, keeping the commandments or avoiding destruction - but loving God. Then a lifestyle that matches this will follow. This is similar to what Paul teaches.

v. 17: *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." "Perfect"* has a link back to complete in verse 4. God gives good and perfect gifts, he tempts no one.

## INTEGRITY (1:19-27)

**Do what God's word says (= application). Knowledge puffs up.**

1. v. 20: Integrity of temper: Anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.
2. v. 22: Integrity in lifestyle in general: Do what the word says, not just listen.
3. v. 26: Integrity of speech: Keep your tongue in check, otherwise worship is worthless.

**v. 27: Pure and faultless worship:**

1. Look after widows and orphans in their need (love your neighbor)
2. Keep oneself from being polluted by the world (love God, do not be divided)

## WEALTH (INTEGRITY IN HOW THEY TREAT EACH OTHER) (2:1-13)

Jesus' followers cannot differentiate between people when Jesus did not. Jesus came especially for the poor and outcasts. If they favor the rich, they act like those who persecute them.

v. 5: Again he says that it is about loving God.

v. 8: *"The royal law"* = the law of God's kingdom

## INTEGRITY IN FAITH AND BEHAVIOR (2:14-26)

Perhaps someone has misunderstood Paul (Rom 3:5-8)?

**3 things that help us with the "contradictions" between Paul and James:**

1. Paul wrote to Gentiles, James wrote to Jews (who all believed in God).

2. Therefore they do not have the same definition of *"faith"*. James speaks of a general faith in God (2:19), not a saving faith as Paul does. Paul's definition includes a new life of good deeds (Rom 6, Titus 2:14, 3:8).

3. Therefore, they also use the word *"righteous"* differently:

* Paul uses it legally (“acquitted”)
* James adheres to the usual Jewish moral meaning. Abraham's later actions (Genesis 22) showed that God was right when He declared him righteous (Genesis 15).

Paul speaks of works before salvation, while James speaks of works after salvation. Paul speaks of being justified now, James of being justified in judgment.

We must avoid getting so hung up on harmonizing James with Paul that we miss his point: It is no use having correct theology if it is not demonstrated in life! Faith is not just intellectual. James complements Paul.

## DUALISM IN HOW WE TALK (3:1-12)

* v. 2: *“Perfect”* again. The tongue is one of the hardest things for our integrity, especially under pressure.
* It can do great harm (vv. 5-8)
* But if no one can tame the tongue (v. 8), what can we do?
* How then can we become perfect? (1:4)

### WHAT IS THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM?

*"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."* Luke 6:45

*"The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value."* (Proverbs 10:20) The tongue is an indicator of the heart!

Your heart = *"your inner being"* (Eph 3:16-17). Feelings, thoughts, will, reason, etc. Everything we are.

The tongue reveals the condition of the heart, especially under pressure. But can something be done with the heart? Is the underlying problem pride?

## THE SOLUTION 3:13 — 4:12

Medicine: God's wisdom (vv. 13-18)

God's wisdom is shown in a righteous life (v. 13)

Description of God's wisdom (v. 17): pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

* an antidote to favoritism and hypocrisy (a divided mind)
* Reminds us of the fruit of the Spirit (and earthly wisdom reminds us of the works of the flesh) in Gal 5 — and of love in 1 Cor 13.
* Encourages to ask for this in 1:5

### 4:4-5

"Unfaithful" is feminine → the congregation as Jesus' bride (Jer 2:2, Rev 19:7)

Friendship with the world, with its values and ethics that are in rebellion against God, is to be unfaithful to Jesus... (1 Cor 6:19-20)

*“You're cheating on God… flirting with the world every chance you get.”* The Message

We live in one world with ethics from another world. These are too different to combine.

### 4:6

Grace is greater than our adultery.

All that is needed is for us to humble ourselves.

All that is needed is for us to admit that we need grace.

### 4:8 parallelism:

*"Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."*

double-minded = sin

The solution (vv. 6-10):

Repentance and wholehearted surrender so we come near to God. Then he will come near to us and give us his wisdom, of which we can also ask to have more, so that faith is accompanied by action.

Jesus has become for us wisdom from God! (Proverbs 3:19 → John 1:3, 1 Cor 1:24,30)

## WARNING TO THE CONFIDENT AND RICH (4:13-5:6)

Building on the parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12:16-21) who makes plans without including God in the planning.

4:17: Now that they know what is right, will it be a sin not to do it? (1:22)

*"You have used the end times to collect treasures!"* (5:3) A warning also to us…

## CONCLUSION (5:7-20)

* Persevere in trials (vv. 7-11 → 1:2-4)
* Control your tongue (vv. 9, 12)
* Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other (vv. 13-18)
* vv. 19-20: Purpose of the letter? Encourage them to help and exhort each other.

Anointing with oil: Mark 6:13. So the prayer can be felt physically? Anyway: *"the Lord will raise them up"*, not the oil or the prayer.

Sickness is not necessarily related to sin (John 9:3), but sin can lead to sickness (1 Cor 11:30). James says that *"If they have sinned, they will be forgiven."*. God will not refuse to forgive to prolong the disease.

## APPLICATION

1. Do I have a foot in the world in any area of my life that conflicts with the kingdom of God? Do I allow myself to be *"polluted by the world"*? (1:27)
2. How can we become better at admonishing each other and helping each other to live according to God's will? (5:20)
3. Why should I surrender completely to God? Do I need a new encounter with Jesus so that the world fades in light of him - both currently and given what lies ahead?

*"Pray for each other"* (5:16)