

Week of May 28 – June 3

Book of James

James calls himself "a bondservant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Four men have the same name in the New Testament:

James, son of Zebedee and brother of John was a fisherman called by Christ, who later became an apostle. Together with John, they were nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" because of their impulsiveness. Herod killed him in 44 A.D.

James, son of Alphaeus is another one of the apostles, about whom little is known. He may be "James the younger," whose mother, Mary, was among the women at Jesus' crucifixion and tomb. This Mary is called the wife of Cleophas, perhaps identified with Alphaeus.

James, father of Judas, the apostle is even more obscure with few references to him.

James, the brother of Jesus is a half-brother of Jesus who did not believe in his brother Jesus at first. He became a disciple following the resurrection and became important in the church at Jerusalem. Peter sent him a special message following his own release from prison. James also played a crucial role in the conference at Jerusalem, and Paul brought him greetings upon arriving at Jerusalem. He is generally considered to be the author of this letter.

The letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad," that is, Jews living outside the land of Palestine. Many Jews were scattered throughout different nations because of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The book of James makes it clear that they were also brothers in the Lord, i.e., that they were Jewish Christians. Many of these Jewish Christians were poor and oppressed and often rejected by the Gentiles. As Jewish Christians, they were also rejected by many of their own countrymen. This letter was not addressed to a single church and is categorized as a general letter.

It was likely written about A.D. 48-50 and is considered the first book of the New Testament to be written.

It deals with the practical aspects of the Christian life, including handling trials and temptations, practicing pure religion, understanding the relationship between faith and works, the proper use of the tongue and display of true wisdom, being a friend of God rather than a friend of the world, and the value of humility, patience, and prayer.

Greeting and Trials and Temptations (James 1:1-18)

Following a simple and unassuming salutation, James begins his letter with a call to look at trials as occasions to rejoice, understanding they can produce patience, which leads to maturity. If wisdom is needed, he tells his readers to ask God with faith and without doubt. Meantime, the poor are encouraged to be glad because they are great in the Lord's sight, while the rich are to be thankful that their riches mean nothing to the Lord since they will also die and leave everything behind.

Happy is the man who doesn't give in and do wrong when he is tempted because he will get his reward, the crown of life that God promised those who love him. Remember, when someone wants to do wrong, it is never God who is tempting him, for God never wants to do wrong and never tempts anyone to do wrong. Temptation is the pull of man's evil thoughts and wishes, which lead to evil actions and the death penalty from God.

Listening and Doing (James 1:19-27)

He warns them to be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath. Then he explains a major theme in his letter: to be doers of the word and not hearers only. Explaining the foolishness of being a hearer only, he shows the difference between religion that is useless and that which is pure and undefiled before God.

Anyone who says he is a Christian but doesn't control his sharp tongue is just fooling himself, and his religion isn't worth much. The Christian who is pure and without fault, from God the Father's point of view, is the one who takes care of orphans and widows, and who remains faithful to the Lord – not soiled and dirtied by his contacts with the world.

Favoritism Forbidden (James 2:1-13)

In this chapter, James calls them to hold the faith of Jesus Christ without partiality to rich people. Some were displaying favoritism toward the rich in their church meetings while despising the poor. Showing respect of persons makes one a judge with evil thoughts, and James provides several reasons why such motives were unbecoming of those who believe in Jesus.

God chose poor people to be rich in faith, and the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs, for that is the gift God promised to those who love him. “Don't you realize that it's usually the rich men who pick on you and drag you into court? They are the ones who laugh at Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear.

“If you make one little slip, you are just as guilty as the person who has broken every law there is. You will be judged on whether or not you are doing what Christ wants you to do. There will be no mercy to those who have no mercy. But if you are merciful, God's mercy toward you will win out over his judgment against you.”

Faith and Works (James 2:14-26)

James then addresses the relationship between faith and works, especially the foolishness of professing faith when unaccompanied by works. Using several examples to make his point, including those of Abraham, the friend of God, and Rahab, the harlot, James declares three times that faith without works is dead.

It isn't enough just to have faith. You must also do good to prove that you have it. Faith that doesn't show itself by good works is no faith at all – it's dead and useless. When will you ever learn that "believing" is useless without doing what God wants you to do? Faith that does not result in good deeds is not real faith.

Abraham was declared good because of what he did when he was willing to obey God, even if it meant offering his son Isaac to die on the altar. He was trusting God so much that he was ready to do whatever God told him to do; his faith was made complete by what he did, by his actions, his good deeds. Abraham trusted God, and the Lord declared him good in his sight, and he was even called "the friend of God." So you see, a man is saved by what he does, as well as by what he believes.

Rahab was saved because of what she did when she hid those messengers and sent them away by a different road. Just as the body is dead when there is no spirit in it, so faith is dead if it is not the kind that results in good deeds.

Taming the Tongue (James 3:1-12)

James begins this chapter with a caution against becoming teachers. Because of the stricter judgment that awaits teachers, one should be sure he possesses the maturity and self-control necessary to control the tongue. He then provides a series of illustrations to demonstrate the power and danger of the tongue, and how we can easily be inconsistent in our use of it.

We can make a large horse turn around and go wherever we want by means of a small bit in his mouth. And a tiny rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot wants it to go, even though the winds are strong. A great forest can be set on fire by one tiny spark. The tongue is a flame of fire, full of wickedness, and it poisons every part of the body. The tongue is set on fire by hell itself and can turn our whole lives into a blazing flame of destruction and disaster.

Men have trained, or can train, every kind of animal or bird that lives and every kind of reptile and fish, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is always ready to pour out its deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our heavenly Father, and sometimes it breaks out into curses against men who are made like God. So, blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Does a spring of water bubble out fresh water first and then bitter water? Can you pick olives from a fig tree, or figs from a grape vine? No, and you can't draw fresh water from a salty pool.

True and False Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

Perhaps some wanted to be teachers to appear wise. Yet James writes that wisdom and understanding are to be shown by one's conduct, done in meekness and humility. He then explains the difference between the two kinds of wisdom. There is wisdom that is earthly that causes confusion and evil.

On the other hand, there is wisdom that is heavenly that produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness. It is first of all pure and full of quiet gentleness. It is peace-loving and courteous and allows discussion and is willing to yield to others; it is full of mercy and good deeds. It is wholehearted and straightforward and sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness.

Submit yourselves to God (James 4:1-6)

James asks his readers to consider what is causing quarrels and fights among themselves. He sees the problem as their own desires for pleasure, which war within themselves. He describes their lusts and coveting (even murder) for things they don't have and can't obtain. Their prayers are fruitless because they have selfish motives in mind. Then James charges them with adultery for trying to befriend the world. Becoming a friend of the world leads to enmity with God, who jealously desires us. But if they are willing to humble themselves, God is willing to show more grace.

The reason they don't have what they want is they don't ask God for it. When they do ask, they don't get it because their whole aim is wrong. They only want what will give them pleasure.

The Holy Spirit gives them more and more strength to stand against all such evil longings. As the Scripture says, God gives strength to the humble but sets Himself against the proud and arrogant.

Slander and False Confidence (James 4:7-17)

James counsels them to draw near to God in humble submission, with clean hands, purity of heart, and true repentance. He warns against speaking evil of brothers and judging one

another, so they don't become judges and not doers of the law. The chapter ends with a call to make plans with the Lord's will in mind, for we have no idea what tomorrow holds, and life is short. Otherwise, we boast in our arrogance and sin when we fail to do what we know is right.

Resist the devil, and he will flee. When you draw close to God, God will draw close to you. Wash your hands, and let your hearts be filled with God alone to make them pure and faithful to him. When you realize your worthlessness before the Lord, he will lift you up, encourage, and help you.

Don't fight against God's law of loving one another, declaring it is wrong. But your job is not to decide whether this law is right or wrong, but to obey it. Only he who made the law can rightly judge among us. He alone decides to save us or destroy us. So, what right do you have to judge or criticize others?

How do you know what is going to happen tomorrow? The length of your lives is as uncertain as to the morning fog – now you see it; soon it is gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise you will be bragging about your plans, and such self-confidence never pleases God. Know what is right to do, and not doing it is a sin.

Warning to Rich Oppressors (James 5:1-12)

The final chapter opens with a strong condemnation against the rich who were oppressing the poor, while they are living in pleasure and luxury. Most likely, these were rich unbelievers. The Lord heard the cries of the poor, and judgment was coming on the rich who condemned and murdered the just. This passage may be an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem foretold by Jesus in Matthew 24 and fulfilled in A.D. 70. James counsels his brothers to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord, and to have their hearts ready. Using the farmer, the prophets, and Job as examples of patience, he warns against grumbling against one another and swearing rash oaths.

Prayer and Confession (James 5:13-20)

The last half of the chapter provides a call to prayer and praise. The suffering are to pray, the cheerful are to sing praises, and the sick are to call for the elders of the church. The elders were to pray over the sick and anoint with oil in the name of the Lord. In answer to the prayer of faith, the Lord will raise the sick and forgive sins if they had been committed. James encourages Christians to confess their sins to one another and pray for one another that they may be healed. He reminds them of the value of fervent prayer by the righteous, using Elijah as an example of how God answers prayer. The letter then closes with a reminder that turning a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Is anyone among you suffering? He should keep on praying about it. And those who have reason to be thankful should continually be singing praises to the Lord. If anyone has slipped away from God and no longer trusts the Lord and someone helps him understand the Truth again, that person who brings him back to God will have saved a wandering soul from death, bringing about the forgiveness of his many sins.

Key Verse in James (James 1:22)

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."