

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Epistle of James: James 1:1-27

### Brief introduction to the Epistle of James

The Epistle of James has been surrounded with controversy. At one time theologians thought it had little value. This was expressed by Martin Luther who described the letter as “an epistle of straw”. The teaching in the epistle to James is very practical. However, the practical teaching is based soundly on Scripture as found in the Old Testament and would be later found in the writings of the New Testament.

James, the writer of this letter, was not the brother of John the Apostle. Biblical commentators seem to vary in their conclusion as to whether the writer was the son of Joseph and Mary and therefore, in purely human terms, the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Alternatively, there are those who think the writer is James the son of Alphæus. James in his letter does not describe himself as an Apostle nor as one related to the Lord Jesus. James prefers to call himself “a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (James 1:1) In this way, James takes away any thought of self, preferring to give both God and the Lord Jesus the authority for what he is writing. In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”. The letter was probably written early in the Church period because of lack of reference to Gentiles. It is considered by many scholars to have been written before AD 50. This makes the letter of James important in terms of dealing with practical issues in relation to the Christian faith. It also highlights how necessary it is for Christians to have a God honouring lifestyle in a world that is contrary to God and the Lord Jesus.

The letter deals with practical issues such as times of testing, prejudice, the balance between faith and works, the need to control what we say, worldliness, the value of patience and the power of prayer. These things were proving to be an issue in the early years of the church of God. If true then, how much more today when we experience the same difficulties! It would appear that every generation of believers needs to learn the same lessons from Scripture, to live acceptable lives for God.

### Opening greeting

James opens with the statement that he is a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1). I mentioned earlier that James did not claim to be an Apostle or indeed take any place of authority. There is nothing lower than a servant or slave as the Greek word implies. Even so, the writer is probably the same James who seems to be of some prominence as recorded in the book of Acts, see Acts 12:17, 15:13 and 21:18.

James writes to the twelve tribes who are scattered abroad. This is an unusual expression but probably means that James wrote to those early Christians saved out of the Jewish system of worshipping God. There would be a remnant from each of the twelve tribes, preserved by God in His grace, see 2 Chronicles 10:17 and 11:3. Many of those saved in the early days were visitors to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. They would eventually return to their own homes scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

### How do we respond to difficulties?

James was obviously concerned that Christian behaviour and response to difficulties should be according to their new faith and not according to the previous ways of their old nature prior to salvation. For the Jew was no different to the Gentile in that all were sinners in need of salvation.

The expression “My brethren” (James 1:2) was not nationalistic but Christian as James tackles the difficulty of persecution. Now the Jews would be used to persecution; consider the Book of Esther as an example. However, they were also used to resisting, if feasible, that they might overcome their enemies. However, they sometimes took an alternative view that persecution was a punishment from a God known for His severity; consider Sinai and the mountain burning with the fire of judgment (see Exodus 19). James teaches a new way to respond to persecution: “Count it all joy”! This is so different, so alien to nature. What? No fighting back! When our faith is tested, it is to produce in us the characteristics of patience or endurance, a passive response to the situation we are in. However, this is not to produce depression or a defeatist outlook, but rather a stronger reliance on our faith which is centred in a

God who only desires the best for His people. The same teaching is found in the writings of Peter and Paul, see 1 Peter 1:7 and Romans 5:3-5.

So, in James 1:4 James states, "Let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete lacking nothing." A right response to difficulties will result in spiritual growth. A maturing effect will move the Christian from depending on the natural things of this world to realising that all our needs are supplied at the appropriate time from the hand of a bountiful and loving God.

James then tackles the need for wisdom in the difficult circumstances of life. He points the troubled believer to God saying, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him", James 1:5. However, James also states that we need faith and a Christian must "ask in faith", James 1:6. Contrary to what is normally thought about James, he is a person who is strong on faith. James challenges the reality of faith in a believer. When praying we are to "ask in faith". Is our faith weak or strong?

James 1:6-8 are a very real challenge: don't doubt when praying because that is not faith in action. A person who doubts is like a wave of the sea moved by the power of the wind. Such a person has two minds and a double minded person is therefore basically unstable and not secure in their God given faith. An unstable person is immature and not growing spiritually. God cannot give to such a believer!

James 1:9 shows that the believer who has been brought low because of some kind of trial can look forward to the day of glory when he will receive a "crown of life", James 1:12. The crown is given because of continued faithfulness during times of trial. In this verse the contrast is with those who experience times of trouble but have their resource in the riches of this world. From chapter 2, James has to remind the Christians to whom he is writing that rich people were their persecutors (James 2:5). And the rich person with their riches will fade away just as grass withers under the intense heat of the sun during a drought. The rich person without Christ had no future day of glory. At the end of James 1:12 James reminds us that it is not only faith but also love that is connected to the crown of life. The crown of life is promised to the faithful and to those "who love the Lord". For the Christian, faith is centred in the Lord Jesus Christ because He is the One whom we love because He first loved us.

### **Does God tempt Christians?**

In James 1:13-16 James wants to remove the impression of a vindictive God. When temptation comes to a Christian, it is our response to the situation which either enables us to avoid the temptation or succumb and fall into sin. We are not to blame God for our own failures but to act responsibly by faith and dependence upon a faithful God. Do not be deceived, says James (James 1:16). Satan is the one who seeks to deceive, not God.

Today, it is very often the culture to blame someone else when failure occurs. During my business life, time and again there was the drive to empower people, to give responsibility and by implication make them responsible for their actions. People like being empowered to take control and have authority but not so keen when made to take responsibility for actions which have failed. It is not just the world of business; in every sphere of life, privileges are willingly grasped but associated responsibility is shunned. This started in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:17-3:24). Adam blamed Eve (Genesis 3:12) and Eve blamed the serpent (Genesis 3:13); finger pointing has continued ever since. Christians are expected to be responsible for their actions in all areas of life.

Christians are not sinless. We do fail and sin, but there is the provision for a Christian to seek forgiveness through the Lord Jesus as the Advocate, see 1 John 2:1. In that situation we are expected to learn and be strengthened in our faith so that in a future situation we will not repeat our failure but turn away from temptation.

### **What then is God's intention?**

James 1:17-18 show that God's intention is to bring us into blessing with good and perfect gifts from the Father of lights. There is no darkness with the Father of lights. Darkness would speak of sin and Satan. James presents to the Christians a contrast to the situation of James 1:13-16. It is the Father's intention to bless and enable the believer to live a positive life for the glory of God. To emphasise the character of the Father of lights, James says, "With whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). There is no deceit and no lies, not even "white" lies. Everything is true and open with the Father. The Father acts consistently with His own divine standards. Because of this, it is expected that Christians act in the same way. Why should Christians act differently to non Christians? The reason is that we have a new nature which came to us at new birth when we accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour. As a result, we have the Holy Spirit of God living in us. We are not to grieve Him by wrong actions.

We have been born anew by God's will through the "Word of truth" to be a demonstration in this world of what God expects to see more fully in the glory of the coming kingdom.

### What then is Christian behaviour?

James now seeks to bring out some practical teaching to highlight the features that should mark a person of faith. James is noted for his deep concern that faith should be blazed abroad for all the world to see by appropriate works. If faith is not seen in such a practical way, then James makes the serious pronouncement that faith is dead in that person, see James 2:17.

The first point that is drawn to our attention is to be careful about what we say. We have some very wise teaching in the book of Proverbs: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise", Proverbs 10:19. James teaches that everyone should be slow to speak. In other words, do not speak in the heat of the moment; weigh your response and, if the opportunity is available, pray about a matter before replying. We can always be quick to listen to a matter but beware of making hasty decisions. A quick response is how unfounded rumours spread which cause discord among Christians. Again we find in Proverbs, "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver", Proverbs 10:20. At all times a righteous person would seek to do and say what is right and what God would honour. The expression "choice silver" would indicate a refining of thought and to be absolutely sure that what I say is right and true. James, in James 3:1-12, has a lot more to say about the tongue and how such a small member in the human body can be so destructive, unless controlled by the wisdom which comes from above.

In parallel with being careful how we speak is the need to have control over anger. Very often the same lack of control which allows the tongue to speak unwisely, also allows the emotions to boil over into a display of anger or violence. So in James 1:20, James states, "For the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God". Again in Proverbs we have the statement, "A quick-tempered man acts foolishly", Proverbs 14:17, but in contrast, "He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit", Proverbs 17:27. In this way, James draws upon the wisdom of God's word as found in the Old Testament. James' teaching is consistent with what has always been taught and the people to whom he wrote would be well aware of the wise sayings found in Proverbs.

James moves on in James 1:21 to address the problems of moral defilement and excessive wickedness. He writes to inform the believers to put away such conduct. People who professed a strict religious code of conduct had sunk to the same level of behaviour as the people among whom they lived. James reminds them that there must be a change of lifestyle as such behaviour was abhorrent to God and Christ. The exhortation is to "receive with meekness", that is to humble themselves and put into practice the truth of the Gospel and live out a changed life. When James talks about "the implanted word, which is able to save your souls", he is speaking of a practical liberating effect that the word of God should have on a believer. The Scriptures are living and should take root in our souls, developing a character which gives testimony to the life changing power of the Gospel.

To emphasise that the word of God should have some practical effect in our lives, James goes on to say, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves", James 1:22. The only way that a Christian can be seen to have accepted God's word is by the behaviour that results. It is not enough to listen to the Scriptures being taught or reading the Bible, there must be an outflow of consistent action corresponding to the teaching received. If there is not a practical result, then James states you are deceived, deceiving yourself and seeking to deceive others. Again this particular theme is further developed by James in the chapters following.

James likens hearing and not doing the word of God to a person who looks in a mirror and, as soon as they turn away, forgets what they look like (James 1:24). However, in James 1:25 we are told again what should happen, "He who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." The "perfect law of liberty" is a description of the word of God. It is in God's word that true liberty can be found - freedom from the shackles of Satan and the world system he has established which is contrary to God. So if we look into the Scriptures and continue in them and we live out the instruction from God, there will be blessing. James reinforces this truth when he writes, "Not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work" (James 1:25), to drive home the absolute necessity of being true to what we believe.

Paul has similar teaching in Philippians 2:12: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling". There is no boasting in living the Christian life, it is only what God expects. And God expects nothing but the best from every believer. We should remember that our lives will be reviewed by the Lord Jesus on the judgment day. Consider Philippians 2:12-16. Remember also the fate of the person who hid his talent and was cast into outer darkness (See Matthew 14:13-30). There was no place found for such a person in the kingdom. The truth about being a doer of the word shows our real character. If we are not a doer, then we need to ask ourselves, "Am I a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ?"

In James 1:26, James goes back to the tongue and those who make an outward show of being religious. Lack of control of the tongue was a clear indication that such a person's religion was useless, empty, a façade with nothing that is true to support the profession. This is like the Pharisees and others who made a great show before the people,

despising others. The Lord Jesus likened them to white washed tombs, the houses of the dead! (See Matthew 23:27-28)

James 1:27 is a contrast as James now speaks about “pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father”. Such a religion had God the Father's approval as it was a life that honoured the Father. The characteristics of true religion were demonstrated in two particular ways. Firstly, to visit and care for orphans and widows in their trouble. Here was a very practical work that showed Christian love working towards those who would be unable to respond back in kind. Giving and expecting nothing in return is the basis of charity, of loving. The other demonstration of true religion was of a moral nature - to keep oneself undefiled from the things that characterise the world. Remember Lot who was dragged out of Sodom before God rained down the fire of judgment on that and surrounding cities! (See Genesis 19) From what we read in our newspapers, it would appear that the features of Sodom are being carried into the heart of Christian profession. Jude speaks of those who seek to turn the word of God upside down for their own devices when in Jude 4 he states, “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

### **To conclude**

From James 1, we gain the impression of the concern James had for Christians from his own national background. They may have been those who accepted the Lord Jesus as Saviour on the day of Pentecost, returned to their own homes but had little opportunity for being nurtured in the Christian faith. James seeks to rectify this by impressing upon them the need for practical Christian living consistent with both the Old Testament writings and that which was now coming from other New Testament writers.

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