

Week 1: Introduction to James: Faith and Works

Hook



Main Point: James gives us practical wisdom for living out our faith in the world.

A survey of 2,000 adults found that 84 percent of people learned things in school that they never used after graduation. Further, those surveyed reported using only 37 percent of the information they received in school. When asked what skills the participants wished they had gained from their education, the top five were money management and budgeting, how to do taxes, how to manage your well-being, understanding loans and how to negotiate.¹

Q: What did you study in school that proved to be irrelevant to your life?

Q: What subjects do you wish would have been offered at the time?

Q: Which passages or books of the Bible have been most transformative in your life?

Transition: Today, we begin our journey through one of the most practical books of the Bible: James.

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Book

Main Point: James gives us practical wisdom for living out our faith in the world.

James 1:1 and Acts 2:5–12 [Read]

Talking Point 1: James addresses situations common to all Christians.

Q: Who wrote this letter? What did he say about himself?

James was one of Jesus' brothers, likely the oldest because his name appears first in lists (Matthew 13:55).² At first, Jesus' brothers did not believe He was the Son of God (John 7:5). It would be hard to believe your brother was God in human form. Even if he seemed to never do anything wrong, he was still your brother! Theirs was an ordinary family; they were carpenter's kids from a tiny and unimportant village (John 1:46; 6:42). At one point, Jesus' family even tried to seize Him and take Him home, saying that He was "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21).

But after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared not only to the 12 disciples, but to 500 other believers and then to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). The text doesn't explicitly tell us that this is when James became a believer, but the story implies that everyone who actually saw the resurrected Jesus believed.³ Then, when the 120 disciples of Jesus were praying in the Upper Room, waiting for the Holy Spirit, the text explicitly tells us that Jesus' mother and brothers were there (Acts 1:14). Eventually, James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17) and even presided over the first church council, where they discussed whether Gentiles had to follow Jewish law to be Christians (Acts 15:13). Paul called James a "pillar of the church," along with Peter and John (Galatians 2:9).

Yet in this letter James didn't claim any kind of authority or status as an apostle, pillar or even leader. He only called himself a servant. This relates directly to the kind of godly wisdom James described in his letter, which he contrasted with worldly wisdom – not selfish ambition but a servant's heart (James 3:15–17). Just the way Jesus Himself lived (Philippians 2:1–8) and the way He encouraged His disciples to live and lead (Matthew 20:25–28). Not lording their authority over the people the way the world does but leading the way as God described in His law – seeing themselves as servants of the people (Deuteronomy 17:18–20).

James's greeting was "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," meaning Jews who lived outside of Israel, dispersed to other nations, like the Jews who were gathered at

Pentecost (Acts 2:5–12). Though Gentiles may have also read or heard it, it was geared toward Jewish Christians.

Since James was the leader of the first church in Jerusalem, it makes sense that he would write a universal letter to all the other churches and that they would see him as an authority figure who could speak into their lives, even if they had never met him. It would also make sense for him to gear his letter toward Jewish Christians since the church in Jerusalem was primarily made up of Jewish Christians. James wrote with a broad brush, not to specific issues in one church but to issues that were common to all first-century Christians. This is even more apparent because of the genre of his writing, which is more of a collection of wisdom literature like Proverbs than a typical letter.

All of this points to its practical nature for our study today. We will still have to do some exegetical study to understand the historical and literary context, but because James is a practical book written to a general audience about common issues, we will also find it practical for common issues we all have today. This doesn't mean that the book of James is "easy." It can be really easy to say something like "be quick to hear and slow to anger" and a whole lot harder to do it. James calls us to *do*. And the stuff James exhorted us to do is hard! Some of it is even impossible. He told us to control our tongues but then said, "No human being can tame the tongue," commanding us to do the impossible, at least with human strength alone (3:8).

This is how every word of the Bible, even the part about *doing*, points us to the Gospel. The Gospel teaches us that we can't be saved by our own works; we need God's grace. But it also shows us we can't live out our faith in our own strength; we need the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:3). James gave us practical advice for how to live in this world, but he did not expect us to do this by ourselves. He wrote to believers who had been made a new creation in Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:22–25). Human beings cannot tame the tongue, but the Spirit can. The only way we can be doers of the Word is by walking by the Spirit, letting Him work in and through us (Galatians 5:16).

Q: Why is it so powerful that James introduces himself as a servant instead of as Jesus' brother?

Q: What difference would it make in your life to be a doer, not just hearer of the Word?

Q: What things about following Jesus do you find difficult and why?

James 1:5–7 and 3:13–17 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Wisdom comes from fellowship with God.

Q: What should we do if we lack wisdom? How will God respond?

Q: How did James contrast the wisdom from above with worldly wisdom?

The book of James has been called the wisdom literature of the New Testament. Wisdom literature is a unique genre in the Bible. The Hebrew word for wisdom means more than intellectual knowledge; it's *applied* knowledge, applying what you know. It is not just philosophical or theological; it is *practical* wisdom for living well in God's world. The book of James is concerned with both believing the Word and putting it into practice (1:22). In the Bible, wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7), not being afraid of God but being in awe of Him and trusting that because He is God, His way is right, not our understanding (Proverbs 3:5–6). Because God created the world and created us, He knows best how to live in His creation. James called this "wisdom that comes down from above" (3:17) and said it is available to any believer who asks (1:5).

Wisdom literature functions differently than law. These are principles. There are natural consequences, not criminal punishments. If you follow this advice, you will likely have a better life. But these principles do not *guarantee* success. "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6) isn't a *guarantee*. Many believers have parented well, but their kids have still turned away. Life just isn't that simple; other factors are involved. "The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short" (Proverbs 10:27) is not a *guarantee*. Think of the missionaries who died young, killed by the very tribes with whom they were sharing the Gospel. They feared the Lord as much as anyone, but they didn't live a long life.

Wisdom comes from the Lord alone. Because we are made in His image, people can have a certain amount of wisdom through natural human reason. Many unbelievers know how to manage their money well, deal with difficult situations, and respond to tragedy with strength. But there is a deeper wisdom, the wisdom of the Gospel, that only comes from living in fellowship with God, and it is the opposite of natural human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). James contrasted godly wisdom, which is pure, peaceable, and gentle, with worldly wisdom, which is selfish ambition and jealousy (3:13–17).

Human wisdom says to "look out for number one," but the Gospel says to put others' needs ahead of our own. Human wisdom tells us it's "us versus them," but the Gospel says to love our enemies. Human wisdom urges us to climb the ladder of success to

prove our greatness, but the Gospel says to do nothing out of personal ambition. The life Jesus lived – the sacrificial way He gave Himself for others and didn't seek His own fame, glory, or wealth – is against human wisdom. But this is the way He has called us to live, too. So, when you really follow Jesus, people may think you're crazy. Why would you spend your free time serving the poor when you could be doing fun things? Why would you forgive that person who hurt you when they aren't even sorry? How could you have such joy when you're enduring such suffering? People who don't know Jesus will not understand, but those who do know Him will.

Wisdom from above teaches us how to relate to others. It favors humility, meekness, mercy, gentleness, peace and patience and condemns envy, selfish ambition and boasting. It involves controlling your tongue and being quick to listen, slow to anger, loving neighbors, caring for the poor, and avoiding the lure of wealth. Some would see this as just good advice, not necessarily connected to God. But James insisted this lifestyle *requires* knowledge of God – not just knowing *about* God but *knowing* God and living in fellowship with Him. Because it is only through the God who is *agape* love that we can *agape* love others. Wisdom begins with a proper relationship to God – recognizing that He is God, and we are not and submitting to His ways. Then when we live in fellowship with the Father and abide in Christ, the Holy Spirit will grow wisdom in us for the rest of our lives.

Q: In what ways do you struggle with following godly wisdom as James described it?

Q: In what other ways can we seek God's wisdom besides directly asking Him in prayer?

Q: How has godly wisdom made an impact on your life? How can you share that with someone this week?"

James 2:14–24 and Ephesians 2:8–10 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Faith and Works: The teachings of James and Paul do not conflict; they complement each other.

Q: Why might some people think these two passages conflict with each other?

Q: Why should we try to reconcile this conflict? Why does it matter?

Some scholars compare these two passages and claim that the teachings of James and Paul conflict with each other, that Paul taught salvation by grace through faith alone, but James taught salvation by works. But that's not what James said at all. He did not

say we are saved by our works. He said if you have been saved and made a new creation in Christ, your life will show it.

If James were read on its own, it would be pretty clear what he was saying – faith that doesn't show itself in action isn't real faith, just as love that doesn't show itself in action isn't real love. If your husband said he loved you, but he constantly berated you, spent all your money on himself, and never wanted any time with you, would you think he really loved you? The same is true of our relationship with God. If you say you love Him, but your actions say something different, your faith isn't real.

And *that* doesn't conflict with Paul's teaching at all. The "conflict" comes because Paul wrote so much about justification by faith *alone*, not by works (Ephesians 2:8–10). If you didn't really understand what Paul meant by faith, this would *seem* to conflict with what James said. But Paul's definition of faith is not just intellectual assent. *Pistis*, the Greek word for "faith" doesn't just mean belief, it means "trust" in the Lord, which by definition implies action. It's not just believing in God but putting your trust in Him.

Faith starts with cognitive belief, but it's not just belief. To fly on an airplane, we have to *believe* the plane can take us safely to our destination. But just believing that the plane can fly isn't having faith in the plane. We don't actually *put our faith in* the plane until we get on it and trust it will get us where we want to go. A biblical definition of faith isn't just believing that the Gospel is true – it's putting our trust in Christ.⁴ As James tells us, even the demons *believe* (2:19).

For Paul, faith isn't just saying you believe in Jesus; it's a complete change in lifestyle to follow Him. The concept of faith that doesn't play itself out in action was unthinkable to Paul. He said we were saved "for good works" (Ephesians 2:10). We are not saved *by* them, but when we are saved, we are made a new creation, and we live out our faith in action. Paul agreed with James that the righteous are not just hearers of the law, but doers (Romans 2:13).

So, the "problem" of faith versus works isn't a problem at all. Faith isn't opposed to works; faith and works go hand in hand. We are justified by faith alone, but true faith (not just intellectual assent) shows itself in action. This can seem hard in our modern context where many churches focus so much on getting people saved that the "Gospel" can get watered down to just praying the sinner's prayer to get your "ticket into heaven," and that's it; there's no change in a person's life. That's a misunderstanding of what a saving faith actually is.

True faith is faith in action. Being a Christian is not just accepting Jesus as Savior but also following Jesus as Lord. Discipleship isn't a "next level" of Christianity, it *is* Christianity.

When we accept Jesus, when we are saved, when we are justified, we are made a new creation in Christ. The old is gone, and we begin the journey of walking in His ways. That doesn't mean we'll suddenly do everything perfectly, but it does mean we will live out our faith in action. It means we will become doers of the word, not just hearers. It means we will follow Jesus with our lives. "Faith" without works is not faith at all. Every apostle of the New Testament agreed on that.

Q: If you didn't follow Jesus with your life, what would you be missing out on?

Q: How does your life show that you trust in Jesus? How is it different from what it would be?

Q: What are the good works that God has created us to do (Ephesians 2:10)?

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Took

Main Point: James gives us practical wisdom for living out our faith in the world.

There is likely a long list of concepts you learned in school that have no impact on your life today. It's true, recalling lines from King Lear or the ability to recall pi to the 10th digit will unlikely make a difference in the way you parent or run your business. A commitment to studying and applying God's Word, however, is different; the Scripture acts as a lamp to our feet, a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). The book of James provides wonderful direction on things like walking through difficult seasons, how to handle temptations, and how people are to relate to one another. Commit to a pursuit of godly wisdom in the book of James this semester. Make the decision to be consistent in your study and your attendance in your LifeGroup these next 15 weeks. Wisdom and life change are waiting!

CHALLENGES

THINK: Take some time to reflect on your life and do some deep self-examination. In what ways are you struggling to be a "doer" of the Word? In what ways are you struggling to follow Jesus, to walk in His ways? Which of Jesus' commands do you find difficult and why? If every command of Jesus comes down to love, what does this tell you about why you find them difficult? If the Holy Spirit can empower you to follow even the commands that are impossible for human beings, what does that tell you? How can you grow in your faith, your trust in Jesus?

PRAY for the American church to preach and teach a holistic understanding of the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith, not just praying a prayer to get a ticket into heaven but a lifestyle of faith that lives out that faith in action. Pray for your own understanding of the connection between faith and works, that you would live out your faith in action by following Jesus with your life. Ask God to give you opportunities to share the Gospel with others.

ACT: Ask for wisdom. Reflect on any questions you have in your life right now, anything about which you want to seek God's wisdom. Then pray about it, directly asking God for wisdom. But also seek godly wisdom in other ways – reading Scripture, asking other godly people what they have learned about God's wisdom, and pursuing

other spiritual disciplines such as fasting, meditation, solitude, etc. All these things can be ways of asking God for wisdom.

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/americans-use-just-37-percent-of-information-learned-in-school-survey-finds/>

² Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, but afterward she and Joseph had other children the conventional way.

³ Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2015).

⁴ Mark D. Roberts, "Faith is More than Just Believing that the Good News is True" - <https://depre.org/life-for-leaders/faith-is-more-than-just-believing-the-good-news-is-true/>