



AN INTRODUCTION TO JAMES'S LETTER

The letter of James encourages us to put our faith into practice and live in a way that matches our faith. Christians should be recognisable by what they do or refuse to do.

There is fairly wide agreement that this letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus – someone who was a doubter through much if not all of Jesus' ministry. Only after Jesus' resurrection, it seems, did James truly believe.

Paul's letters usually have a first part full of theology and a second part about Christian living. James has no equivalent first part; he goes straight in to writing about how we should be living out our faith in practice.

1 It is a Christian letter

Jesus is only named twice, and there is no real mention of the gospel of salvation through Jesus. But:

- In the first verse, James describes himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."
- He repeatedly addresses his readers as "brothers" (brothers and sisters in modern versions) – a very distinctively Christian way of speaking.
- There are numerous echoes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The teaching of Jesus underlies the teaching of James.

2 It is an illustrated letter

Little illustrations – sort of mini-parables – come time after time (eg 1:23).

3 It is a letter with a Jewish background

James often uses an Old Testament character to illustrate his point. He refers to Abraham (2:21), Rahab (2:25), the prophets (5:10), Job (5:11), Elijah (5:17f).

4 It is a letter with warnings about the use of our tongues

eg 1:26. Not only our actions, but our words too should demonstrate the fruit of our faith. However many kind actions we might undertake, it will only take one unkind word to undermine everything we have done. Even just one little thing that you say can reveal a big miss-match between what you do and what you say.

James has many of his little illustrations to make the point that, although the tongue is quite small, it can do great damage (see 3:3-8).

5 It is a letter with encouragement to care for the poor

On a number of occasions, James refers both to the dangers of wealth and to the responsibilities of wealth – the need to care for the poorest in our community (see 1:9-11, 1:27, 2:1-7, 2:14-17, 4:13-17, 5:1-6).

Faith and works

It has often been suggested (particularly by Martin Luther) that James, with his stress on good works, contradicts Paul, with his stress on salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus. But Paul and James are writing from two different perspectives:

- Paul begins before a person's conversion: they can be saved only by putting their faith in God. They can't earn forgiveness by good deeds; they can only accept the forgiveness which comes from God's grace – his free gift.

- James, on the other hand, begins with the person who is a professing Christian – already forgiven and in a new relationship with God. They should live a completely new life which is seen clearly in their deeds. Paul would agree.

Paul is saying that you 'get into' God's kingdom only by faith; James is saying that God requires good works from those who *are* in.

Some challenges for the coming week(s)

1 Read the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7), and then read James' letter; see how much 'copying' you can spot.

- 2 Think about your tongue: perhaps make the decision that, when anything difficult happens, you'll count to ten before you speak.
- 3 Ask yourself, "Is there one thing I can do this week to show compassion to those who are poor – locally or globally?"
- 4 At the end of Ch.1, James speaks about keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world – ie doing things Jesus' way, not the world's way. Pray that, this week, out of all the things you do/say, something will stick out which makes you noticeable – noticeable as someone whose faith in Jesus can be seen in good works.

For homegroups

- Look up the references to the Old Testament characters. What qualities in each of them is James commending?
- Look at the illustrations/mini-parables in 1:6, 1:10f, 1:23, 3:3, 3:4, 3:5f, 3:7f, 3:11, 3:12, 5:7. In each case, what point is James making? Are there any that you would like to update for the 21st century?
- Look up the references in section 5 above. If James were writing to Christians in Ely today, what challenges would he have for his wealthiest readers? For his poorest readers?
- " . . . you should ask God . . . and it will be given to you" (1:5).
" . . . can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?" (3:12).
"Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness" (3:18).
"Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded" (5:2f).
Can you identify the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7) which James is echoing in these verses?
- In 21st century Ely, what opportunities do we have to do good works which are the fruit of our faith?