

## **Christianity at Work**

### **A study of the Epistle of James**

#### **Introduction**

The Epistle of James shows what everyday Christianity is supposed to look like. It describes Christianity at work, or what could also be called authentic faith. An authentic faith is what contemporary society needs. While the book of James is nearly 2,000 years old it is full of teachings that are needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The book is remarkably easy to read and understand and is especially suited for Christians today.

What is needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is an authentic faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We know that there are many who call themselves Christian, but their faith is not authentic. These are Christians in name only. They profess Christ but not as Lord of their life. They do not live their lives in accordance to Christ. Such persons are known in scripture as hypocrites and their presence in the church results in Christianity gaining a reputation for being fake and irrelevant, not authentic.

Another problem facing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church is that of inactive Christians. These believers have an authentic faith in Christ but do not translate their faith into action. Too many of these inactive Christians follow a Christianity of convenience. They come to services when it is convenient, but when it is not convenient they are nowhere to be found. This inactivity also results in society thinking that the church is irrelevant.

The Epistle of James combats both of these perversions of Christianity. James makes it clear that there is a difference between true and false religion. He shows that a

true, authentic faith will be a working faith leading to authentic Christians and a church ready to impact the world.

There are three prominent men named James mentioned in the New Testament. One is James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee. This James was one of the original Apostles of Jesus (Matthew 4:21-22) and was killed by Herod in Jerusalem during the early history of the church (Acts 12:1-2). The second is James, the son of Alphaeus, sometimes known as James, the Less since so little is known of him. He was also one of the original Apostles of Jesus (Matthew 10:2-3).

The third man named James is the one this writer believes to be the author of the Epistle of James. He is known as James, the Lord's brother. This James is mentioned several times in the New Testament along with his other brothers and sisters (Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:3). Technically, James would have only been the half-brother of Jesus. From the gospels we know that Mary (the mother of Jesus) was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they were married Mary became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit and eventually gave birth to the Son of God. We also know from the gospels that Joseph was instructed by God to take Mary as his wife and subsequently they had other children as well.

Perhaps the most prominent of these other children was James who appears first in the list of the siblings of Jesus, perhaps indicating that he was next in age to the Savior. Throughout the gospels the siblings of Jesus are known for their lack of faith that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, several times their opposition to Jesus is shown. It is amazing to us that even Jesus' own brothers and sisters did not believe Him during His

earthly ministry (John 7:3-5; Matthew 12:46-50). Even the miracles of Jesus did not persuade them. It is possible that James was present at the wedding in Cana of Galilee when Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:1-12). But, even miracles did not keep the brothers and sisters of Jesus from thinking that Jesus had lost His mind and they determined to bring Him back home to prevent embarrassment to the family (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35).

Then something happened to change James' mind about his brother Jesus. The gospels show us that Jesus was condemned before Pilate, crucified, buried, and resurrected. This is the core of the gospel according to Paul (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). The empty tomb obviously had a profound effect upon James and the rest of his family because Acts 1:12-14 tells us that immediately after the ascension of Jesus into heaven they joined themselves to the Apostles of Jesus and other believers in Jerusalem waiting for the appearance of the Holy Spirit.

The change that took place was that James himself was an eyewitness of the resurrection of Jesus. Paul lists him as one of the witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7. Once James saw his resurrected Lord he became a believer. In fact, the book of Acts tells us that James was one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. He was the one who made the official determination about the status of Gentiles in the church during the first Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:13-21). James is also listed with the elders of the Jerusalem church in Acts 21:18. James was one of the members of the church who worked with Paul after his conversion (Galatians 1:18-19) and was obviously married (1 Corinthians 9:5). This was the James who wrote the Epistle that bears his name.

A man who was a Jew himself writing to other Jewish believers, but also a man who could simply be known as James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19). What a unique perspective he has upon the things he writes to fellow believers.

Many commentators believe that the Epistle of James is one of the oldest, if not the oldest book in the New Testament scriptures. It is thought by some to have been written before the Jerusalem conference (49 A.D.) since the Epistle makes no reference to the issues discussed there. It is the writer's personal belief that the Epistle of James is one of the oldest books in the New Testament.

## **James chapter 1**

### **Introduction (verse 1)**

Verse 1 identifies both the writer of the Epistle (James, the bondservant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ) and the intended recipients (members of the twelve tribes scattered abroad). This Epistle was written to Jewish Christians who had been spread throughout the various nations of the world. While the Epistle was originally written to Jewish Christians all those who follow Christ can find much excellent teaching contained within this brief book.

### **Why trials are good (verses 2-8)**

The teachings of Christ run counter to conventional thinking in many ways. Jesus taught that the way to live was to die, that the way to be exalted was to be humble, and that the first would be last and the last would be first. This is completely contrary to what people commonly believe. Yet, James also employs this type of contradiction when he states, “count it all joy when you fall into various trials”. How could anyone be glad when they experience bad things?

Becoming a Christian does not guarantee you will never experience setbacks. In fact, James teaches that the only way you will grow as a Christian is to experience trials. The early Christians were persecuted yet they rejoiced that they were worthy to suffer shame for Christ (Acts 5:41). The Apostle Peter commands that we add perseverance (or patience) to our faith (2 Peter 1:5-11). The Apostle Paul taught that we should glory in tribulation because it produces perseverance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3-5). In

the same manner James teaches that we should be happy to suffer trials for Christ because we need to learn patience.

In verse 4 James pleads that Christians allow patience to do its perfect work, another way of stating that we must persevere. If Christians will learn to be patient, James says, they will become perfect, complete, and lack nothing. Our problem is that we are not typically patient people. We must work at being patient.

One of the ways Christians can be aided in gaining patience is by asking God for wisdom. As James points out in verse 5 Christians who lack wisdom should ask God to provide it. An excellent example of this is found in the life of Solomon. Once King Solomon succeeded his father David to the throne of the nation of Israel he was given an opportunity by God to ask for anything and promised that God would give it to him. Solomon did not ask for long life or riches. He did not want power or prominence. What he asked for was wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-10). Because Solomon asked for wisdom God gave him not only what he asked for but multiplied his other blessings as well. Solomon was known as the wisest of rulers. We benefit from his wisdom each time we study the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Christians today can also receive the gift of wisdom, particularly in the area of dealing with trials. As Jesus Himself promised in Matthew 7:7, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Too many times Christians are hesitant to ask for God's blessings. James promises that if we will ask, God will give. In fact, James describes God's willingness to provide wisdom in verse 5 as

“liberally and without reproach”. God is not disappointed when we ask Him for wisdom. He is disappointed with us when we do not.

In order to properly pray for wisdom we must pray in faith. Jesus spoke of the kind of faith that would move mountains (Mark 11:22-24). This is the type of faith James speaks of. When we pray to God we must do so without doubting (translated “wavering” in the King James Version). A wavering or doubting Christian is described as a “wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind”. Anyone who has seen the ocean knows what James is talking about. Waves are impacted by many forces and travel in many different directions. Waves on the ocean can cause a person to become seasick, a most unpleasant feeling. Doubts in the prayers of a Christian result in receiving nothing from the Lord. When we pray we must pray believing that God hears and will answer our petitions.

The doubting Christian is also described by James in verse 8 as “a double-minded man”. This word denotes vacillation, or a constant turning from one idea to another. Christians cannot be double-minded, they must be faithful. James uses this same description in James 4:8 where he implores the double-minded to purify their hearts. In chapter 1 he states that such Christians are “unstable”.

### **The attitude of rich and poor Christians (verses 9-11)**

James speaks of “the lowly brother” a reference to any Christian who is humble or depressed in their material circumstances. In times of economic turmoil many Christians can find themselves without jobs or suffering from a lack of resources. These Christians are urged to glory in their exaltation. This is another instance where

Christianity seems to get things backward. Why would anyone glory about being in financial difficulties? The answer is found in the fact that Jesus took special interest in the poor. He was constantly helping those who were poor and condemning those who trusted in riches. A poor person who becomes a Christian can glory in their exaltation. A rich person must become humble in order to accept Christ. This is shown clearly in the account of the rich ruler who came to Jesus (Mark 10:17-22) causing Jesus to exclaim, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23).

Before Jesus was born, His mother, Mary sang a song prophesying that He would fill the hungry with good things (Luke 1:52-53). When Jesus began His public ministry one of His first acts was going into the synagogue and reading publicly from Isaiah 61:1-2 which prophesied that He would "preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:16-21). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:1-10). When John the Baptist wanted confirmation that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told John's disciples to report, "the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11:2-6). Truly, as Jesus preached, "there are last that will be first, and there are first that will be last" (Luke 13:30).

While the lowly brother is to glory in his exaltation, the rich Christian is to glory in his humiliation, that is, in the fact that they must humble themselves to follow Jesus. James reminds those who are rich that they are like the flower of the field which quickly passes away. In the Old Testament, Job also spoke of the brevity of life (Job 14:1-2). We can all understand James when he describes the power of the sun withering the grass of the field in verse 11. Those who are rich especially need to heed the admonition of Jesus



to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on the earth (Matthew 6:19-21). One of the most powerful parables Jesus taught concerned a rich man who was exceptionally blessed and wanted to hoard his possessions (Luke 12:16-21). Each of these examples illustrates the need to place our faith in God rather than material possessions. James will have much more to say about this later in the Epistle.

### **Temptation (verses 12-18)**

“Blessed is the man who endures temptations”. James uses the example of Job as one who endured temptations (James 5:11). Christians will certainly face temptations, however they are promised a blessing for their endurance. Temptations provide an opportunity for Christians to show their reliance upon the Lord.

As James explains in verse 12, Christians who endure temptations are said to be “approved”, the testing leads to approval in the eyes of God. Peter expressed a similar idea in 1Peter 1:6-7. The ultimate reward for enduring temptation is receiving the crown of life. Paul links endurance with receiving the crown of life (1 Corinthians 9:24-25) as does Jesus (Matthew 10:22). In fact, the Lord promised the persecuted church in Smyrna that they would receive the crown of life if they endured (Revelation 2:10). The promise of the Lord is sure.

In verse 13 James shows where temptation comes from. God is not the source of temptation since He cannot be tempted with evil. Temptation comes from Satan. James explains how temptation progresses to sin if it is not dealt with. First, Satan begins with presenting something that a person desires. Having desire by itself is not sinful, it is only when a person is “enticed” or continually dwells on the desire, that sin is conceived.

John divides sin into three separate types: the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life (1 John 2:15-17). Each person's temptations are different and unique to them. Some are tempted more by lusts of the flesh while others are tempted by the pride of life. James is warning us not to be deceived. Giving in to desires results in the conception and birth of sin. Then, as James explains, "sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death". This is the same warning Paul provided in Romans 6:23. Satan would like nothing more than to deceive each one of us into acting on our desires. The only way to overcome this is to resist temptation. If we give in to temptation and commit sin then the only thing we can do is repent.

In verse 17, James explains the source of every good and perfect gift. God is the source of all that is good. John the Baptist also taught the same idea (John 3:27). James describes God as "the Father of lights" a phrase that denotes something that is manifest or luminous. There is no variation or turning with God, a concept also explained by Balaam in the Old Testament (Numbers 23:19). James couples this idea of God being the source of everything good with the fact that He has provided us the opportunity to be saved with these words, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth".

Truly we have been the recipients of God's wonderful favor.

#### **How to overcome trials (verses 19-20)**

After discussing the source of our blessings James returns to the theme of how Christians can overcome trials. He lists three qualities that Christians should incorporate into their lives: be swift to hear, be slow to speak, and be slow to wrath. This Epistle is full of practical ideas for helping Christians make an impact in their world. In the matter

of how Christians react to trying situations we can learn much from this verse. By being swift to hear Christians can insure that they actually listen to what others are saying. Too many times we listen to what someone else says while at the same time thinking about what we can say as soon as they are finished. Being a good listener is an important facet of the Christian life.

Being slow to speak indicates that we will choose our words carefully. Solomon taught many things along the same line (Proverbs 10:19; 17:27-28). Many times problems could be averted if Christians would listen more closely and say fewer things. The last quality James mentions is “slow to wrath”. Paul instructs us to “Be angry and sin not” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Solomon said “A quick-tempered man acts foolishly” (Proverbs 14:17). One of the qualifications for a man to serve as an elder is that he not be “quick-tempered”. This is a difficult area for all of us. As Christians we must learn to control our anger. We should follow the example of Christ (1 Peter 2:21-24). As James says, “the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God”.

### **Authentic Christianity (verses 21-27)**

James begins verse 21 with the word “Therefore”, indicating that we should do what he is about to command in light of the teachings of the previous verses. In this case, in addition to learning to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath we should lay aside all filthiness (anything that is dirty) and all overflow of wickedness (superfluity of naughtiness in the King James Version) and receive with meekness the implanted word that can save our souls.

This teaching highlights the absolute importance of repentance (that is, laying aside filthiness and wickedness) just as Paul also taught in Colossians 3:8 coupled with the manifestation of saving faith (receiving the implanted word). As Jesus explained in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:11) the seed is the word of God. We cannot be saved in any other fashion than believing the good news about Jesus. Paul makes this especially plain in Romans 10:10-17.

James emphasizes the fact that we must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (verse 22). As Jesus explained in the parable of the sower, if a person hears and does not obey “the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (Luke 8:12). Jesus also taught that hearing alone was insufficient for salvation in the parable of the house built on the rock (Matthew 7:24-27). If we are hearers only we build upon a foundation of sand and our spiritual house will not stand. James expands greatly upon this topic in chapter 2.

The person who hears and does not obey is compared to a person who looks into a mirror and walks away. The purpose of a mirror is to reveal our physical appearance giving us a chance to make corrections before we are embarrassed. A person would be considered foolish who looked into the mirror and discovered a problem and then turned away without doing something about it. The same is true with our spiritual mirror (the Word of God). As James explains in verse 25, if we look into “the perfect law of liberty” (James 2:12) and continue in it (not being hearers only, but doers) we will be blessed.

James then continues his theme of authentic Christianity in verse 26 by exposing the folly of saying we are religious when our tongue betrays the fact that we are not right with God. This theme is expanded on in James 3:1-12. The Christian who does not control what they say deceives their own heart and their religion is useless (not authentic).

In verse 27 James identifies “pure and undefiled religion” as that type of Christianity which will cause us to visit widows and orphans. James is not suggesting here that this is the only kind of authentic Christianity, but that the kind of Christianity that causes one to take care of widows and orphans will be the kind of authentic Christianity which will have a visible impact in the world. James also defines authentic Christianity as that which will keep us “unspotted from the world”.