

# THE BOOK OF JAMIES





# INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

The writer of the book of James is identified as the half-brother of Jesus who rose to prominence as a leader of the early Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17, Acts 15:13, 21:18, Gal.2:9, 12). He is recognized in Mark's gospel as a part of Jesus' family (Mark 6:3). Similar to Paul, he became a follower of Jesus only after the resurrection (1 Cor.15:7, John 7:5). But the writer of this letter identifies himself simply as *"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ"* (James 1:1).

James is an intensely practical book, filled with exhortations to Christians about the way they should live their lives now that they have been given new life in Jesus. It is filled with allusions to and quotations of the teachings of Jesus, and includes more commands per word than any other New Testament book. For these reasons, James has been called **"the Proverbs of the New Testament."**



James is therefore highly relevant to the Christian life. Unlike many of the other books of the New Testament, James' aim is not to give a theological presentation of the gospel. Rather, he writes his book to those who already believe the gospel, and his goal is to help them live faithfully as followers of Jesus. There are many different and seemingly disconnected themes in James—perseverance under trial, riches and poverty, wisdom, the danger of the tongue, prayer, faith and works. But what ties them all together is **James' desire to take the teaching of Jesus and apply it to a Christian's personal life.**



James can be divided into two parts: **chapter 1** introduces Jesus and the wisdom He offers, while **chapters 2-5** contain twelve wisdom teachings for different scenarios in life. The book concludes with an encouragement for perseverance in prayer.

(An Interesting fact: "*James*" is the latinized translation of the name "*Jacob*." In the Greek language, the Hebrew name *Yaaqob* becomes *lakóbos* and with further evolution in English translations, this becomes "*James*.")

# THE BIG IDEAS IN THE BOOK OF JAMES

## ■ Be Doers of the Word

*“Doing”* the Word of God is at the very centre of the theology and practical teachings of James. We must not merely give lip service or mental assent to the truth of God’s Word. We must live it out in action. His teaching is simple but profound.

Thousands of professing Christians are being misled by self-imposed standards that deviate from God’s teachings. They have become mere spectators who enjoy listening to the Word of God preached and taught Sunday after Sunday. Their heads are filled with Biblical knowledge and facts, but they avoid acting on that knowledge. James says, *“Do not merely listen to the word, rather do what the word commands.”* (James 1:22)

## ■ Faith that produces works

For James, faith was no abstract proposition but had effects in the real world. Throughout the book, James contended that faith produced authentic deeds. In other words, if those who call themselves God’s people truly belong to Him, their lives will produce deeds or fruit. He encourages God’s people to act like God’s people. The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. He makes no excuses for those who do not measure up. For James, *a faith that does not produce real life change is a faith that is worthless* (James 2:17). The Book of James challenges faithful followers of Jesus



Christ to not just *“talk the talk,”* but *“walk the walk.”*

### ■ **Be wise in a hostile world**

For James, God is the source of all wisdom. James is calling the messianic community to become truly wise by living according to Jesus’ summary of the Torah — love God and love your neighbour as yourself. James’ wisdom has been heavily influenced by two sources, the first of which is Jesus’ teaching about life in the Kingdom of God, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). The second key influence is the Biblical wisdom book of Proverbs, especially the poems in Proverbs 1-9. James literally grew up with Jesus and the book of Proverbs, so his own teaching sounds a lot like them both and is stamped with their language and imagery. This book is made up of short challenging wisdom speeches, which are full of metaphors and easy to memorize one-liners.



# CHAPTER SUMMARY

## James 1

**Live with Faith and Wisdom that Jesus offers**

### James 1:5

*"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you"*

## James 2-5

**The Twelve Wisdom Teachings**

### James 4:6-7

*"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble." <sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will*

# JAMES 1

## LIVE WITH FAITH AND WISDOM THAT JESUS OFFERS

The introductory chapter is designed to sum up the main ideas to the entire book. Chapter 1 is a flowing stream of wise teachings and one-liners that introduce us to all of the keywords and themes that we'll see in Chapters 2-5.

James writes to give them practical counsel regarding how they can follow Christ as the Lord of their lives even more effectively. **James knows from personal experience that life is hard.** After all, he was martyred not long after writing this letter. But he believes that **life's trials and hardships are paradoxical gifts that can produce endurance and shape our character.** God can work on us in the midst of suffering to help us become "*perfect and complete*" (1:4). James' understanding of perfect life is a **life of wholeness**, which means living a completely integrated life in which your actions are consistent with the values and beliefs you learned from Jesus. James knows that most of us live as fractured people with large inconsistencies in our character. All of us are more compromised than we'd like to admit, but God is on a mission to restore fractured people and make them whole.

This journey begins with **gaining wisdom**, and the ability to see hardships through a new perspective (1:5-8). God will generously give wisdom to people who ask for it in faith without doubting God's character. It's when we realize our humble and



frail place before God that we're forced to choose between anxiety and trust. True wisdom is choosing to believe that God is good despite any circumstances.

In James 1:9-11, hard times are often caused by poverty. He urges his audience to try and view this circumstance as a gift that forces us to trust in God alone. Besides, wealth is fleeting and will pass away like wildflowers in the summer heat. When we do fall on hard times (1:12-18), we must not accuse God. **Rather, we should let our circumstances teach us what Jesus Himself taught about God's character, that the Father is generous to meet us in our pain, and He's trustworthy.**



This God has given us new birth through Jesus to become new kinds of humans who can face their suffering with total trust in the Father just as Jesus did.

This new humanity is something that we discover **when we not only listen to God's word but actually do what it says** (1:19-27).

Then, James shows us practically what that looks like by giving a few examples from reality like speaking to others in a kind and loving way, serving the broken people, and living with wholehearted devotion to God alone.

*James 1:26-27, "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."*

One can see how this opening chapter contains all the keywords and ideas that are explored more deeply in the twelve teachings of Chapters 2-5.



# CHAPTERS 2-5

## THE TWELVE WISDOM TEACHINGS

The body of the book is in Chapters 2-5 consisting of twelve short teachings that call God's people to wholehearted devotion to the way of Jesus. But these chapters don't develop one main idea in a linear way. Instead, each teaching stands alone and usually concludes with a catchy one-liner. They are all connected through key repeated words and themes.

### 1. Favouritism and Love (James 2:1-13)

James exposes how we show favour to people who can benefit us, and we neglect people who can't because they are needy. This behaviour is the exact opposite of love as Jesus defined it (Matthew 5:46-48).

James concludes that showing favouritism or partiality is utterly unlike God! He gives three specific reasons why favouritism toward the rich and discrimination against the helpless or poor is evil.

First, such an attitude stands in contradiction to God's own evaluation, who honours the helpless (2:5-6). Second, favouritism toward the rich caused issues in the church - for rich people were the very ones who persecuted the Christians (2:6-7). Please note, James is not disapproving all rich people in church rather pointing out the futility of partiality and worldly behaviour. And, third, discrimination against the helpless violates the demand of love for the neighbour, the centrepiece of Jesus' reinterpretation of the law of God (2:8-13).



## 2. Qualities of Genuine Faith

(James 2:14-26)

James proceeds to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic expressions of faith. Faith, James argues, always results in a life of obedience and good works. And a “*faith*” that does not do so is not saving faith at all; it is, rather, dead faith. **Genuine faith will always result in obedience to Jesus’ teachings** (Matthew 7:21-27). In the first chapter, he sets forth the proposition that we must not only be hearers of the Word, but also doers (James 1:22)

James’ understanding of the relationship between faith and works seems to be something like the planting of a seed. If a seed (faith) is truly alive, it will produce a plant (works). Faith cannot be mere mental assent or intellectual belief. James argues that even demons have that kind of belief (vs.19).

### Does James contradict Paul?

Does James’ teachings contradict Paul’s teachings? So, are we saved by faith or saved by works? Or both?

When one realizes that James and Paul are writing to two different audiences with two different perspectives, addressing two different problems, and defining their words in slightly different ways, it becomes apparent that there’s no real contradiction.

**The apostle Paul was addressing the problem of legalism.** He was addressing people who thought they could earn their salvation or who were trying to screen other people out of the church because they were not Jewish and did not keep the ceremonial law. Paul is constantly trying to emphasize to them that we are saved through the sufficiency of the work of Jesus Christ, which is received by faith, not by works.

**If Paul is addressing the problem of legalism, James is addressing the opposite – Antinomianism (no law at all).** It’s the idea that the law just doesn’t matter. If we’re saved by grace, we can live however we want, there’s no need for obedience, there’s no need for sanctification, there’s no need for holiness. These are the people who think that as long as they have faith and right doctrine or tradition, everything’s fine, but there’s no need for life transformation. James is addressing that, and the need for true and genuine saving faith that leads to **obedience to Christ.**

Biblical faith is best defined as active obedience. James uses two specific examples to reveal this vital truth: Abraham (vs.23-24) and Rahab (vs.25). Abraham and Rahab did not merely talk about faith—they acted it out. They did not only believe in God but responded to Him in active obedience, even in difficult situations. They practiced “live” faith.

Neither are we called to live in the flesh nor try to appease God or win His favour with our own works, which are done in the flesh. He is instructing us to walk in the Spirit by faith and, as we do, our lives will manifest the works or fruits of the Spirit. Without these deeds of the Spirit, faith is dead.

### 3. Be Careful with the Tongue (James 3:1-12)

James says it is humanly impossible to *tame the human tongue*. Yet, within that context, he shares some great insight as to how the tongue can be tamed by God. Scattered through the book of James are three different instances where he discusses the issues of the tongue.

In this portion, he points out that with **the very same mouth, we unleash pain by our words to others while offering praise to God**. How we talk to and about people opens a window into our hearts and our core values. And our words tell the real truth about our character according to the teachings of Jesus (Luke 6:43-45). James’ conclusion in this matter is that blessings should flow freely from our mouths—but not cursing. We have been created in God’s image to bring glory to Him.



#### 4. True vs False Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

James is encouraging believers to develop a wisdom that comes from above (Divine) and to avoid all kinds of earthly wisdom that destroys one's character.

*How to identify real wisdom?* Wisdom from above is always peace-loving. Godly wisdom brings peace, but earthly wisdom is characterized by envy, selfishness, and confusion (vv. 14-16) - the opposite of peace. The characteristics of true divine wisdom is given in **James 3:17**, "*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*"

This section ends by pointing to peacemakers who sow peace with divine wisdom.



*How do we get this wisdom?*

One must ask God for wisdom, who gives generously into your life. And the one who actually possesses Godly wisdom is the one who manifests good conduct and works in his or her daily lifestyle. Jesus said that we would know people by the fruit of their lives (Matt. 7:16).

## 5. A Divided Heart

(James 4:1-10)

James is warning his readers about just where their envious desires might lead them if not checked in time. Verbal argument, private violence, or national conflict - the cause of them can be traced back to the wrongful lust of wanting more than we have, to be envious of and covet what others have, whether it be their position or their possessions.

Jesus had promised, "*Ask, and it will be given you*" (Matt. 7:7). But clearly Jesus had in mind that which focusses on God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will (Matt. 6:9-10).

The Christian, living in the "overlap" of the ages, is pulled between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan, the realm of the Spirit and the realm of "flesh". To allow "*the world*" to entice us away from

### A Tongue Problem or a Heart Problem?

Your words are the single best indicator of the state of your heart.

When we say an angry word, or something harsh or condemn or judge or use a degrading comment or verbalize lust, but are embarrassed by it and later go back and say, "*I didn't really mean it,*" we deceive ourselves. Ironically, even if we later regret saying something hurtful, the initial intent reveals our true feelings.

We're so frustrated with ourselves for not putting better filters on our mouths, when what we should do is lament what our words reveal about the depravity of our hearts.

**A tongue problem is ultimately a heart problem.** And that is what James is hinting at. "*Can a fig tree bear olive, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water*" (James 3:12). No matter how much a fig tree wants to produce olives--no matter how many books it reads on olive production; no matter how much willpower it exerts ("I will produce olives!"), it is never going to do it! Words indicate your heart and what requires change is a change of heart.

Your words are just the tip of the iceberg – all those sinful, unkind words spoken publicly or privately reveals a massive depravity of the heart underneath. **The only cure for a depraved heart is to receive a new one through Jesus Christ and fundamentally walk with Him in an interactive relationship.**

total, single-minded allegiance to God is to become people who are divided in loyalties, "*doubleminded*" and spiritually unstable.

James shares our Lord's deep concern for His followers to walk humbly before Him. In the most practical and helpful way, James tells us not only to stay humble, but also how to do it (James 4:7-10).

- Submit to God
- Resist the Devil
- Draw near to God

## 6. Be Careful in Condemning Others (James 4:11-12)

James again points out the danger of the human tongue when used in slandering and judging others. **One of the most common expressions of our sinful nature is the attempt to build ourselves up by tearing someone else down.** It is the pride of sin that motivates a person to think that he is capable of judging another. And so, James poses the direct question, "*Who are you to judge another?*" (vs.12). James goes on to say that there is only one Law Giver and He alone is qualified to pass judgement on us.

## 7. The Arrogance of Wealth (James 4:13-17)

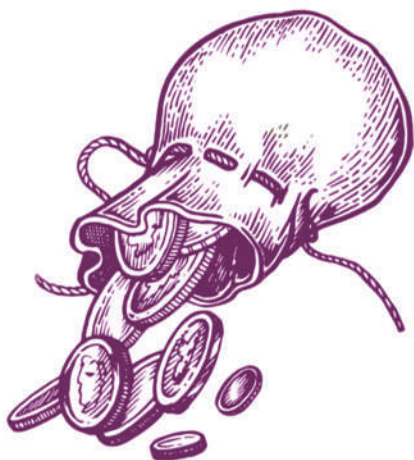
James continues to unfold his main point that new life in Christ should result in a life of obedience to God's Word. Here he addresses particularly the sins of the wealthy. First, he addresses the sin of pride in those who would forget that their lives are



completely in the hand of the Lord (James 4:13-17). Then he turns to warn of the coming judgment against those who would use their wealth and power to oppress God's people (James 5:1-6).

**James rebukes the attitude of well-to-do people who arrogantly suppose that they can think and act without reference to God and eternity.** He rebukes the self-confident planners who reject God. Arrogant selfishness is the problem connected to wealth. James urges the wealthy to acknowledge God's sovereignty and providence as they make their business plans and encourages rich believers to avoid boasting in their own worldly accomplishments and put their trust in the Lord.

James is not against planning or profits but our planning should be based upon the conviction that our lives and our futures are not in our own hands but in the Lord's! We need a dual sensitivity to the world around us and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The great Latin phrase, *Deo volente* (God willing), should become the motto of our lives, beyond just mere words. **We should live with utter dependence upon the sovereign will of God. Our lives are His, and the future is His.**



## 8. The Danger of Wealth (James 5:1-6)

Here, James warns of the arrogance that wealth can create in people, especially those who believe that it will be around forever. James reminds them that their wealth will one day rot away just as they will. The very fact that they have accumulated so much suggests that these rich people have been guilty of focusing on "earthly treasure" at the expense of "heavenly treasure," showing plainly just where their "heart" really is (Matthew 6:19-21).

Having wealth is not a sin in itself. Indeed, some of the Lord's most faithful servants were persons of great wealth including Abraham, David, Solomon. However, there is a misuse of wealth that is contrary to the very essence of spiritual living. The true

### Watch out for Greed!!!

*"The more you get, the more you want."* Few truths cut more deeply across the breadth of the human experience. No matter how much money or materials we amass, we never feel like we have enough. Even more haunting is the fact that: *"The more we get, the more neurotic we often become."* That's why, Jesus' counterintuitive insight is: not only does wealth not make us happy (beyond lifting us out of poverty and offering the basics of life), it often makes us anxious, agitated, discontent, and lonely.

Perhaps this is why the bulk of Jesus' teachings on money are warnings about the danger of it, such as His cry in Luke 12: ***"Watch out for greed! Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions!"*** We often believe the lie that we'll be happy when we "get" — a raise, a better job, a new home or car.

**Jesus' invitation to a simpler life in Him is marked by the Biblical virtue of contentment.** Contentment itself is a way of being in which we are deeply happy with what we have, and our life as it actually is, here and now.

Get rid of greed by practicing these three healthy outlets for our finances. Some of our finances are for us to give away to the less privileged; some are for you to live on to deeply enjoy our lives before God; and some are to build God's kingdom, the future God has put in our heart and His calling upon our life — **Give, Live and Build!**



meaning of this passage is that these rich people lived for the very purpose of their extravagance instead of God. They had become ungodly hedonists who lived for the pleasures that could be derived from wealth. They trusted their money instead of God. They lived for money instead of God.

### **9. Live with Patience and Hope (James 5:7-11)**

Having warned the rich and powerful oppressors of God's people about the coming judgment, James turns now to encourage the church with the same reality. One day, Jesus Christ will come again to rescue His people from those who oppress and persecute them. He will put an end to injustice and evil. In light of that reality, God's people should live and wait patiently, as a farmer waits patiently for his crops to grow from the earth. That patience is warranted precisely because God has shown Himself faithful. He will, without fail, keep His promises, just as He always has.



## 10. Telling the Truth (James 5:12)

James is now warning against the misuse of speech by swearing. *"Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No!' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."* James is proclaiming the teaching of Jesus in the most practical terms. In fact, his teaching is almost word for word what Jesus had declared in Matthew 5:37. Both James and Jesus are saying that our truthfulness should be so consistent and dependable that we need no oath to support it: a simple "yes" or "no" should suffice.

## 11. Faith-filled Prayer (James 5:13-18)

One of the main ways we live in light of God's reality is to pray to Him. He hears prayer, and He answers it. Prayer is powerful. Prayer is the key word in this entire passage. Repeatedly James encourages us to pray.

- Pray when in trouble (vs 13)
- Pray when you are sick (vs 14)
- Pray for one another (vs 16)

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (vs 16). Elijah is shown as a vivid example of a man of prayer (vs 17–18). The Bible is consistent in its teaching that prayer is powerful and effective. Ours is a God who hears the prayers of His people and who delights in answering them.

## 12. Restoring Others (James 5:19-20)

James does not conclude his letter with greetings and benedictions as we see in other epistles. But James is encouraging the church to bring back any person among them who might have *"wandered from the truth."* James says that there is every possibility that the members of the family of God will stray but it's the responsibility of every believer to rescue them back in love, seeking to turn them from their sin and restore them.

Each believer has unique abilities and insights that are invaluable for building up other believers in the body of Christ. **Christianity is to be lived out in community, and God has created us to be dependent both on Him and on one another.**



## CONCLUSION

The book of James is for everyone. This is one of the most realistic books on how to follow Jesus on a practical level. It paints a realistic picture about the difficulties in life as well as on how to live the new life in Jesus. We shouldn't be surprised at this. James knew that his older brother, Jesus Himself, had embodied new life on earth and showed us how to live the perfect human life. He had hung at the place where new life and forgiveness came bursting through from God's world to ours. Everything James has been saying flows from that astonishing fact. To learn, with James, to understand and obey *'the royal law'* of love is to get to know Jesus Himself. And as that happens, so the patience and humility, the love and the prayer, the wisdom, and the true speech on which he has been insisting will become part of our lives. These are the *'works'* which will demonstrate our faith.







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