

Epistle of James: Outline

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The epistle of James is the 1st of the 7 '**General**' or '**Catholic**' epistles, with a general content of teaching that is intended for all of God's people.

James gives basic practical and moral teaching for the man / woman of God.

Peter's epistles give truth centered around the kingdom of God.

John's epistles give truth centered around the family of God.

Jude gives general principles concerning the judgment of God.

The Author of the Epistle

Most likely James, earthly brother of the Lord Jesus (Matt 13v55), one of the apostles in Jerusalem (Gal 1v19), and among the pillars in the early Church (Gal 2v9, Acts 15, Acts 21).

Prior to the cross, this James, along with his brother Jude, did not believe in the Lord Jesus as the Messiah (see John 7v5). But they are present in the upper room in Acts 1v14, evidently now believers in Christ, James having seen the risen Lord Jesus, "**seen of James**" (1st Cor 15v7).

Both James and Jude begin their epistles by referring to themselves as "**a servant** (i.e. a bondservant) **of ... the Lord Jesus Christ**", showing humility, and the evidence of grace in their lives. They do not misuse their privileged past earthly relationship with the Saviour.

James is evidently in the good personally of Paul's ministry (see 2nd Cor 5v16), and his own exhortations to humility (see ch4v6,10).

They acknowledge His deity, His equality with God the Father, "**a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**" (Jas 1v1), giving the Lord His full divine confessional title (also in ch2v1).

The Recipients of the Epistle

James was writing particularly "**to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad**" (ch1v1).

He refers to his fellow Jewish "**brethren**" 4x, "**my brethren**" 8x, and "**my beloved brethren**" 3x. Jewish believers were dispersed from Jerusalem following the persecution of the Church after Stephen's death (see Acts 8v1), and James writes about the testing & proving of their faith (ch1v3), and their need for unwavering faith, patience and wisdom in such a condition.

James also desires to touch the consciences of those of his brethren nationally of Israel, also dispersed among the Gentiles by previous captivities, who were still steeped in the now empty religion of Judaism, and not yet believers in the Lord Jesus (see ch1v21,26).

The Timing of the Epistle

This is a relatively early epistle in Church history, and does not give us definitive NT Church doctrine or practice. In ch2v2 "***your assembly***" is the word for '***synagogue***'.

At this early time, there was not yet a complete and final separation of Jewish believers from their Jewish brethren, many were still likely gathering in the Jewish synagogues, especially in places where there was not a local church (***ecclesia***) of God.

The Style of the Epistle

James is taking the position of the teacher in the Jewish synagogue, as he uses multiple metaphors, similes & illustrations; his style of phrases is abrupt & pointed.

He introduces subjects using a challenging, didactic and conversational style, e.g. ch2v18 "***shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works***".

He moves abruptly from topic to topic by asking searching rhetorical questions (see ch2v4-7).

He is engaging his readers, challenging them to consider what he is teaching with this didactic style and these rapid fire questions.

But the tone in which the teaching is given is a loving one; 3x "***my beloved brethren***".

There is a constant mixture of correction & comfort in his teaching, and James approaches all his exhortations on the basis of a common family relationship with his beloved brethren.

For his Jewish readers, James draws many lessons and examples from OT characters, and from the OT Law of Moses (e.g. ch2v8,11).

James gives primarily moral and practical teaching of basic Christian principles, relevant to personal behaviour, brotherly love, and social justice, and practical principles that are to be expected of all who profess the Name of Christ. The emphasis is upon character more than upon doctrine. The practical teaching is based on the character of the Person of Christ.

James draws much from the content and style of the public teaching of the Lord Jesus, giving similar practical lessons; e.g. ch5v12 "***But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation***" (compare with Matt 5v34-37).

The Theme of the Epistle

The main theme throughout is that of a living faith and its outworking; every believer's faith is going to be challenged and tested in their life.

Ch1: The proving of faith; a living faith tested by trials

Ch2: The practice of faith; a living faith proved by works

Ch3-4: The piety of faith; a living faith evidenced by conduct

Ch5: The patience of faith; a living faith expressed by perseverance

NB. James is not contradicting the teaching of the apostle Paul in Romans & Galatians regarding faith and works. Paul is dealing with judicial justification of the sinner before God, and that is by faith alone, and not based upon or merited by works (see Rom 4v2-5).

The emphasis in James is a living & life-changing faith lived out before men; belief must be displayed by behaviour, a faith that lives & loves is proved outwardly by corresponding works.

The Content of the Epistle

James Ch1:

v1-12: The believer and trials

There is to be patience (v1-4), prayer (v5-8), praise (v9-11) and promise (v12) in our trials.

v13-21: The believer and temptations

v13-20: The process of temptation

v21: The prevention of temptation

v22-27: The believer and truth

The reception of God's Word, and the need for obedience to it.

Characteristic believers in James Ch1:

- 1. The tested believer (v2-4)**
- 2. The deficient believer (v5)**
- 3. The double-minded believer (v6-8)**
- 4. The inauspicious believer (v9)**
- 5. The intrepid believer (v12)**
- 6. The erroneous believer (v13-17)**
- 7. The disciplined believer (v19-21)**
- 8. The deceived believer (v22-26)**

James Ch2:

v1-13: The wrong of partiality

v1-4: Partiality is against the Person of Christ

v5-7: Partiality is foreign to the sovereign purpose of God in salvation

v8-13: Partiality is contrary to the moral principle of law, including "*the royal law*" of love (v8), the OT Mosaic Law (v9-11) and the perfect "*law of liberty*" (v12-13).

v14-26: Justification by works

v14-20: Faith and works explained

v21-26: Faith and works exemplified in Abraham & Rahab

James Ch3:

NB. The context in ch3 is particularly with respect to teachers (translated as "*masters*" in AV).

v1-12: The teacher and his tongue

v1: Responsibility linked with use of the tongue

v2-3: The need for control of the tongue

v6: The destructive potential of the tongue

v7-8: The insubordination of the tongue

v9-12: The inconsistency of the tongue

v13-18: The teacher and his conduct

Wisdom "*not from above*" (v14-16) contrasted with "*the wisdom that is from above*" (v17-18).

James Ch4:

v1-5: The display of fleshly lusts

v6-10: The need for humility

v11-17: Leaving God out of our lives

James Ch5:

v1-12: The prospect of faith

v1-6: The conduct of the unjust and the rich; their prospect of coming "*miseries*" (v1).

v7-12: The conduct of the just, their great prospect is "*the coming of the Lord*" (v7-8).

OT examples of the endurance of the prophets and Job are given (v10-11).

v13-20: The prayer of faith

Prayer in the context of affliction (v13), sickness (v14-15), and transgressions within (v16).

OT example of the prayers of Elijah (v17-18).