

Introduction to the Letter of James by Rev John Castle, September 2018

1. Distinctive features of the letter of James

The opening verse indicates that it is a letter, but one that is being sent to a large number of churches rather than just one (as with Paul). These churches are almost certainly Jewish Christian communities in the Jewish Diaspora (see 1:1). The letter is a collection of teachings on particular topics that the author believes are crucial to authentic Christian discipleship. James emphasises ways in which Christians should behave toward each other and toward other people generally, and challenges worldliness and complacency, which he clearly saw as being real dangers to Christian communities that had perhaps been established for some years.

Those more accustomed to the letters of Paul may struggle at first to find a unifying argument or logical sequence. Unlike the letters of Paul, which typically fall into 2 main sections, theological teaching and then practical instructions for Christian living, James has no explanation of theology. The letter of James simply covers different aspects of Christian lifestyle in sections that can vary in length from one verse to half a chapter.

On first reading, it may seem like a collection of unrelated sayings, a bit like the book of Proverbs. It would be fair to say that James is better at lateral thinking (where one thought leads on to another that has a similar point) than logical argument. You could compare it with the collection of the sayings of Jesus in Matthew chapters 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount).

But there is a unifying theme: being a Christian disciple, says James, is not about words or faith alone, but about putting your faith into practice day by day. Every point James brings up is just as relevant to us today. For example, are we inclined to treat people unequally (perhaps without realising it)? How aware are we of the damage we could cause by careless or critical words (whether spoken or written on social media – or those e-mails copied to others)? And do we pay lip-service to helping the poor and disadvantaged or are we serious (*really* serious) about giving generously from our own resources to bless others?

2. Who wrote it?

The author describes himself in 1:1 as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”. Tradition identifies him as James, the eldest of the 4 brothers of Jesus, who are mentioned in Matthew 13:55. James seems to have taken a lead role in the church in Jerusalem (see Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18). The Jewish historian Josephus records that James and some others were stoned to death (in Jerusalem) after being condemned by the Sanhedrin for “violating the law”. Josephus says this was instigated by the High Priest Ananus, taking advantage of the gap between the death of one Roman governor and the arrival of his replacement in 62 AD¹.

By this time Christianity, which was still seen as a sect of Judaism, had spread to Jewish communities all over the Roman Empire and to the east in Persia and Babylonia. James writes to these Jewish Christian communities with his authority as the leader of the mother church in Jerusalem, just as he and the other Christian leaders did in Acts 15:19-20.

3. What's in the Letter of James?

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (XX:200)

The following summary is based on the structure identified by Richard Bauckham²:

A Greeting (1:1)

B Introduction (1:2-27)

(This contains many of the themes that are developed more fully in chapters 2-5)

- 1) 1:2-4 Facing trials
- 2) 1:5-6 Asking for wisdom
- 3) 1:9-11 Attitudes to poverty and riches
- 4) 1:12-18 Temptation and the goodness of God
- 5) 1:19-27 Hearing and doing the word of God

C Exposition (chapters 2-5)

- 1) 2:1-13 Don't show favouritism according to social status
- 2) 2:14-26 Faith that is not shown in actions is meaningless
- 3) 3:1-12 The tongue can cause huge damage
- 4) 3:13-18 True and false wisdom
- 5) 4:1-10 A call to repentance from selfishness and worldliness
- 6) 4:11-12 A warning against negative criticism
- 7) 4:13-17 A warning to business people
- 8) 5:1-6 Denunciation of landowners
- 9) 5:7-11 Encouragement to wait patiently for the Lord's Coming
- 10) 5:12 Truthful and honest speech
- 11) 5:13-18 Teaching on prayer
- 12) 5:19-20 Bringing back those who go astray

As you read James, some phrases or themes may remind you of sayings of Jesus, e.g. "let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no" (5:12; compare Matthew 5:33-37), as well as some Old Testament verses. James doesn't actually quote any of the sayings of Jesus that we have in the Gospels, but he is passionate about the same things that we see Jesus being passionate about. His aim is to help his readers (or hearers) be like Jesus.

The following beliefs and values lie behind the teaching of both Jesus and his younger brother James³:

1. Getting to the heart of what God wants from us – the spirit of the law, not the letter.
2. In the Kingdom of God all are equal – there's no room for social status and privilege.
3. Wisdom is about putting God's values into practice.
4. God is compassionate and generous, and we should be the same.
5. Jesus' disciples should stand out from the world by the way we live.

In conclusion, this is a letter for those who are serious about following Jesus. James has no time for people who aren't willing to practise what they say they believe. But he reminds us of God's generosity and compassion, and invites us to put our lives in order.

² *James: Wisdom of James, disciple of Jesus the sage* by Richard Bauckham (London: Routledge 1999); I have reworded this in more everyday language.

³ This is my paraphrase of Bauckham's longer explanation on pp 97-107 of the above book.