

James

James wrote this letter to Jewish believers in Jesus. The letter covers many different topics that teach believers to put their faith into action. This letter continues to teach us today how our faith in Jesus should change the way we act and the things we do.

Writer: James, the brother of Jesus, our Lord (Galatians 1:19). James was also a leader of the Jerusalem church for many years (Acts 15; Galatians 2:1-13). In the Jewish language, James was called Jacob or Yakob.

Date of writing: Between 40-60 AD

Original Audience: Jewish followers of Jesus. James 1:1 says, “To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” The Jewish nation of Israel had twelve tribes. During that time, many Jewish people lived in many different cities in the Roman empire.

The Reason for the Letter: The exact reason for the letter is unknown. Since James is writing to a large group of Jewish believers living in different areas, he gives more general teaching to the many churches spread across the Roman empire.

The Main Message of the Letter: James begins his letter by offering advice on different subjects: trials that test one’s faith (1:2–4); receiving wisdom from God (1:5–8); rich and poor people (1:9–11); resisting temptation (1:12–16); God’s generosity (1:17–18); anger (1:19–21); obeying God’s word (1:22–25); controlling your tongue (1:26); and the works of pure religion (1:27). Next, James teaches about some of those topics again in more depth. First, James says that treating the rich better breaks the royal command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (2:1–13). Next, he says that faith must be put into action, saying, “faith without deeds is dead” (2:14–26). Then, James warns people who aspire to be teachers (3:1), followed by the need for all people to control what they say (3:2–12). He then talks about two types of wisdom; wisdom from God and wisdom from the world. He calls his readers to repent of being double-minded and following these two types of wisdom (3:13–4:10). Finally, James finishes the letter with more short teachings on various topics: speaking evil against one’s neighbor (4:11–12); human planning (4:13–16); sins of not doing what we should (4:17); condemnation of wealthy people (5:1–6); patience and endurance (5:7–11); swearing oaths (5:12); prayer and healing (5:13–18); and restoring a believer that walked away from the faith (5:19–20).

Outline of James:

1. Short teachings for all believers (1:1–27)
2. Warning against favoritism (2:1–13)
3. Teaching on faith and deeds (2:14–26)
4. Teaching on controlling the tongue (3:1–12)
5. Teaching on two kinds of wisdom (3:13–4:10)
6. Warning against arrogance (4:11–17)
7. Warning against wealth (5:1–6)
8. Encouragement to persevere (5:7–11)
9. Commands for believers in the Church (5:12–20)

Who Was James?

In the New Testament, we learn many things about James, the Lord's brother. First, James did not follow Jesus during his earthly ministry (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 7:3–5). But he was one of the first believers to see the risen Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7). In Galatians 1:19; 2:6–13, James is a key leader in Jerusalem. As a leader of the Jerusalem church, we see him as a key person at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). To learn more about James and the other brothers and sisters of Jesus, see the study guide on the letter from Jude.



The Sayings of Jesus

James uses the saying of Jesus in his letter more than any other New Testament letter. In particular, James says many things similar to the sayings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew's Gospel. Both Jesus and James talk about the joy that comes with trials (Matthew 5:12; James 1:2). Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7), and James writes, "Ask from God, and it will be given you" (1:5). Both stress perfection: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), and "Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (1:4). Both praise meekness and endurance (Matthew 5:5, 9; James 1:12; 3:17–18), speak out against anger (Matthew 5:22; James 1:20), talk about oath-taking (Matthew 5:33–7; James 5:12), and divided loyalty (Matthew 6:24; James 4:4).

Faith and Works

The most famous section of the letter is when James talks about someone who claims to have faith but has no deeds (2:14). James says that faith without deeds is dead (2:17, 26). James even says that "a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone" (2:24). At first, this might seem to be a contradiction to the teaching of Paul that "a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16). So, do James and Paul disagree? Not at all. James and Paul sometimes use the words "deeds" or "works" differently. When Paul talks about "works" being worthless, he talks about Jewish law "works" like circumcision and other rituals. James talks about works or deeds as obeying the law of love and doing good deeds. Here are some of the ways Paul's message and James' message are the same: Paul's idea of "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6) is not much different from James's notion of faith "brought to completion" by works (2:22). Likewise, Paul's saying that faith without love is nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2) is not much different from James's claim that faith without works is dead (2:26). Finally, Paul's teaching that "it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13) lines up well with James's call for believers to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22-25).
