



REDEMPTION

MAKING MUCH OF JESUS

James 1:1

Introduction to James

4/19/2020 - 4/25/2020

MAIN POINT

The Book of James teaches us how to put our Christian faith into action.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Do you have a favorite “self-help” book or TV show you turn to for practical advice? If so, what is it and what do you like about it?

Why do you think self-help books or TV personalities like Oprah and Dr. Oz are so popular? Why are people drawn to them?

Navigating life in the chaotic, broken world we live in can be a daily challenge. Everything from parenting to time management to physical health throw obstacles our way every day, so it is common to look to the advice of others to help us learn how to function in this world. For Christians, we know that the best place to turn for advice and direction is the Word of God, and one of the most practical books we can read in all of Scripture is the Book of James. The Book of James makes a great companion piece to the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. James has a strong ethical emphasis that is consistent with the moral teachings Jesus gave to His disciples. James also echoes the denunciations Jesus spoke against religious hypocrisy. Like Jesus’ teachings, the Book of James is both a source of exhortation and comfort, reproof and encouragement. Finally, James is known for being extremely practical, yet it contains some of the most profound theological truths of the New Testament.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Before we begin our study of the Book of James, discuss what, if anything, your group members already know about this letter and James's relationship with Jesus.

| Introduction to the Author & Audience

Unlike many of the New Testament epistles, the Book of James was not written by Paul. James is named as the author in James 1:1. A number of New Testament personalities were named James, but only three are candidates for the authorship of this book. James the son of Zebedee died in A.D. 44, too early to have been the author. No tradition names James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18) as the author. This leaves James the brother of Jesus, also called James the Just, as the most likely candidate. This James is identified as the brother of Jesus in Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, and Galatians 1:19.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:7 and Acts 1:12-14. Why is it important for us to know that the resurrected Jesus appeared to James, the author of this book?

Read Acts 15:12-21. This passage comes from a meeting of apostles and elders who convened in Jerusalem to discuss what role, if any, the Jewish religious practices played in Gentiles converting to Christianity. From this passage, what can we conclude about James's reputation and authority in the early church?

Though James was not a follower of Christ during His earthly ministry (John 7:3-5), a post-resurrection appearance convinced James that Jesus is indeed the Christ (Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 15:7). James later led the Jerusalem church, exercising great influence there. Because the Book of James is in the canon of Scripture, it is hugely important to us to know that James had personal interaction with Jesus after His resurrection and James was regarded by his peers as a pillar of the faith. These support the credibility of his teachings and the authority he brings to our faith today.

Read James 1:1. What do we learn from the opening of James' letter?

James's audience is described as "the 12 tribes in the Dispersion." What does this mean, and what does it set us up to expect?

James was probably written between A.D. 48 and 52, though nothing in the epistle suggests a more precise date. James's death in A.D. 62 or 66 means the epistle was written before this time. Similarities to Gospel traditions and Pauline themes are suggestive. For example, James referred to himself as a slave, or servant, of God as Paul often does in his letters. The reference to "the 12

tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1) suggests the letter was written to Jewish Christians living in or around Palestine. This gives the letter a more broad audience than many of Paul’s letters, however it also helps us understand James originally wrote primarily to address Jewish Christians.

If you were going to disciple a Jewish convert to Christianity, what would be some of the differences between Jewish practices and Christian practices that you would want to highlight?

| Message and Purpose

As a general epistle, James was addressed to a broad audience (Jewish Christians) rather than a specific audience (e.g., Christians at Ephesus only). There is an obvious concern to address internal and external difficulties being faced by Jewish Christian congregations. Externally they were facing trials (James 1:2), particularly oppression of various sorts exerted by wealthy landowners. It does not appear that the oppression was religious in nature. Internally it appears that dissension was caused by a lack of self-control (James 1:13-17), uncontrolled speech, and false teachings that led to a misunderstanding of true religion (James 1:19-27; 2:1-4; 3:1-8), favoritism toward the wealthy (James 2:1-13), and selfish ambition that led to murder and criticism (James 4:1-12).

Like James’s audience, Christians today continue to deal with both external oppression and internal dissension. What are some of the key ways these two issues manifest themselves in our faith experiences today?

Look at the list of issues that triggered internal dissension in the early church. Do any of these strike a nerve for you? If so, which one(s) and why?

James addressed these issues primarily through the application of principles defined by the Old Testament wisdom tradition. The solutions he named reflected the wisdom from above that comes from the “Father of lights” (James 1:17) who gives wisdom generously to those who ask for it. Wisdom is required for proper speech in worship and in determining who ought to teach (James 1:19-27; 3:1-8). Wisdom is also needed to avoid internal conflicts that create dissension within congregations (James 3:13-18; 4:1-12). The theme of faith in action is also important (James 1:19-27; 2:14-26); James demonstrated that faith that does not express itself in good works is useless. Another theme of the epistle is ethics, especially social justice (James 2:1-13; 4:1-12; 5:1-12).

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Based on today's overview, what do you hope to learn from our study of the Book of James?

Of the major themes we will encounter—trials and temptations, faith and works, wisdom, and social justice—which are you most curious to learn more about? Which do you think will challenge you the most?

Challenge your group members to read through the Book of James before next week's meeting.

PRAYER

As you close in prayer, pray over the upcoming study through James. Ask God to open His Word to your group in new ways, and ask Him to begin today preparing you for the life-changing truths and convictions that will surface when you dig into His Word.

COMMENTARY

| An Overview of James

The author presented himself in 1:1 as James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. This brief identification showed two facts about him. First, he was well-known. He introduced himself only with his first name, assuming that his readers could identify him. Second, he showed great humility. He wanted to be known only as a follower of Jesus. The most likely author of this letter from the numerous James in the New Testament is the Lord's brother (Mark 6:3; Acts 15:13). The letter contains several references showing possible influence by Jesus' words on the author (cf. Jas. 4:11 and Matt. 7:1-2). The early church also accepted the Lord's half brother as the author of the writing. James was a younger half brother of Jesus and a child of Joseph and Mary.

The book of James is a letter (an epistle), though only the greeting conforms to the ancient Greek form exemplified in Paul's letters, especially Galatians. Epistles were often used as a means of spurring the recipients to a change in behavior or belief based on the authoritative word and guidance of the sender.

The content of James moves quickly from one subject to another. James quickly covers such subjects as trials, hearing God's Word, the tongue, and the right use of wealth. This rambling style resembles the approach of Proverbs in the Old Testament. James omits personal references, prayer requests, and travel plans. This may indicate that the letter was written to several Christian groups scattered over a large area. James made use of catchwords to move from one subject to another. Sometimes, no logical progression or transition is apparent.

James's inspired purpose in writing is clear: Profession of faith in Christ must issue in Christian conduct marked by the highest ethical and moral standards. James stressed that genuine faith issues in good works on others' behalf. Some believers were content to profess faith without putting it into action. James questioned the validity of that kind of faith. Although some of his teachings may seem contradictory to the teachings of Paul that stress justification by faith alone, James and Paul were not at odds but agreed: People are saved by grace through faith in Christ, not by good works, although saved people perform good works.