

The Letter of James 1: THE “HOW TO ...” BOOK

James 1:19-27 [MW19-07]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 17 February 2019

Who's read the Letter of James?

- it doesn't take too long
- easy reading, only five chapters, 108 verses

Let's just have a “Quick Quiz” and see what you know! [Slides]

You may be interested to know that

- although sometimes thought one of the earliest NT writings it actually took quite a while to become an accepted part of our New Testament
- even today, with most people, it does not occupy a top position
- the Letter of James is not usually mentioned in the same breath as John or Romans, Luke or Galatians

The question of who exactly wrote this letter is interesting

- the letter begins by saying simply
From James, a servant of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ
- James is a common name in New Testament times and the accompanying phrase could have described any Christian suggesting this particular “James” needed no further introduction
- there are four “James” mentioned in the New Testament:
 - son of Zebedee and brother of John, disciple and apostle
 - son of Alphaeus, also one of the apostles
 - the father of an apostle named Judas
 - the half brother of Jesus, who later became leader of the Jerusalem church
- it is this last James who is widely regarded as author of the letter yet questions remain ... why is there no mention of his relationship to Jesus? or his position in the Jerusalem church?
- surely this would have established his credentials and given his words the authority they deserved
- was it humility, his sole claim to authority being spiritual servanthood? or was it something else?

Biblical scholar Moffat thinks it likely the writer was simply a teacher called James

- about whose life and story we have no information at all while others speculate that the letter is a sermon preached by James taken down by someone else and issued to the Church at large
- this would certainly explain the lack of references to Jesus, the Resurrection etc for a single sermon does not try to cover the whole range of the faith

The letter is addressed to: *the twelve tribes scattered all over the world*

- there is no specific geographic destination but it seems to have been intended for Jewish Christians living outside Jerusalem and was probably passed from church to church
- the letter contains no specific references to time or events which makes it tricky to date accurately

However the consensus seems to be somewhere between AD 44

- when James became leader of the Jerusalem church and AD 62 when this James was martyred
- a date of around 46 AD is thought reasonable making this letter one of the oldest books in the New Testament

Perhaps though the Letter of James' greatest claim to fame

- is that Reformation theologian Martin Luther regarded it as an "epistle of straw" and relegated it to the appendix of the Bible
- Luther objected to James' stressing the necessity of "works" as against being saved by faith
- with the benefit of time and a wider view today, it all seems a bit of a misunderstanding yet it gave this letter a bad press for a long time
- James was not arguing that a person could be "saved" by doing good works his point was that if you have faith, works will naturally follow
- James was aiming at 'freeloaders' who claimed that because they had faith they did not need to do good deeds
- faith and works are both necessary, for James and St Paul they are two parts of God's work in us
- James just said very clearly and very bluntly: if you say you have faith but don't do any good works, then you really don't have faith!

So there you have the Letter of James

- it almost wasn't accepted as part of the New Testament it was dismissed by Luther
- and is still regarded as somewhat second class today

Yet it seems to me the Letter of James is actually a very important part of the New Testament

- essential even, though it is often overlooked because the Letter of James is *the*, that's right *the* "How to ..." book of the Christian life

From fixing a car to wall-papering a bedroom "how to" books explain how things are done

- with helpful pointers and colourful illustrations the Letter of James offers practical instruction and encouragement to Christians
- it deals with problems and trials, prejudice, improper speech judging one another, leaving God out of plans, even bitterness
- just like a *how to* book, James explains in a few words the responsibilities of a Christian supplying apt illustrations from real-life - like shipping and horseback riding

The Letter of James is perhaps the most practical book in the New Testament

- James' basic premise is that when a person truly believes in something they will act on that belief
- with this letter James is sounding a wake-up call to Christians: "Get your life in line with what you say you believe!"

One writer says:

In some ways the Letter of James is the most authoritarian in the New Testament. James issues instructions more profusely than any of the other writers. In the short space of 108 verses there are 54 commands!

So, to illustrate this, let's have a quick look at the practical instructions for Christian living
- from today's reading, James 1:19-27

James says be quick to hear and slow to speak

- this has more than a trace of humour about it
literally meaning "hurry up and hear"
- Christians are to be ready to hear the Word of God
as well as all godly counsel and admonition
and being always prepared to listen to what others have to say
- James has much to say about speaking
and in this falls into line with the wisdom literature of his time and the Old Testament
- Greek wisdom noted that humans have two ears and one tongue
so that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak
- the Book of Proverbs abounds with similar instruction:
talk too much and you are done for (Prov 13:3)
even fools seem smart when they are quiet (Prov 17:28)

James continues with the instruction to be slow to get angry

- for those who are quick-tempered can't do things God's way
in fact those who lose their temper give people the wrong idea about Christianity

The next verse says to stop doing anything immoral or evil

- and remember the message which is planted within
The Message translation puts it very well
*So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener,
God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life*

The following verses highlight one of James' major themes: hearing and doing

- you can't just hear God's message, it's not enough just to read the Bible
you have to put what is read and heard into practice!
- otherwise you are like a person who looks in the mirror first thing in the morning
and then forgets what you saw
- of course there are some things about appearance that cannot be changed
but when the mirror says: "Wash" or "Shave" or "Comb" or "Brush"
we should at least do as we are told, James reminds us:
that what is heard in the holy place must be lived in the market place

James concludes this section by talking about 'real religion' or 'true worship'

- he makes a point about the tongue which he develops further later in the letter:
if a person can't control their tongue, they're not living God's way
and they're fooling themselves if they think they are Christian
- in fact they are wasting their time

As The Message says:

Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived.

This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air

James reminds us that what is important is how a person lives

- how they show what they believe by what they *do*
not what they *say*, nor what religious ceremonies they observe
- all through history people have tried to make ritual and liturgy
a substitute for sacrifice and service
- made religion splendid *within* the church, while neglecting it *outside* the church

James says that God seeks a practical type of godliness

- which takes a compassionate interest in others
and keeps one's own life clean
- and the way to do this is to reach out to the homeless and the loveless
and guard against being corrupted by the world

All worship, religion, church attendance, Bible study

- is futile unless it sends people out to love God by loving others
and enables people to walk more purely in the tempting ways of the world

One writer derives a 'practical checklist' from these verses:

- do I read the Bible with a humble desire to have God challenge, teach, change me
- am I anxious to have my tongue bridled?
- do I justify my temper or want victory over it?
- how do I react when someone starts to tell an off-colour joke?
- does my faith show in deeds of kindness to those who cannot repay me? [PP slide]

[space for reflection]

A little girl got home from Sunday school, where she had been taught the verse: 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.' She asked her mother, when she repeated the verse, what it meant. Her mom said, "Well, it means that when you are good and kind and thoughtful and obedient, you are letting Christ's light shine in your life before all who know you." The very next Sunday in Sunday school, the little girl got in a bit of a fracas with another student and created somewhat of an uproar - to such an extent that the Sunday school teacher had to go and find her mother to get her settled down again in the class. Her mother was concerned when she got to the classroom and said, "Sweetie, don't you remember about letting your light shine for the Lord before men?" The girl blurted out, "Mom, I have blowed myself out."

The Letter of James gives practical instruction and down to earth guidance

- in how not to "blow ourselves out"
or more positively, how to ... keep our light shining for Jesus
- the letter's aim is to enable followers of Jesus to shine brightly
for the benefit of others
that the good things of life promised by God may be enjoyed by all

That seems to me reason enough to have it as part of our Bible

- and even more reason to read it and act on it!

QUICK QUIZ

1. The Letter of James comes between which two New Testament books?
a) 2 Peter, 1 John
b) Titus, Hebrews
c) Hebrews, 1 Peter *
d) 3 John, Jude
2. This letter has how many chapters?
a) six
b) Five *
c) Three
d) One
3. Supply the missing word in this verse:
So faith by itself, if it has no _____ is dead (2:17)
a) prayer
b) hope
c) love
d) works *
4. One of the striking things about this letter is it makes no reference to:
a) resurrection *
b) The devil
c) Jesus Christ
d) baptism
5. Although having the title "James", this letter was actually written by:
a) Paul
b) Peter
c) Timothy
d) Luke
e) we're not exactly sure *