



# The Letter of James

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## Chapters 1-5

### Pure Religion

The letter of James is the only letter in the New Testament written by James. There are three James mentioned in the New Testament, James the brother of John, Son of Zebedee and one of the twelve disciples (Luke 6:14), James the son of Alphaeus, and one of the twelve (Luke 6:15), James the Just, brother of Jesus and the first Bishop of the Church of Jerusalem.

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:  
Greetings. --James 1:1*

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The church has traditionally held the author of this letter to be James the Just, the brother of Jesus and first Bishop of Jerusalem. We read about him in Acts 15 where he presided over the first council of the Church in Jerusalem (see also Acts 21 and Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 12; Jude 1:1).

James' letter is addressed broadly to "the twelve tribes in the dispersion". Before the new covenant, this phrase would have specifically applied to the natural born descendants of the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who had been exiled (dispersed) outside of the physical geographic boundaries of Israel, the Promised Land. In light of the coming of the Messiah and the New Covenant, the writers of the New Testament apply this language to the spiritual children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that descendents "by faith" in the promise, Jew and Gentile alike. For example, Peter uses the same terminology as he writes to the churches in Asia Minor when he calls them "elect exiles of the dispersion". In this letter, James is addressing the entire Church of Jesus Christ.

His primary concern in the letter is for the manifestation of authentic Christianity. There is no way for one human being to perceive the true spiritual state of another person's soul only God perceives the heart. What we do see are external religious piety and expression. James is primarily concerned about those who would be tested and refined as through fire by the trials of this world and prove to be authentic or inauthentic on the Day of the Lord.

It is not those who merely claim to be "religious" or say "I have faith" that are the true people of God. The authentic Christian will bear the marks of spiritual authenticity in his speech and in his good works. Religion is the external manifestation of the inward heart orientations toward God and others. James writes:

*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled*



*before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. James 1:26-27*

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So for James, religion can be worthless or it can be pure and undefiled before God. The test and the difference is in the speech and actions of the “religious” person. A person who shows forth pure religion will manifest: a bridled tongue, generous actions toward the needy and a holiness of life.

The period of trial, suffering and waiting in which the exiled people of God are living is actually a joyous opportunity for their faith to be tested, perfected and completed (1:2-4)

There are four disciplines which are essential for the believers in the midst of the test of faith. Through believing prayer for wisdom (1:5-8), through lowliness with respect to wealth (1:9-11), through steadfastness in the face of temptation (1:12-15) and through responsiveness to God’s word (1:16-25), the full manifestation of the fruits of faith will show forth in speech, actions and character of those who truly have pure religion.

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## The Test of Faith: Worthless or Pure Religion (1:1-27)

The opening and closing chapters of the letter serves to provide an eschatological context to provide perspective on the realities of the people of God. Until the “coming of the Lord” (5:7) the exiled people of God (1:1) are going through a period of trial and suffering. In this period, the godly are downtrodden, the wicked are wealthy, temptation and sin abound.

To James, the period of trial, suffering and waiting in which the exiled people of God are living is actually a joyous opportunity for their faith to be tested, perfected and completed (1:2-4)

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*  
-- James 1:2-4

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There are four disciplines which are essential for the believers in the midst of this test of their faith. Through believing prayer for wisdom (1:5-8), through lowliness with respect to wealth (1:9-11), through



steadfastness in the face of temptation (1:12-15) and through responsiveness to God's word (1:16-25), the full manifestation of the fruits of faith will show forth in speech, actions and character of those who truly have pure religion. The next three sections will focus on three main areas where the "religion" or "faith" of the professed Christian will be "perfected and completed" or proven to be "religion that is worthless" (1:26).

## **The Call to Generosity to the Poor: Partiality and Generosity (2:1-26)**

The first area of fruitfulness for authentic Christian faith is in matters of wealth and poverty. The allure of the wealth of this world is in direct opposition to faith in the Kingdom of God. As Jesus taught, you cannot serve both God and money (Luke 16:13).

The first temptation is to show partiality to the rich. James instructs:

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. <sup>2</sup>For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, <sup>3</sup>and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? --James 2:1-4*

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The rich of this world need to be warned of the allure of wealth (see 4:13-5:6). They are to be very careful that in with their wealth they do not sin against the Sovereign Lord and humble poor. On the contrary those who have been entrusted with earthly wealth should be given in "good works" to the poor. So a key area where faith is tested, completed and perfected is in the actions of generosity. The heroes commended for their faith in the Scriptures such as Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25) manifest their faith by their actions. Good words of faith that are not matched with good deeds of faith, is a dead faith (2:17, 26)

## **Bridling the Tongue (3:1-12)**

The speech of the tongue is powerful index of the heart. Jesus warned the Pharisees of the defilement that comes from the mouth (see Matt. 15:10-20). The mouth reveals or betrays the state of the heart. James warns of the potential self-deception. When a man says "I am religious" and at the same time has an "unbridled tongue"—he "deceives his heart" (1:26).

James argues that the tongue should be bridled like a wild horse--that is why the teaching ministry should be constrained to those who show such self-control (3:1). The tongue needs to be controlled—not out of control. Ships have rudders, horses respond to the bit and bridle. A controlled tongue can control a person's sanctification positively.

An out of control tongue can do great harm—like a wildfire in a forest (2:5-8)



# The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

*<sup>7</sup> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. —James 3:7-12*

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While no human can tame the tongue—God can! This is why we turn to the 4 disciplines mentioned in chapter one, prayer for wisdom from above being of primary importance. The good fruit that can come from the tongue is only produced by the “wisdom from above”. This wisdom is attained by prayer in faith (1:5-8). You will be able to tell whether you have indeed received the gift of wisdom from “the Father of lights” the giver of “every perfect gift from above” (1:17) because of its character.

It is not “false to the truth” (the word of truth, 1:18; the implanted word, 1:21). Rather,

*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. —James 3:17-18*

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## Keeping oneself Unstained from the World (4:1-5:6)

In chapter 4, James now turns to his third fruit the call to personal holiness. Earlier, he had described the holy life of pure and undefiled religion as a call to “keep oneself unstained from the world” (1:27). The occasion of conflicts and fights in interpersonal relationships actually serve to reveal the “stain of the world” within the unperfected and uncompleted heart.

James asks,

*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? <sup>2</sup> You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. <sup>4</sup> You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. —James 4:1-4*

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The conflicts are rooted in “friendship with the world”. The pure and undefiled heart cannot be friends with the world. The call to the Christian is to recognize the three forces of evil at play sin, the world and Satan. The call is to brokenness and repentance in resisting sin and Satan.

Drawing on the “word of truth” James exhorts:



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*<sup>5</sup> Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? <sup>6</sup> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” <sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. —James 4:5-10*

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He again warns them connects his three themes of an undefiled heart, a bridled tongue and generous works in a stern warning to be careful in our speech to one another (4:11-12) and a warning against pride of wealth and neglect of the poor (4:13-5:6).

## **Patience, Integrity, Prayer and Mutual Accountability (5:7-19)**

As James closes his letter, he returns to the themes with which he began. They are living in exile from their true home during a time of trial and testing while they wait for the “coming of the Lord” (5:7)—“the Judge is standing at the Door (5:9).

Therefore, they should be people of patience and steadfastness, like Job (5:7-11). They should be a people of integrity who have no need to make vows because their actions always align with their words (5:12). They should be people who are persistent in prayer for one another on all occasions (5:13-18). And finally they should hold one another mutually accountable to not “wander from the truth” but to rather bring the sinner back from his “wandering” in order to save “his soul from death” (5:20)

James is a pastor whose heart for the church is authenticity and faithfulness until the Lord returns!