

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Letter by James

Letter by Jude

Readings: *James 1:1-5:20; Jude 1-25*

Reflections:

- Letter by James: James and Jude were both half-brothers of Jesus. James' name was actually "Jacob" just as Jesus actual name was Joshua. Good Hebrew names! Jesus' brothers were mentioned in the biographies of Jesus (see Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 3:31; 6:3; Luke 8:19; John 2:12) but did not follow him during his life (see John 7:5). Jesus apparently appeared to James after the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:7) and became an important leader in the church of Jerusalem (see Acts 12:17; 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). Apparently James held a high view of maintaining the Torah even as a follower of Christ (see Galatians 2:12). Church tradition states that he was the key leader in Jerusalem and died a martyr there in 62 CE. The accounts of his death indicate that he was stoned by the religious leaders of Jerusalem for defending Jesus as the Messiah. There is something interesting to note about the content of James' letter. The person that James' teaching parallels the most closely is Jesus. As you read James and reflect on Jesus' teaching you will see striking parallels. There is a very strong affirmation that true trust in God results in action. Most conservative scholars hold that James' was the author of this book, possibly with the help of a scribe. Some debate this and suggest it may be a book dedicated to James that captures his teaching in light of the fluent Greek used and the suggestion that James was only been fluent in Aramaic. All of this is speculative of course.
- Salutation: James rather than referring to himself as the brother of our Lord simply calls himself the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, the full title given to Jesus as both Lord and Messiah. James familiar with the Diaspora of Hebrews uses a similar term referring to the persecuted early church, "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations."
- Preparation for oppression – trials help development: Persecution throughout this time against Christians was widespread. James calls his readers to see how God will use this suffering to mature their faith. In this refinement process we can choose to have joy, not in the pain but in the process of drawing nearer to Christ and being changed into his likeness (see notes on Matthew 5:1-12).

- Seeking wisdom: In times of suffering, we feel the need for wisdom. Faith, our trust relationships with God enables us to stay completely focused on God until we receive from God what we need. God will provide the wisdom we need often through the Spirit working through us or other Christ-followers but we must remain focused in our trust in God even when he chooses to be silent for a time as a way of refining our motives. When we fail to trust God, we end up trying to save ourselves. In this way, we do not remain focused on the purposes of God but can get in the way of God's plans and in turn create instability that works against his purposes.
- Riches will fade: James teaches as Jesus does in the inversion of the social order – the poor are often spiritually rich and the wealthy are often spiritually poor. This is often most clearly seen when comparing Christ-followers from wealthy countries and those from poorer countries. Money can't buy you love or keep you happy! Therefore in times of suffering, don't look to save yourself through money. Allow the struggle to make you poor and find security in your high position in Christ.
- Temptation comes from within: James here describes the process of temptation giving birth to sin and to death. If you feed your desires in time you will be dragged away into sin. If you keep feeding that sin in time it will bring death into your life and relationships. The key is not to try to have no desires but to be very, very careful what desires you feed and what desires you starve. Whatever you feed will get bigger and stronger.
- Goodness comes from God: James encourages his readers to not focus on their unmet desires but rather on the good gifts God gives to us and how he speaks into our lives (the word of truth) bringing new life to us. In this way our lives become expressions of the first and the best of all he has created. This is a good reminder that when facing temptation we should not focus on the sin but rather on God's provision. Don't just resist temptation and sin, replace it with something better.
- Consistency between faith and conduct – word produces righteousness: James provides some very practical wisdom. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. This is excellent advice for any relationship, particularly one's relationship with God. When we suffer it is easy to get angry at God and others and to shut down. James says that we should purify our lives and completely embrace the word (his heart for us as revealed by Jesus) he has planted in our lives. Only then can we experience the intimacy of his love with us through the tough times.
- Knowledge is not enough: Here in this context James seems to move from the idea of listening to God speak to us and then obeying what God is saying to us as second image. Rather than just listening, we can also stare into the written word, Scripture, to help us see ourselves and our context more clearly. As we listen to what God says to us through the Spirit and at the same time look into what he has already revealed in Scripture, we are then in the best possible position to know his heart for us. The key though is still to act on it!

- True religion: Here is the only context in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) that the word religion is used positively. What is interesting is that true religion is described as not being religious at all. Watching what you say, caring for the vulnerable and living pure, counter-cultural lives: that is religion God accepts. There is no mention of doctrine, ritual, magical formulas, or paths to enlightenment. Now we must remember that this is religion we are talking about, not relationship. Like the centurion in Acts whose gifts to the poor and prayers were acceptable to God as an offering, those who start by caring for the poor and living a counter-culturally pure life must still come into relationship with God through Christ. Acceptable religion is just the starting point to move us towards true relationship. So with this said, we should never confuse that somehow we can just practice good works and be saved. James is just saying the religion we think God wants he doesn't want!
- Partiality not of faith: It is interesting James, the brother of Jesus uses the phrase, "glorious Lord Jesus Christ". He is definitely honoring Jesus with the highest respect possible. James uses the example of what happens in their house churches to remind them that the poor should be honored rather than treated poorly. As Jesus taught, "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God." Luke 6:20
- Any violation disrespects: We see here in James two very close parallels to Jesus Sermon on the Mount. The Royal Law or the King's Law is for us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. James reminds his readers that the love ethic of Jesus points out that we can't take a proud stance. We must embrace a mercy based form of righteousness before God (see Matthew 5:7) and guard carefully against hypocrisy because even if we break part of the Law we are guilty of breaking all of it. The Law that gives freedom is not the Torah but the law of love and mercy, the two greatest commands of Jesus (See Matthew 22:36; Mark 12:28).
- Changed life evidence of faith: A true trust based relationship with God will result in action. It is like saying, "I love you, I just don't want to have anything to do with you." If you don't act like you love someone, then you don't actually love them. Trusting God is the same way, James points out. As Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." John 14:15 (also see John 14:21, 23-24)
- Faith without works: James continues this theme and points out that even the demons do something because they believe in God...they shake with fear!
- Examples of obedient faith: Some see this as James contradicting what Paul taught in Romans 4. It would appear this at first glance, it is better to see this as James clarifying a misunderstanding of Paul rather than contradicting him. Good works alone can't save a person. But faith that finds no practical expression in a person's life is not actually faith. Therefore as James points out, the two work together. There are actions and expressions that reflect our true faith in God. That is what it means to live as a friend of God just as Abraham was a friend of God. James then goes on to point out one of their own family's ancestors, Rahab the prostitute. She is listed in the genealogy of Jesus (see Matthew 1:5)

and is another example of someone whose trust in God resulted in action. Living faith, real faith, true faith always expresses itself in action.

- **Practicing what is preached:** James now focuses on the disproportionate impact of the tongue. It seems so small and the words we say so insignificant but in fact what we say can have massive impact in shaping people's lives and community, for good or for evil. God created the entire universe with a word. We are made in the image of God and our words have the power to shape and define how people understand the truth about God, life and themselves. This is why James points out how vital it is within house church and community for people to be very careful what they say and what they teach. James reminds his readers that those who teach will be judged more strictly. This is a good warning to anyone who would want to take the microphone and try to tell people how to live. Can your life stand up under scrutiny or are you being hypocritical?
- **Speech to reflect purity:** James nails the evil of the human tongue. Again as we reflect on how when God speaks things then come into existence. We humans have a powerful ability made in the image of God to shape reality by the things we say. With a word a President declares war. With a simple sentence a parent destroys the self-worth of their child. With a comment a community is divided. Only through our hearts being changed from the inside out will what flows out of our mouths transform from words of unbelief to words of trust, from words of criticism to words of affirmation and from words of deception to words of truth. James uses the image of a fresh water spring flowing from within us to parallel what Jesus said in John 7:38 to the woman at the well.
- **Wisdom shown by good life:** James continues to point to the heart as the true battlefield of the human struggle. There is a kind of human wisdom that is rooted in ambition and bitter envy (angry because someone has more than we have). True wisdom (the right way to look at life) comes from humility. It reflects many of the character qualities Jesus outlines in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11 (also see Galatians 5:22-23). The culmination of growing to be like Christ in God's approach to life is to become a peacemaker in the world, bringing reconciliation that produces a harvest of people getting right with God. Again it is interesting to see how closely James follows Jesus' core teachings.
- **Materialism brings conflict:** Whenever we have a broken relationship, we always know where to look for the problem. Someone has something wrong in their heart as they are looking wrongly to a person to meet all their needs rather than looking to God. This self-centered rather than God-centered approach is what leads to division and fights. If we come to God with right motives that focus on serving others, God will be happy to meet all of our needs in his time and in his way. James concludes this section by pointing out you can only be friends with God or with the world. You can't be friends with both because the two are in conflict with each other. We have to choose who we will be friends with. We see again how over and over relationship with God is painted as intimate friendship.

- Godliness brings joy: This first verse could be translated either as God longing for our spirit or God's Spirit longing for us. In either translation, God deeply loves us and wants an exclusive, intimate relationship with us. The key to this intimate relationship begins with humility, abandoning our will to God. James pauses here to give a very detailed description of what true repentance is: what a broken and contrite heart looks like and what seeking God with all your heart means. As Jesus proclaimed: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."
- Obeying versus judging: Here James again takes a page out of Jesus teaching as he puts in his own words Jesus' teaching on hypocrisy and judging others in Matthew 7:3-5. Who are we to judge someone else? We need to take the plank out of our own eye!
- Exhortations for suffering saints – Perspective and priorities: James points out a kind of pride that attempts to live independent of God and boasts as we have complete control of our lives. We can be distracted from doing what God actually wants us to do by trying to build our own success.
- Judgment against oppressors: James has harsh warnings against the rich. To be extremely wealthy, often a person will have to take advantage of someone along the way. Either by overcharging customers or under paying workers. If we are generous, committed to being fair, and are fully abandoned to God, we will not acquire or keep extreme wealth but will seek to invest in the poor. The money we try to keep for ourselves will come under judgment. We should not focus on money James declares but rather focus on what God has called us to do. Much of the perceived wealth of the Western world is built on the backs of oppressing the common person in the East. There are various forms of slavery and it is still practiced today in countries so that we in West can live wealthy lives. This God will judge.
- Steadfastness in suffering: James encourages the early church as it suffers to be patient. Remember in Jerusalem, the community that James led, Jesus had prophesied its destruction. In a very real sense, by the time James wrote this Jesus was about to come on the clouds of heaven (an image of Jesus using the armies of the nations to judge Israel – see notes on Matthew 26:64 and Mark 14:62). As we wait for God's will to be fulfilled we must cling to God's compassion and mercy. He will be faithful to those who remain faithful to him.
- Rash oaths: James basically quotes Jesus word for word from Matthew 5:37.
- Prayer and suffering: James ends his epistle by teaching on the power of prayer, particularly in restoring people who have sinned or those who are sick. The first Christians depended on God for healing the same way we today depend on doctors and hospitals. God was their only hope for being restored to health. We also see the importance of complete trust in God (faith), humble honesty (confession) and seeking God through prayer. God's power to change us from the inside out both spiritually and physically comes from us abandoning our lives to God. As we align with God's heart, he then guides us how to pray and we through prayer speak out words that bring life, healing and restoration. Rather than our tongues

being used to ruin people's lives through our praying with people for their needs, we can be agents of God's power and grace (see notes on Ephesians 6:10-20 for Paul's parallel teaching).

- Mutual watchfulness: James concludes his letter simply by encouraging his readers to be good shepherds to each other, to own each other as Jesus taught in John 10. We are to leave the ninety-nine to go seek out the one that wandered off. In this way we live out God's parental heart in community as we own and care for each other.
- Letter by Jude: We know little about Jude, the brother of Jesus. We know like James he didn't follow Jesus but later became a church leader after the resurrection. It is possible that James led him to faith in Jesus as the Messiah after Jesus appeared to James. We know by Acts 15:27-32 that Jude, also called Judas, was recognized as a prophet and was respected within the Jerusalem church as a key leader. This letter by Jude has been debated by scholars regarding its authenticity. Some of it relates to its content as it draws from a Hebrew writing written in the inter-Testamental period, the Book of Enoch. Some of the debate is the style of the Greek and suggesting that Jude the brother of Jesus would not have known Greek this well. Some of it relates to references that appear to be pointed at Gnosticism. In any case, most early Church leaders viewed it as authentic and it was ultimately accepted as being original with Jude. The letter could have been written as early as 60 CE or as late as 90 CE. It is hard to place an exact time of the writing of this letter.
- Salutation: Jude describes himself as James does: a servant of Jesus Christ. He also refers to himself as the brother of James who was better known across the church. This was a circular letter to go to all Christians and so he wanted them to know his identity and authority. Jude or Judah was a very common name in Israel. We see his emphasis on mercy, peace and love in his greeting. These are the heart qualities that were viewed as the defining qualities of living in relationship with God through Jesus.
- Contend for the faith: Jude is writing about leaders who are misusing the grace of God as a license for self-indulgence and in turn deny Jesus and his message. We should anticipate that if we teach grace properly some people will take it as a free ticket to do what they want. We must teach both grace and abandonment to the Lordship of Jesus so that people understand the truly relational nature of living in the grace of Christ. James again honors his brother with the highest terms he can use: "Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." Jude is clear like James that Jesus is the only one true King, God with them.
- Judgment upon ungodly: Jude now gives three illustrations as warnings. Two of the three have to do with sexual immorality within the early story of Israel. One has to do with the angels who rebelled against God. Here we see a very brief and interesting window into what the early Church understood about the over-arching meta-narrative and particularly the fall of Satan and the angels that rebelled with him.
- False teachers: Jude now quotes from the Book of Enoch about the archangel Michael disputing with the devil over the body of Moses. This is an interesting story and apparently

Jude discerned that this story was indeed true and served as a noteworthy example. What is the main point? Don't treat spiritual battles lightly. Don't self-indulge foolishly and don't think you are above spiritual warfare. There is a pride that wants to treat all spiritual realities as insignificant. Jude mentions Cain, Balaam, and Korah – all classic examples of people rebelling against God out of their self-centeredness. Jude states clearly that these leaders are bad news and completely dead spiritually. He is using the strongest language possible to warn his readers against this kind of leader and this approach to spirituality.

- **Prophecy of judgment:** Again Jude quotes from the book of Enoch and a prophecy of judgment. These words all line up with what we know from the teachings of Jesus. All those who live self-centered rather than God-centered lives should take strong warning!
- **Admonition to be faithful:** Jude refers to the apostles as he himself was called a prophet and would not have considered himself an apostle. He shares their warning as well about what how people will turn away from God in the last days. The last days within Jerusalem, Jude's home city, would have been in the 60's CE as the city and Temple were destroyed in 70 CE. If this letter was written early then Jude may be referring to the spiritual condition they were facing at that time. If it was written later, he may be looking forward to the future time of Christ's return. In any case, Jude's counsel was simply this: build your faith, remain intimately connected to God through the Spirit, keep yourself centered in God's love, and wait for his mercy! It isn't our external world that will keep us safe and strong. We must be changed from the inside out by the Spirit, God's perfect love and an ever deepening trust-based friendship.
- **Obligations toward the erring:** Jude reminds them of their need to own each other and take responsibility to care for each other. We are to live other-centered lives where we invest in each other's spiritual growth. Like his brothers, Jesus and James, both encouraged, we must be like good shepherds to each other (see John 10).
- **Benediction:** Jude ends with a beautiful prayer and promise. God is able to take care of us in all things and to truly complete his work of changing us from the inside out. He alone through Jesus has the power to do this and because of this he deserves all the credit, now and forever!