

Course Outline

Faith Without Works is Dead

James

Introduction to James

I. Setting

- a. Early church tradition strongly supports the identification of the author of this book with James the (half-) brother of Jesus. James the apostle, brother of John and son of Zebedee, was martyred in AD 44 (see Acts 12:2), probably before this letter was written. The other apostle named James was much less well known. But the brother of Jesus became the influential head of the early church in Jerusalem (see especially Acts 15). A skeptic during Jesus' lifetime (Mark 3:21, John 7:5), he was probably converted by means of a special resurrection appearance to him (I Corinthians 15:7). Modern critics have at times supported theories of pseudonymity, particularly on two grounds: (1) James' style is very good Greek, better than we would expect of a Hebrew carpenter's son. But Hellenism had made deep inroads into first-century Galilee,¹²⁶ and the epistle may well have undergone stages of redaction.¹²⁷ (2) James' teaching is extremely Jewish. He speaks of the church as "twelve tribes" (1:1) and "the synagogue" (2:2) and refers to Jesus only in 1:1 and 2:1 and never unambiguously to the Holy Spirit. But this is only to be expected if the letter is what it claims to be—the product of early Jewish-Christianity. And the letter's Christian ethos is amply demonstrated by its numerous allusions to the Sermon on the Mount.¹²⁸ Tellingly, objections (1) and (2) in large measure cancel each other out!
- b. If the letter is authentic, it must be dated prior to the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus, in AD 62. If James' insistence on supplementing faith with works is a reaction to Paul's letters (perhaps to an overly one-sided appropriation of them), then it should probably be dated to the early 60s. If James was writing independently of Paul's teaching, then this may well be the earliest canonical book we have, from the period after James' ascendancy and before Paul's (i.e., AD 44–49). Evangelical commentators slightly tend to

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favor the early date in the 40s.

- c. The “early and late rains” of 5:7 best fit the climate of Israel and support a Palestinian provenance. The rich unbelievers oppressing the poor Christians (2:6-7) in an agricultural context (5:1-6) fits the practice of many Jewish (and a few Roman) landlords owning large holdings of land in Palestine and Syria and relying on migrant workers for labor, many of whom were often unfairly treated. Given the tension in the early church between Christian and non-Christian Jews, such marginalization could well have been exacerbated for James’ Jewish-Christian community. The reference to the *diaspora* in 1:1 suggests that James’ audience lives outside of Palestine, perhaps in Syria. But if the scattering refers to the dispersion of Christians after Stephen’s stoning (Acts 8:1), they might merely have moved elsewhere in Israel outside Jerusalem.

II. Structure

- a. Perhaps more so than with any other New Testament epistle, the structure of James is substantially in doubt. Older commentators, on analogy with gospel form criticism, tended to see James as a classic example of stringing together loosely related concepts. They likened it to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (most notably Proverbs).¹²⁹ More recent scholarship, on analogy with gospel redaction criticism, tends to see James as a purposeful theologian, with a more conscious structure. Davids supports one such outline, with James twice introducing three key themes in chapter one, and then unpacking them in more detail in reverse sequence throughout the rest of the book.¹³⁰ We will adopt his basic outline here, with some modification in section divisions.

Analysis

I. Greetings (1:1)

- a. See notes in the introduction.

II. Statement of Three Key Themes (1:2-11)

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- a. Trials in Christian living (vv. 2-4)
 - i. James begins with the theme of *trials*, no doubt because of the poverty and the socio-economic and religious oppression his community was experiencing. He commands them (and us) to consider difficult external circumstances an opportunity for growth in Christian maturity (v. 2-4). Joy, in this context, is not primarily an emotion but a settled attitude.
 - b. Wisdom (vv. 5-8)
 - i. Second, he turns to the theme of *wisdom* (vv. 5-8). He may still have the context of trials in view, though his principles are not limited to that context. When we need wisdom, we must ask God in faith, not doubting. The doubter is a *dipsychos*, literally *double-souled* (cf. 4:8, where it refers to one not wholeheartedly committed to God). There is thus no support here for “name it and claim it” theology. James’ point is not that we must know *how* our prayers will be answered in advance; rather we must be certain of *who* will answer them (i.e., who we are committed to as our God).
 - c. Riches and poverty (vv. 9-11)
 - i. Third, he introduces the theme of *riches and poverty*, the specific context of the trials of his church (vv. 9-11). Economic situations are reversed by spiritual evaluations in a Christian setting. The poor brother is spiritually rich; the rich one can take none of his possessions with him into eternity.
- III. Restatement of Three Key Themes “With a Twist” (1:12-27)
- a. Trials and temptations in relation to God (1:12-18)
 - i. James begins again with trials but turns quickly to talk about temptations (vv. 12-18). The same Greek word *peirasmoi* can be translated either way. One and the same set of external circumstances can be a trial that a believer allows to help him or her to mature, or it can become a seduction to sin. The believer’s response is what proves determinative. As throughout Scripture, God is dissociated from evil

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in these verses; he brings only good. But neither does the devil enter in here; when we give in to temptation we have only our fallen, sinful natures to blame.

- b. Wisdom in the area of speech (1:19-26)
 - i. Second, the theme of wisdom is unpacked, especially with respect to our speech (vv. 19-26). We must be slow to speak, quick to listen and to obey the implanted word (v. 21) and the perfect law of liberty (v. 25), two of James' distinctive terms for the gospel.
- c. The dispossessed and the responsibility of faith (v. 27)
 - i. Thirdly, concern for the *dispossessed* combines with moral purity as a key definition of true religion—the external outworkings of our inward faith commitments (v. 27).

IV. The Third Theme Expanded (2:1-26)

- a. Favoritism, specifically of the rich, is condemned (vv. 1-13)
 - i. James now elaborates his concern for the disparity between rich and poor. Favoritism, here specifically for the rich, is condemned (vv. 1-13).
 - 1. The illustration (vv. 1-4)
 - A. Many have taken the illustration of vv. 2-4 to refer to worship, but a credible case can be made for seeing this as a Christian courtroom—early Jewish-Christians gathering, as Jews before them consistently did (and as Paul commanded the Corinthians to do—I Corinthians 6), to sort out legal disputes “in house.”¹³¹
 - 2. The threefold rationale (vv. 5-13)
 - A. Verses 5-13 give a threefold rationale for the prohibition: (1) Most Christians then were poor (v. 5)—though contra Vatican II, God does not express here a “preferential option” for all poor, but for “those who love him.” (2) The rich tended to be the oppressors of Christianity (vv. 6-7). (3) Discrimination goes against the heart of the Christian ethic, summarized in

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- the royal or supreme law of neighbor love (vv. 8-13).
- b. Concern for the needy leading to discussion of works and faith (vv. 14-26)
 - i. Next, James discusses the outworking of concern for those in need, leading to a discussion of the requirements of works which proceed from faith (2:14-26).
 - 1. The illustration (vv. 14-17)
 - A. Verses 14-17 provide an illustration of people who claim to be Christians but refuse to help the truly needy among their fellow believers when they are in a position to do so. The grammatical form of v. 14a anticipates a negative answer: such people are not saved.
 - 2. The anticipated objection (v. 18a)
 - A. Verses 18-26 anticipate and answer a potential objection: aren't faith and works separable? James denies this possibility (v. 18).
 - 3. The rebuttal (vv. 18b-26)
 - A. The demons believe that God exists (they have faith "by itself"), but obviously they are not saved (v. 19). By way of contrast, Abraham and Rahab in Old Testament times demonstrated their righteous standing before God by their good deeds (vv. 20-26). The language of these verses, especially vv. 23-24, at first glance seems flatly to contradict Paul (cf. Romans 3:28 and 4:3), leading to Luther's famous reference to James as "an epistle of straw." But we must recognize that Paul and James use "faith" and "works" in different ways. Paul speaks of Christian faith (trusting in Christ) and Jewish works (obeying the *law* in attempts to justify oneself); James, of Jewish faith (pure monotheism) and Christian works (good deeds that flow from salvation).¹³² Both agree that true commitment to Christ will of necessity lead to a transformed lifestyle (cf. Galatians 5:6).
 - V. The Second Theme Expanded (3:1-4:17)

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- a. The topics of speech (3:1-12) and wisdom (3:13-4:17) are now juxtaposed.¹³³
 - i. The dangers of the tongue—speech (3:1-12)
 - 1. For teachers (v. 1)
 - A. James warns against the dangers of the tongue, first by cautioning too many not to aspire to the status of teachers, since stricter judgment accompanies that profession—the damage done by careless *words* can be more extensive than, say, in private conversation (v. 1).
 - 2. For everyone (vv. 2-12)
 - A. Then he generalizes to describe the powerful effects of the tongue for good and ill, more generally, and its unique capability among all creation for duplicity (vv. 2-12).
 - ii. Wisdom (3:13-4:17)
 - 1. Unspiritual vs. spiritual wisdom (3:13-18)
 - A. Verses 13-18 contrast spiritual and unspiritual wisdom--purity vs. self-centeredness are the key concepts here.
 - 2. The two kinds of wisdom illustrated (4:1-10)
 - A. These two kinds of wisdom are illustrated in 4:1-10 as spawning humility and violence, respectively. These verses also contain two crucial teachings on prayer.
 - I. Why pray if God's will is always done? (v. 2)
 - 1. First, *why pray at all if God's will is always done?*
Answer: Sometimes it is His will to give only if His people ask (v. 2).
 - II. Why don't we always get what we ask for? (v. 3)
 - 1. Second, *why don't we always get what we ask for?*
Answer: Sometimes our motives are wrong (v. 3).
 - 3. Wrong kinds of speech (4:11-17)
 - A. Why don't I get what I ask for even when my motives are right?
 - I. Verses 11-17 elaborate on the wrong kinds of speech and include a third key teaching on prayer: *Why don't I get what I ask for even if my motives are right?*

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- B. Sometimes simply not the Lord's will (vv. 13-17)
 - I. Answer: Sometimes it is simply not the Lord's will. These verses also tie back in with the theme of rich and poor, although the business travelers described here were probably from the small mercantile "middle-class" and part of James' church rather than the very rich oppressors about to be condemned.
- VI. The First Theme Expanded (5:1-18)
 - a. Those responsible for causing trials (persecution) will be judged severely (vv. 1-6)
 - i. At last, James returns to trials. First, he takes up the specific circumstances of oppression in which many in James' church found themselves (vv. 1-12). He assures them that those who cause their trials—external persecution—will be judged severely (vv. 1-6). These self-indulgent are clearly not Christians, but their living in luxury indifferent to the plight of the oppressed offers a strong warning against all people who would act similarly while claiming to be believers. The murder of v. 6 may be judicial—condemning to debtor's prison those who could not pay extravagant taxes and rents.
 - b. Those experiencing such trials must respond with patience (vv. 7-12)
 - i. James calls on those suffering to endure, trusting in Judgment Day to right their wrongs (vv. 7-12). He appeals to the patience of Job and of the prophets. But Job complained bitterly of his fate and the prophets regularly denounced injustice in their preaching. So James occupies a middle ground between the Zealot and Essene options of his day—while not promoting violence or revolution, neither does he endorse quietism. We too are called to speak out against those who inflict suffering on innocent people, especially Christians.
- VII. Concluding Remarks (5:13-20)
 - a. Faithful prayer as an antidote to suffering (vv. 13-18)
 - i. Trials can also take the form of physical illnesses (vv. 13-18). Here,

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again, James enjoins faithful prayer as an antidote to suffering—the term appears in vv. 13, 14, 15, 16a, 16b, 17, and 18. In serious cases, the sick person is to call for an anointing with oil by the church elders. Several words in this passage can refer either to physical or spiritual sickness and healing, leading some to think that only the latter is in view. But vv. 15b-16 suggest that only some illnesses are caused by sin, in which case confession is needed, and rabbis often used oil to anoint sick people ceremonially, so it is best to see physical disease as in view throughout.¹³⁴ What, then, do we do with v. 15a: “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well”? We realize that 4:15 still applies: “A true prayer of faith, then, always includes within it a tacit acknowledgment . . . that it is God’s will that must be done.”¹³⁵ While the fact that the person who is sick has to summon the elders suggests that the illness is serious enough to leave that person housebound, there is nothing here to suggest anyone is at the point of death, as in the traditional Roman Catholic sacrament of extreme unction (“last rites”) which developed from this text.

- b. Closing (5:19-20)
 - i. James’ abrupt ending reminds us that his epistle is not in standard letter form, but more in the genre of wisdom literature. Still, these verses form a fitting ending, reminding his audience of a key task of the Christian life—to restore sinners from error and save them from spiritual death.

Application

- I. To Lordship Salvation and Liberation Theology
 - a. Perhaps no other New Testament document as pointedly demonstrates the contrast between biblical and American Christianity. “Lordship salvation” and “liberation theology,” when stripped of their unbiblical excesses, rightly appeal to James for their legitimacy.¹³⁶ Saving faith inevitably leads, over time, to an acknowledgment of Christ’s lordship, preeminently in the area of financial stewardship and concern for the poor. If this *never* happens to any

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extent at all, we have serious reason to question any profession of salvation. By this criterion, nominal, rather than genuine, Christianity afflicts North American *evangelical* churches just as it does mainline ones. It is possible to be rich and a Christian, according to James, but it is *not* possible to be a rich Christian and not be generous with one's wealth in helping the needy.¹³⁷

II. A Prophetic Option in Between Zealotry and Essenism

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