

An Overview of James

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Date: 24 July 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Good, well, please do keep your Bibles open at James chapter 1, and as we come to study God's Word together, let's pray. Let's ask for his help. We thank you, Heavenly Father, that you're a speaking God, and we thank you that you've given us your living Word. And we pray for the work of your Spirit now in our hearts, that you would bring your Word to bear on our lives and change and transform us into the people you want us to be. Help us, we pray, as we learn together. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, over the next three Sunday mornings, we're going to be having a brief foray into the epistle of James. We're only really going to get as far as chapter 1 over these three weeks, and next week and the week after that, we'll be spending quite a lot of time looking at the detail of chapter 1. But this week, we're going to begin by kind of wandering around the letter a bit more widely, so we can get some idea of what the whole thing is about. Now, some of you here this morning will be very new to the Christian faith, maybe just beginning to have a look for yourselves at who Jesus is and what following him might mean for you. If that's you, then my guess is that you probably haven't come across this little letter before. It's kind of near the back of the Bible, and it's not very big. It's easy to miss. But if you've been involved in Christian things for any length of time, then you'll almost certainly have come across it for this reason. I first met this letter fairly soon after becoming a Christian because we studied it in our... I became a Christian at university, and we studied it in our Christian Union Bible study groups. And I remember being told at the time that we were studying this letter because it was a practical letter. That was the word used. And often, let's face it, our Christian Union Bible studies were not all that practical. And at least studying a practical letter made us think about what to do about what the Bible said. And my guess is that for most Christians, that's the big thing we know about this letter. It's a practical letter, because James all the way talks about doing things, how we speak, how we behave towards one another, how we plan for the future, how we handle the difficulties that come to us in life, what to do with our money, the importance of not just thinking things, but doing them. Everyone agrees that this is a very practical letter. And that's what makes it attractive. Because if you're a real believer in Jesus, you want to be someone who actually responds to what God says to you in the Bible. But to be honest, that's about as far as people often get with this letter. It's practical. And so many questions about the letter remain unasked. For example, who exactly is James writing to? And why? What made James an important person, an important person, almost certainly James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, leader of the church in Jerusalem, what made him get out of bed one day and say, you know, I really must write that letter today? So we're going to spend the next 20 minutes or so asking a few very basic questions about the letter as a whole. Here's the first. Who is James writing to? And why?

Well, let's start at the very beginning because it's a very good place to start. Look at the address, chapter 1, verse 1. Turn to chapter 1, verse 1. What can we learn about where this letter is going?

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations, greetings. It's a pretty general looking address, isn't it? No name, no house number, no postcode, no town. And as you go through the letter, he doesn't say hi to anyone in particular on his way through. 12 tribes, that's got a strongly Jewish flavor about it. It's certainly a letter to Christians, so probably Christians from a Jewish background. He calls them scattered people.

How far is he writing? Well, possibly not all that far because there's nothing in this letter about how these Jewish believers should relate to non-Jewish believers. Such a big issue for Jewish believers further afield in the first century. So we might be talking about a letter from James in Jerusalem to other Jewish believers scattered throughout Palestine and round its fringes and a bit beyond.

But you certainly can't be more specific than that about where it's going. So much for the address. What about the content of the letter? Why is he writing? Well, it starts very gently.

[5 : 10] Gently, verse 2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And from that point, it seems at first glance to wander from one subject to another, to another, and back again.

Let's just skim through chapter 1 and see what's there. Verse 2 talks about trials, the things that happen in life that are difficult. Verse 5, there's a section about praying for wisdom and not doubting and not being double-minded. Verse 9, he switches over to a section about poverty and riches. Verse 12, we're back to trials again. Verse 13, temptation and sin and death. Verse 14, about God and how he's a generous giver. Verse 19, about speaking and listening and becoming angry.

Verse 21, about hearing God's word and doing it. Quite a long little section there. And then verse 26, we're back to the subject of speech again. And then widows and orphans.

Now, it's all good practical stuff. But at first sight, it's not obvious that there's a clear line of argument going on from one thing to another and then back again. And so some people suggest that this is just a kind of collection of useful bits of practical advice that James has collected together for Christians all over the place. Helpful hints for holy living. The kind of first century equivalent of Christian blogging on Christian living. Practicalchristianliving.org or something like that.

Is that what this letter is? Just a collection of useful sayings? Well, probably not. Because the further you go through the letter, the less general it looks.

[7 : 07] Let's take a brief tour further afield. See if you notice a change in tone as we make progress through the letter. Let's start with chapter 1, verse 19. Look at 1.19, will you please?

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this. Look at 1.26.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet don't keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world. Again, that could be written to anyone anywhere, couldn't it?

It's easy to think yourself religious and deceive yourself. Everyone knows that speech is a tricky thing to get on top of. But now turn over to chapter 2. Look at chapter 2, verse 2. See if you notice a change in tone. Imagine a situation, says James, where two very different people come walking into your church on Sunday morning. A rich man all blinged up wearing an Armani suit and a poor one in really grubby clothes and smelling a bit. And imagine that these two get treated very differently. It's not that hard to imagine, is it? Everyone makes a fuss of the guy in the smart suit and the poor one is just told to go and sit over there and ignored. Now look at 2.5. Listen, my dear brothers and sisters.

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him, but you have dishonored the poor. All of a sudden it doesn't sound quite so hypothetical, does it? And you get the feeling that a finger is beginning to point at a situation. And look at 2.6. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name to whom you belong?

[9 : 40] I suppose one could throw that out there for a general audience and it be generally true. Anyone in this world who's going to be persecuted in court is likely to be being persecuted by a rich person because it's the rich person who can buy the lawyer. But doesn't it sound as though James knows that some of his readers are in fact being hauled into court by the rich?

There's a growing feeling that James is talking about a particular situation. And that feeling keeps growing as you move through the letter. Look, for example, at 3.9. Turn to 3.9.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father. And with it we curse human beings who've been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Doesn't it sound as though he knows that somebody is cursing their brother? Don't you think that might be slightly strong language for a letter for general release talking about cursing your brothers and sisters if you didn't know it was happening?

And if you're in any doubt, turn to chapter 4 verse 1. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

[11 : 00] You desire but don't have so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask. When you ask you don't receive because you ask with wrong motives.

That you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people. Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Now let me ask you folks.

Do you think you could possibly write those words in a circular letter for general release? Just think about it for a moment. I guess the nearest we get in our own age to the circular letter is the Christmas newsletter.

You know the Christmas newsletter. It won't be too long before they start coming through your doors again. Now I don't know if you're a person who likes Christmas newsletters or finds them just tedious and irritating. I find them slightly boring myself and sometimes really nauseating.

Whatever. Imagine if this Christmas someone sent you a letter in which somewhere after the children's achievements and the holidays and the new car and how well the cat's doing at university and all those kinds of things these words are written.

[12 : 14] Again, you two-timing whoring people. You claim to be Christian but at the moment you're sleeping with the enemy.

Now you could only write words like that in a Christmas letter if you never wanted to receive a letter from anyone again at Christmas or any other time. Which of course is a thought. But you could not possibly write that in a general letter for Christian encouragement everywhere.

Could you? You adulterous people. Don't you know that the friendship with the world means enmity towards God? You see, at the start this looks like a very general letter.

But as you move through it looks increasingly situational. He turns the volume up. He begins to point the finger. Very directly.

And he's looking for change. What is the issue? Well, simply put, the big issue that I think runs all the way through this very letter from start to finish is bad behavior.

[13 : 22] Let me just list the bad behaviors that I mentioned in this letter. Uncontrolled speech. Uncontrolled speech. Anger.

A love of money and power. Carelessness for low status individuals. Cultivation of high status individuals. Letting fellow Christians go hungry and unclothed.

Envy. Selfish ambition and destructive speech among Christian leaders. Self-indulgence. Quarreling. Fighting. Slander. Murderous hatred. Hoarding wealth at the expense of the poor.

Grumbling against one another. Not speaking the truth to one another. I could go on. This letter absolutely bristles with believers behaving badly to one another.

And James is writing so that that will change. Look at the very last verse of the letter right at the end. Turn over to chapter 5. My brothers and sisters.

[14 : 23] If one of you should wonder from the truth. And someone should bring that person back. Remember this. Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way.

Will save them from death. And cover over a multitude of sins. The whole letter reflects that concern. It's a letter written to bring wandering people.

Back to the truth. How have they wandered? Well not doctrinally. There's no hint of false teaching in this letter. No they've wandered behaviorally from the truth.

And he wants them to stop doing that. And repent. And believe the gospel again. Now that concern is there in chapter 1. Even in the general looking chapter.

Look at chapter 1 verse 21. This I think is the headline imperative of the letter. Chapter 1 verse 21. Therefore. Therefore.

[15 : 21] Get rid of all moral filth. And the evil that is so prevalent. Stop behaving that way. And. Humbly accept the word planted in you.

Which can save you. Believe the gospel word again. Now. Now. It's going to take all the rest of the letter. To convince his readers.

That that really is what needs to be done. But that's what he's writing for. To turn them away from that dysfunctional way of behaving. And turn them back to the gospel.

So. Rather a long first question. It gets shorter. Who is he writing to and why? Well. Believers behaving badly. To bring them back.

Question number two. How big a group of believers. And. Why are they behaving badly? Is he writing to a church? Well. Probably not.

[16 : 20] There's no place name. There are no names of individuals. Is he writing to a group of churches in the same area. Involved in the same problems. That's a possibility.

Or is he perhaps writing to. A wider group of Christians. That he anticipates are facing similar circumstances. I think that's perhaps more likely.

You see there are hints all the way through this letter. That his readers are under pressure from outside. Look at chapter one verse two again. He mentions trials of many kinds.

Remember chapter two verse six. There are people being dragged into court. In chapter five. James uses as an example.

The prophets who spoke in the Lord's name. And the sufferings of Job. Perhaps his readers are undergoing a degree of persecution. For belonging to the Lord Jesus. In chapter one verse one.

[17 : 22] We read that these were scattered people. Well perhaps their scattering is related to persecution. I wonder if you remember how in Acts chapter eight. The believers in Jerusalem.

Are scattered all over the place. By persecution in Jerusalem. No doubt that was extraordinarily difficult for them. Maybe that's going on in the background. Whatever the setting.

There is hardship in the background. And there's absolutely no doubt. That when people are under pressure from outside. They can fall out with one another inside.

A sports team will fight among themselves where they're losing. Think French rugby for a moment. Couples can struggle in their marriage relationship. When a child becomes ill.

A nation at war can unite. But can also fragment. Catastrophically. Closer to home I've come across several examples of church leadership teams.

[18 : 23] Who went through very difficult problems from outside. Unitedly together. And then fell out after the difficulty outside disappeared. Pressure you see exposes people's weaknesses.

In ways that can make them angry with one another. But in this letter. The external things are in the background. They're not at the heart of the matter.

No the heart of the matter is what comes from the heart. Look at chapter four. We read this earlier on. Turn to chapter four please. What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Now if you're a parent you'll know that that's the kind of question you ask your children. You're at home. Everything is calm. The children are playing happily next door.

Suddenly there is an enormous shriek. And tears and screams from next door. You rush through. There is catastrophe everywhere. The question.

[19 : 25] What happened here then? And instantly the fingers point. She did it. He did it. You know how it is. What happened here says James? Well you did it.

Notice verse two. Your desires are at war. And notice how the you's repeat. You desire.

You kill. You covet. You quarrel. You do not ask. You ask with wrong motives. Where's the problem in this letter? With the individual.

With you. Says James. Yes there are external factors at work. But the real problem comes from inside. People treat each other badly in the end.

Because they want to and choose to. Not because they are forced to. Why the bad behavior? Well there are external factors at work.

[20 : 27] But the heart of the problem is the heart of the individual. So folks. When we find ourselves. In a fuming rage.

With our brothers or sisters. Bitter. Resentful. Angry. Bad mouthing them to others. Squabbling with them in public.

Misrepresenting them. Attributing negative motives to them. Wanting them to get into difficulty. When we find ourselves like that.

We need to look not at them. First of all. But at ourselves. She did it. He did it. No says James. You did it.

That's the second question then. Third question. How does James go about dealing with this situation? It is sometimes very, very difficult.

[21 : 29] To tackle people behaving badly. Is it not? If you've tried. You'll know. Because people very quickly become entrenched in their own positions. It's their fault.

Not my fault. I'm entirely justified in being angry. I have every right to speak that way about this person. Don't dare criticize me. You haven't been on the receiving end of their behavior like I have.

So how does James deal with it then? Well, he has a number of tools in his toolbox. And he wields them very carefully. And we'll meet them in the next couple of weeks. But his most significant tool is this one.

He operates a bit like a doctor. What does a doctor do? Well, looks at the symptoms. But diagnoses a disease. Doctors, if they're any good.

Don't just treat symptoms. They go for the disease that underlies them. Let me talk about symptoms and diseases for the moment. I spent a while working as a doctor.

- [22 : 29] So forgive the medical interlude. We all have all kinds of symptoms all the time. You've probably had loads this morning. And not even paid any attention to them. An itch. An ache.
- A rash. A cough. Anybody coughed this morning? Well, you don't know, do you? Because you didn't notice it. But so many symptoms do we have that when you're a medical student and you go to lectures and learn about diseases, you come out of every lecture thinking that you're just about to die.
- Because you suddenly start to notice all the symptoms you always had. Last week, I was absolutely sure that I had coronary disease and cancer and cholera. And now, because we're learning about psychiatry, I know I'm completely bonkers.
- The truth is that most of our symptoms, most of the time, are of absolutely no significance at all. And all we need to be told is that we're really fine and we need to stop looking at medical websites and getting worried.
- But sometimes our symptoms, though small, are serious. Let me give you a medical example. I remember spending about an hour one afternoon in a very warm medical clinic trying to persuade someone that they really were very ill indeed.
- [23 : 43] And that they really needed the fairly serious treatment that had been suggested to them. The trouble was, of course, that the symptoms were not severe. A little bit of a cough from time to time.
- A little bit of breathlessness on significant exercise. Nothing big. But the truth was that unless she embraced reality and took the treatment, she was likely to be a respiratory cripple in a year or two.
- If you'll forgive the medical analogy, James is like a doctor trying to get a patient to believe that his several and not terribly important looking symptoms are actually the product of a serious disease that needs real treatment if the patient is to survive.
- The symptoms are all about bad behavior. The disease is a disease of the heart, the divided heart, or as James refers to it, double-mindedness.
- Now this letter has a whole bunch of examples of double-mindedness and we'll meet some of them next week. But most graphic is in chapter 4. Just look at chapter 4 again. He starts with the symptoms.
- [25 : 02] What causes fights and quarrels among you, verse 1? Let's face it. Fights and quarrels are pretty common, aren't they? Not all that uncommon as symptoms amongst Christians.
- What causes them, verse 1? Desires battling inside. And what's the root of all that, verse 4?
- Spiritual adultery. Two-timing God. Trying to be in bed with God and the world at the same time. You see how James moves from the outward symptoms to a problem with the heart.
- He moves from human relationships to people's relationship with God. The truth is that being badly behaved is a pretty ordinary symptom in human life.
- It comes easily to us. And it's therefore very easy indeed to minimize it, treat it as though it's really not all that significant, ignore it in ourselves, brush off any attempts from somebody else to deal with it.
- [26 : 10] So how does James approach the problem? Well, he approaches it carefully. He creeps up on it. It takes him four chapters to get to the heart of the matter.
- And he approaches it not just carefully, but theologically. Chapter 4, verse 4. You've got a problem with God, he says.
- You see, he doesn't just say, stop behaving badly. Be nice to one another. That's just dealing with the symptoms. No, there's the disease.

The fundamental problem is not a horizontal problem between people, but a vertical problem between them and God. What does James want them to do about it?

Well, he wants them to change. Back in chapter 1, he told them to get rid of that moral filth and humbly accept the gospel word. Here in chapter 4, he does exactly the same.

[27 : 11] But notice in chapter 4, the emphasis on God. Look at verse 6. Now, it's often said in this letter that there's not much of the gospel in it, but I think that's quite wrong.

Verse 6 is a gospel verse. God opposes the proud, but shows favor or gives grace to the humble.

It's about God's grace. And then he tells them, having reminded them about God's grace, he tells them to stop behaving that way and to turn back to God, not just to one another.

Look at verse 7. Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. There's the word. He wants people not just to behave nicely towards one another, but he wants to deal with the disease, to remind them of the gospel, to turn them back to God, and to urge them to believe in the gospel again.

[28 : 20] Now, folks, our time has gone. We've looked at three questions. Who's he writing to and why? Not to one place, but about a specific problem. Believers behaving badly.

Why are they behaving badly? Well, there are external factors, but the real problem is a heart problem. How does he get at the problem?

Well, carefully, patiently, he explores the symptoms, which are mainly about human relationships gone wrong, and in doing so, uncovers the disease, which is really about relationship with God gone wrong.

What can we learn from this? Well, let me say two or three things. First, there's a refreshing realism about this letter, don't you think? It's not all that straightforward, behaving well towards one another.

But there's also a refreshing wholesomeness about this letter. God thinks our human relationships are very, very important indeed.

[29 : 33] It's the wonderful thing about belonging to the Lord Jesus, that in having your relationship put right with God, you can begin to have your relationships with people straightened out.

Now, of course, that's not an easy thing to happen. It takes a while, and there are many setbacks. But isn't it a wonderful thing that the Lord Jesus is good for people?

He's good for us, good for others, good for the way we interact with others. And he really cares about our human relationships. He cares when they're good.

Why? Because they're good for us and for others. And they make the good news about Jesus look attractive to other people. And they bring honor to the Lord. He cares about them when they're bad.

Because it's bad for us, and bad for others, and bad for the advance of the gospel. Nothing, nothing is better at spoiling Christians, getting on with the work of the gospel, than having them fall out with one another.

[30 : 38] Nothing's better than that. Our human relationships are very important under the lordship of Jesus. Also, this letter reminds us that our human relationships need theological resources.

Loving one another is seriously not straightforward. It's absolutely no good just telling us to behave nicely. I mean, folks, the world around us is telling people to behave nicely all the time.

And how well is that going? No, what James does again and again is to face his readers with the uncomfortable truth that behind such everyday symptoms as fighting and squabbling and bitterness and jealousy and not listening to people and getting angry and bad-mouthing others, behind those everyday symptoms is an attitude of proud hostility towards God, which constantly needs to be challenged.

Behind these ordinary symptoms lies an attitude to God that must be addressed because it's deadly. The wonderful thing about what the Lord Jesus has done is that he has made it possible to address those things deep down.

He offers forgiveness, mercy, kindness, welcome, totally undeserved to people who behave badly towards one another.

[32 : 11] It's just magnificent, isn't it? So as we close, let's just read from chapter four again. It may be in life that your relationships are all straightforward and everything is well, but you may have found as we've read this letter just briefly that there are things that need to change about your relationships.

So let's just read from 4-6 and remind ourselves of the gospel. God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.

Wonderful promise of favor, grace, forgiveness. Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Let's pray together.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, that the great work that the Lord Jesus has done has made it possible for us ordinary, sinful human beings to be forgiven, to come into proper relationship with the perfect and holy God.

[33 : 35] And we thank you more than that, that having been brought into right relationship with you, you are deeply concerned that we're in right relationship with one another.

We thank you for the forgiveness that you hold out to us. We pray that you would help us if things are not well in our relationships with others to go towards those, to turn towards you, to seek your forgiveness and to sort out the problems we have.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.