



For a Pastor, every sermon involves deciding not only what to include, but what to exclude. Often, the things that are excluded are very valuable, but simply don't fit into the scope of the sermon at hand. This happens on a larger scale when preaching through an entire book; there is simply no way to cover every important detail and insight. Most of the time, what gets cut is the background material that helps a careful listener (or reader) understand the cohesive argument of the entire book or letter. Spending too much time from the pulpit addressing such things as audience, date, author, intertextuality, structure, difficult interpretive issues and things of that sort can quickly turn a sermon into a lecture. So, as we embark on a study of the Letter of James, I thought we'd try something new. Below, you'll find a simple study guide that will give a basic introduction to the Letter of James. Hopefully it will make you a better listener on Sunday mornings and perhaps a better reader during the week. Enjoy!

The Wisdom of James

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther didn't think much of this book; he called it a "right strawy epistle." He considered it to have many redeeming elements but thought it had little gospel character. Largely because of his influence, many in the church have read James with a dubious 'eye', and taking his lead, a great deal of scholarly study has addressed whether James is compatible with the systematic theology of Paul. This unfortunately places the focus upon a few fairly difficult verses in chapter two that are thought to possibly conflict with Paul's teaching on justification instead of reading the whole of James' letter on its own terms. Through this series, we will come to see that when understood correctly, James in no way contradicts Paul (or any other part of Scripture for that matter), but simply addresses different concerns. It is wisdom literature, dealing with the nitty gritty details of life, much like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, instead of didactic theology, like parts of Paul's writing that it is sometimes assumed to be in conflict with.

Basic Details

1. AUTHOR: There are a number of candidates named 'James.' While it is impossible to know for sure many scholars believe it to be James, the brother of Jesus.
2. AUDIENCE: This letter doesn't address a particular church or situation, but was most likely a 'circular letter' which was read by multiple churches.
3. DATE: This also is disputed, but is probably before 60 AD because of the lifespan of the probable authors.
4. PURPOSE: To exhort believers to live out their faith; to be doers of the word, not just hearers.
5. THEMES:
 - *The command to go beyond merely believing the Gospel but living it out.*
 - *Faith is not merely intellectual assent to truth, but the surrender of the whole person.*
 - *Wisdom comes from 'above'; it is God-given rather than self-generated.*
 - *Trials and suffering are normal, but can be redeemed by God and used to perfect character.*
 - *Behavior flows from the orientation and pre-committments of the heart.*
 - *The tongue is a powerful instrument of either peace or destruction.*

Interpretive Issues

1. FAITH, WHAT IS IT? Throughout the Bible, *faith* and *belief* are closely related and derived from the same Greek word family. *Believe* is the verb form of *faith* and *faith* the noun form of *believe*. All of us express a general sort of faith in everyday lives when we believe that our office chair will support our weight and that the sun will come up in the morning. But, when the Bible talks about faith, it is using it specifically as it relates to God and his word. A Christian has faith in God as a person, his actions and his promises. This involves: *knowledge* - of God's word and its plan of redemption, *belief* - that God's word is true, *trust* - believing in not simply about, and *action* - situating one's life underneath the promises and commands of God.

2. FAITH AND WORKS: James' teaching on faith in action has often been read in contrast to Paul's teaching on justification because James appears to say that one's good works have a causal relationship to their salvation. This is not what James is saying. We will deal with this topic at more length during the sermon, '*Faith and Works*' on May 16th, but for now, remember the definition of faith in #1 above. If Paul, in his more systematic expositions of theology tends to emphasize *knowledge* and *belief* primarily, James would tend to focus more on the other end of the spectrum, emphasizing *trust* and *action*. They are both talking about the same thing, just giving more weight to a different aspect. And, there are numerous times where Paul focuses on *trust* and *action* and James upon *knowledge* and *belief*.

Outline

Date	Title	Scripture
April 18th	Faith and Suffering	1:1-12
April 25th	Faith and Temptation	1:13-18
May 2nd	Faith and True Religion	1:19-27
May 9th	Faith and Favoritism	2:1-13
May 16th	Faith that Works	2:14-26
May 23rd	Faith and the Tongue	3:1-12
May 30th	Faith and Wisdom	3:13-18
June 6th	Faith and Fighting	4:1-3
June 20th	Faith and Humility	4:4-12
July 4th	Faith and Control	4:13-5:11
July 11th	Faith and Community	5:12-20