

An Introduction to James

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[0 : 00] Years ago, I conducted a very unscientific survey online asking people, what's your favorite book of the Bible?

I wasn't asking whether one book is better than another. I was simply asking, what's that one book that you especially enjoy reading and studying? What's that one book that you find yourself returning to time and time again?

And the responses were interesting. Unsurprisingly, out of the 200 or so people that responded, quite a few people named Psalms or one of the Gospels.

But coming in at number one was the book of Romans. And coming in at a very close second was the book of James. Now, I found that interesting because these top two books are considerably different.

Romans is a relatively long epistle. James is comparatively shorter. Romans is a deeply theological book. And while every book of the Bible is theological to some degree, James is far more practical.

[1 : 11] I mean, glance at the headings in the book of James. Trials and maturity. Hearing and doing the word. The sin of favoritism. Faith and works. Controlling the tongue.

And so on. But looking through Romans, I see headings such as, The righteous will live by faith. God's righteous judgment. Circumcision of the heart.

The promise granted through faith. And on it goes. The authors of these books also have very different styles. They have very different approaches to writing.

Paul, the author of Romans, is very systematic in his teachings. As you read through Romans or pretty much any of his books, you see him building his case.

One block at a time. One argument just builds upon another. It's very linear from start to finish. So, the left side of our brain loves Romans, right?

[2 : 09] Now, the right side of our brain can probably relate to James a little better. He's not linear at all. In fact, we may find James a little confusing at times because he jumps from one subject to another and back again without any apparent rhyme or reason.

Consider the first chapter of James. In verse 2, he's talking about enduring trials. In verse 5, he jumps to the matter of praying for wisdom.

And maybe you can see a connection between the two. But then, in verse 9, he begins talking about the pride of the wealthy. Then, in verse 12, he's back to talking about trials.

I don't know. Maybe my survey was a kind of personality test. If Romans is your favorite book, maybe that says one thing about you. If James is your favorite book, that might say something else. As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, it was primarily men who chose Romans and primarily women who chose James. Maybe that says something about our differences.

[3 : 14] I don't know. But again, my survey was hardly scientific. That wasn't the point. I just found it interesting that these two books would rise to the top because they represent, perhaps better than any other books in the New Testament, a subtle conflict that has existed throughout church history.

And that conflict is between what some have called Pauline Christianity and Jewish Christianity. Obviously, Romans would represent Pauline Christianity and James would represent Jewish Christianity.

And I don't know that anything better illustrates the conflict than their different uses of Genesis 15.6. Genesis 15.6 says, Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

So Paul quotes this verse twice in Romans. And listen to how he uses it. In Romans 4, he says, For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.

That's Genesis 15.6. Now to the one who works, pay is not credited as a gift, but as something owed. But to the one who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is

credited for righteousness.

[4 : 45] Paul is arguing that justification before God comes through faith, not works. And he uses the example of Abraham in Genesis 15 to make that point.

He cites the verse later in the chapter again saying, Therefore, it was credited to Abraham for righteousness. Now, it was credited to him was not written for Abraham alone, but also for us. It will be credited to us who believe in him, who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. So there, Paul makes it clear that justification and righteousness come through faith, not only to Abraham, but to everyone who believes.

James, on the other hand, he uses the exact same reference to seemingly make a contradictory point. Here's what he says in James 2.

Wasn't Abraham our father justified by works in offering Isaac, his son, on the altar? You see that faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was made complete.

[6 : 01] And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. There's Genesis 15, 6.

And he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Now, I will tell you from the start that Paul and James are not, not in disagreement with one another. They are certainly making different points, but they are not in conflict with one another. Even so, you can see how someone might be tempted to pit Paul against James.

You can see how someone might think that Pauline Christianity is something different than Jewish Christianity. To some degree, Martin Luther, the great reformer, he was one of those people. He seems to have struggled with the book of James. As you likely know, he was tremendously influenced by Romans. He was essentially converted through the book of Romans.

[7 : 09] But here's what he wrote about James. He said, in a word, St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine.

Therefore, St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.

So Luther refers to James as an epistle of straw. He actually made a similar comment about the book of Hebrews. I think what he has in mind is 1 Corinthians 3, where Paul says, if anyone builds on the foundation, that is the foundation of Christ, with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become obvious, for the day will disclose it because it will be revealed by fire.

Paul's talking about the value of a minister's work by comparing it with these various building materials. Obviously, straw has its use, but it may not be as useful as, say, gold or precious stones. So Luther, he doesn't see as much gospel in the book of James as he sees in other books of the Bible. Now, he believes it has its purpose, and he believes it's good for the church, but he doesn't see as much gospel in it.

[8 : 57] He goes on to write, though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God.

Now, someone might ask, what does Luther mean? How does James promulgate the law of God? Well, we've already seen that James teaches about the relationship of works or law-keeping, if you will, to justification.

Paul and other authors of the New Testament, however, they emphasize faith's role in justification. So, right off the bat, it seems like a very works-oriented epistle.

Plus, there are numerous comparisons that could be made between James and the Lord's Sermon on the Mount. And the Sermon on the Mount is distinctly Jewish in its orientation.

As Jesus teaches about the ethics of the kingdom, he frames it very much in Jewish terms. He talks about the ethics of the kingdom while citing Old Testament law. In fact, one of the primary lessons of the Sermon on the Mount is that Christ has come to fulfill the law.

[10 : 13] He says, don't think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. But I think Luther's primary point is that James is more about doing than, say, trusting or resting in Christ for salvation.

It's more about practical and ethical concerns than the way of salvation. But even Luther admits that it is a good book.

It sets up no doctrines of men. It's not invented by men. Unfortunately, Luther is sometimes falsely presented as being anti-James, but I don't think that's true.

He believed James was a God-inspired, profitable book of the Bible, but like some people today, he had his struggles with it. I guess Luther was a predominantly left-brained person. It would be a real tragedy to cast James aside as though it were somehow a lesser book of the Bible.

If we did that, we'd have to throw out the Sermon on the Mount. There are at least, to my count, at least 18 parallel teachings between James and the Lord's Sermon on the Mount.

[11 : 32] And this shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to us. The author James, after all, was the Lord's brother. Now, he wasn't a believer when Jesus preached that sermon, but he was undoubtedly heavily influenced by Jesus.

He was also a Jew himself. So it isn't surprising that his writing would have a Jewish orientation to it. And he is writing to Jewish Christians.

So of course, it has Jewish characteristics. Paul primarily wrote to Gentiles, so inevitably there are differences between them. We might also consider that James was likely the first book of the New Testament written, even before the Gospels.

He may have written this letter a full decade before any other book of the New Testament. So you see, most of Christianity is still within Jewish communities.

In short, there's nothing surprising about the so-called Jewish Christianity, if you will, of James. But more important than any of its Jewish characteristics is that James is a Christian book written by a Christian pastor for Christian churches.

[12 : 56] If you want to follow along, turn in your Bible to the book of James. In fact, you may want to place a ribbon there because we are going to spend possibly the next ten weeks in this book.

Why James? In his book, *Radically Whole*, a book that I will likely borrow from extensively at times, David Gibson, the author, he says, we know what it's like to be in two minds about something.

We've all stood in a shop trying to choose between pairs of shoes or coats or new phones. We weigh up big decisions all the time in choosing between alternatives, a school, a house, a career.

This is normal. It's what it means to be finite creatures with incomplete knowledge of the ultimate good as we feel our way forward on the path of life.

But the fact that we are capable of going in more than one direction has a darker hue when it comes to our character. Everyone reading these lines will know what it is like to say and do things that can leave us on the other side of our words and actions utterly bewildered about where those choices came from.

[14 : 20] How could we have been so stupid, so selfish? What on earth made us speak like that? Creatures made in God's image we may be but sin renders us absurd even to ourselves.

Digging deeper we know that no one else can see what goes on inside our heads and so we live with truths about us that only we can comprehend. We are the solitary observers of our inner closed circuit TV.

Sometimes this means there are things we are anxious to keep hidden. Often it means there are things we love which somehow say more about the real us than others can discern on the surface. Always it means there is a kind of fault line running through our personalities, a fracture at our core which means that what we project is not the full story.

We are so often less than who we wish we were. What is the book of James all about? If you are a left brain person you will love this.

[15 : 27] There is more harmony to this letter than you may have realized. It is not just a collection of random proverbs. James may not be the most systematic author of the Bible but there is a central theme connecting all of its various teachings.

And what is that theme? In short it is what James refers to as double mindedness which may very well be a term he created himself to describe what is a universal problem among Christians.

We have all experienced it. Haven't we? We sometimes find ourselves thinking things or saying things or doing things that seem to contradict our very character.

They certainly contradict what we believe what we know is right and what we strive to do. And you know this has led many outside of the church to look at us from the outside and accuse Christians of being a bunch of hypocrites.

Well to paraphrase Spurgeon I say to them come on in there's always room for one more. But this hypocrisy these defects in our integrity is a far more pressing concern for believers because we realize what's at stake.

[16:55] For us we're not merely talking about human frailty. People make mistakes who cares? We realize that God's honor is on the line.

We realize that souls can be in jeopardy. And more than anyone we understand the supreme value of faithfulness. And we'll talk about that more in a moment.

I often think about Romans 7 where Paul essentially describes his own double-mindedness. And as we read Romans 7 we can really sense Paul's frustration with himself.

He confesses I do not understand what I am doing because I do not practice what I want to do but I do what I hate. For the desire to do what is good is with me but there is no ability to do it for I do not do the good that I want to do but I practice the evil that I do not want to do.

So I discover this law when I want to do what is good evil is present with me. For in my inner self I delight in God's law but I see a different law in the parts of my body waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body.

[18:16] And we really see his exasperation when he cries out what a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?

this was incredibly frustrating for Paul and it's incredibly frustrating for us. As believers we love God. We love his word. We treasure it in our hearts and we strive to follow it. We strive to do all to the glory of God. So it's very discouraging devastating even when we so frequently find ourselves betraying our own love and our own convictions.

The world seems to think we have some secret pleasure in preaching one thing while we are secretly doing another. But we don't. We hate our hypocrisy.

We hate our double-mindedness when it reveals itself. And we pray Lord what is wrong with me? Why do I fail to do what I know I should? And why do I do what I know I shouldn't?

[19:27] So often. As I said, we understand the supreme value of faithfulness. And interestingly enough, this is something well understood by even unbelievers.

This is why they mock us for our hypocrisy. They know the importance of faithfulness. Years ago, I saw the results of a survey. people were asked what they would like to least see happen to their spouse or to their partner.

Death was one of the options. Breaking up was an option. And do you know what people considered the worst possible scenario? Worse than the death of your spouse, they considered unfaithfulness or cheating the worst possible scenario.

They would rather experience the death of their spouse than discover that he or she committed adultery. And I can't say I blame them. Even the world understands how devastating unfaithfulness is.

I mean, their sense of morality regarding relationships can be completely upside down. Today, most people don't think twice about having sexual relationships outside of marriage.

[20:48] They don't think twice about having these relationships with multiple people outside of marriage. They don't bat an eye at couples living together outside of marriage. Increasingly, homosexuality is readily accepted as natural, moral even.

The argument goes love is love. And yet, unfaithfulness remains taboo. two people can be living in a sinful relationship, never having made any vows, never having entered into a covenant with one another, find nothing wrong with any of it, and yet still consider cheating or unfaithfulness an act of pure immorality.

It's just wrong. Why? How do they know? Well, they're still image bearers of God, aren't they? In Romans 2, Paul says, when Gentiles who do not by nature have the law do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law.

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences confirm this. They may suppress the truth in many other ways, but the immorality, the wrongness of unfaithfulness remains.

It's built into us. You see, unfaithfulness, it's a destructive act. It takes what should be unified and breaks it apart. In the case of relationships, it shatters the relationship.

[22:30] And this is an important theme of the Bible. Because you see, the Bible is really the story of God's relationship, His marriage with His people.

And our unfaithfulness, our sin, destroys the relationship. In Ephesians 5, Paul talks about marriage in a profound way.

While people may have long thought that marriage was little more than a covenant of convenience, of pragmatism, Paul says no. Don't you see?

It's so much more. In fact, God gave us marriage in the first place to communicate a precious truth about our relationship with Him. He says, for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh.

This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. marriage brings two individuals together becoming one with each other.

[23 : 41] That's why Paul can tell husbands, each one of you is to love his wife as himself. The most loving thing a husband can do for himself is love his wife because they're one and the same.

marriage creates wholeness. In the garden, God said of Adam when he was still all alone, it is not good for the man to be alone.

So He created Eve and He brought them together. He completed them in this way. And all of this was designed to illustrate our relationship with God.

We can either be one with Him in our faithfulness to Him or what? We can commit unfaithfulness through our disobedience through our sin.

I said this is an important theme throughout the Bible. God is frequently described as the husband to His people. Christ is called the bridegroom to His people.

[24 : 51] And in our rebellion, we are said to have committed adultery. Ezekiel 23, for instance, she multiplied, this is speaking of Israel, she multiplied her acts of promiscuity, remembering the days of her youth when she acted like a prostitute.

Even James uses this language. In chapter 4, verse 4, he says, you adulterous people, you say you love God, you say you are faithful to Him, but you go and do, you're committing adultery.

You are destroying the relationship. You are breaking up the wholeness. Right? And of course, this never feels right. This never feels good for the believer.

We love God and it hurts us to know that we hurt Him. furthermore, we're fracturing ourselves in the process.

This is what James means by double-minded. We divide ourselves in two. We cut our hearts in half. And this is a dangerous place to be.

[26 : 03] David Gibson says, James is a letter written to churches in danger of dying, churches that could become very sick. James knows the recipients could embark on a one-way journey to the morgue.

I know from experience, you don't come back from the morgue. Mercifully, however, James is the best kind of doctor to have.

Not to say he was a literal doctor. But he sees the symptoms, right? He diagnoses the underlying disease and he prescribes the right medication for it.

And I think it's the underlying disease. I think that's what we often miss when we read the book of James. The symptoms are clear enough. The problems are right there out in the open, which I'll talk about those in a moment.

But what's the disease causing the symptoms? That's the crucial thing. I've worked in funeral service long enough to know that doctors, not to scare anyone, but they occasionally make mistakes.

[27 : 08] and they occasionally make grave mistakes. Sometimes a patient will come to them with symptoms and they will treat the symptoms without ever discovering what that underlying condition is that's causing the symptoms.

I met one man whose legs were tragically eaten up with gangrene. And according to him, he had all kinds of problems and he had been to doctor after doctor after doctor for years and years before they finally realized what that underlying problem was.

And by then it was too late. James sees the symptoms, but he also diagnoses the disease. And best of all, he knows how to treat it.

So what are the symptoms he sees? Well, I'll tell you what. Let me first back up and draw your attention to whom James is writing. He says in the first verse, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes dispersed abroad.

Greetings. Now obviously, again, he has a Jewish audience in mind. He refers to them as the twelve tribes, that is the twelve tribes of Israel.

[28 : 28] But as we'll discover throughout this letter and we see a hint of it here in his greeting, he's really writing to Jewish Christians. He's writing to fellow servants of Christ.

He's writing to churches dispersed abroad. James is likely writing from Jerusalem where he is pastor of the church and he's sending this letter out to churches in other parts of the world, wherever they happen to be.

Now, if for no other reason, that's significant because it gives us some insight into the living conditions of these people. They are Jews living outside of Israel.

So that means they live among Gentiles, which is not the most welcoming environment. Maybe they're tolerated, but they're not welcomed with open arms. They are also Christians, which means by this time, they are likely living outside of their local Jewish communities, their families, their friends, have likely rejected them.

And this is very relevant to what James says to them in a couple of ways. First of all, we'll notice that these people are largely poor and oppressed, it would seem. Douglas Moo has a great commentary on James, and he talks about this extensively.

[29 : 51] And second, these people are struggling to live in a world that opposes the Christian faith, that walks contrary to it and doesn't like the Christian faith. So they're dealing with all of the temptations that arise from that, and I suspect we can relate to some degree or another.

And it's through these struggles that James sees some problems emerging. He sees symptoms of potentially fatal disease.

And let's briefly consider a few of these symptoms. Symptom number one. Angry words. Angry words.

He mentions this in the first chapter. Verse 19 says, My dear brothers, understand this, everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

Verse 26, If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless, and he deceives himself. It comes back to this in the third chapter.

[31 : 01] James 3, 6 says, The tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our members. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is set itself on fire by hell.

But remember, this is merely a symptom. There's a deeper issue here. But angry words, fighting, hurtful speech, these things indicate that something is wrong.

Symptom number two. Division. Division. Division. Look at James 2, 1. My brothers, do not show favoritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Then he says in verse 5, Listen, my dear brothers, didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? In this case, the division is between the poor and the rich.

But as we see throughout the New Testament, it hardly matters where we draw the dividing line. Division among God's people in the church is a serious problem.

[32 : 25] Symptom number three. Lack of good works. Lack of good works. James 1, 22.

Be doers of the word and not hearers only. He returns to this in chapter 2. What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works?

A bit later, he says, For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. And that's just three of the symptoms. But let's stop right there because we're going to go into detail about all of them and more.

What's the cure for these things? Now, interestingly enough, James doesn't say, well, speak nicely. You know, stop showing favoritism.

Do more good deeds. He doesn't say that. No, he sees all of these problems as symptoms of something more serious. Listen to what he says in chapter 1 starting with verse 5.

[33 : 32] Now, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without doubting.

For the doubter is like the surging sea driven and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.

Double-minded. That is a word that literally means two-souled as in one person having two souls. Now, to be clear, that does not mean this person is double what he should be.

Man, he's that good. He's got two souls. No, he's the opposite of what he should be. He's not wholehearted. He's not consistent. He's not a person of integrity.

To say he is double-minded is to say he suffers from a divided heart. In 1 Kings 8:61, Solomon says, Be wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord our God.

[34 : 48] Psalm 119, verse 2 says, Happy are those who keep his decrees and seek him with all their heart. Not partial, not half, not most, but all.

And by the way, you'll often find heart, mind, and soul are interchangeable in Scripture. We're talking about the core substance of a person. How he thinks, what he loves, what he does. And the Christian is supposed to be singularly minded, not wavering and unstable. He's supposed to stand firmly upon Christ the rock.

But instead, some have one foot on the rock and one foot on the sinking sand. And that's a disaster waiting to happen. So how does James know this disease is present?

How does he know? Well, he sees the symptoms. He sees the inconsistencies. For example, these people, they readily listen to God's Word.

[35 : 57] They profess to believe God's Word. But they're not following it. They are fellow members of the body of Christ, called into unity with one another, but they're divided right down the middle.

The affluent of them are sitting on one side of the church, so to speak, and the more impoverished people are sitting on the other side. Clearly, something isn't right. The twelve tribes dispersed abroad are necessarily forced to live in the world.

They're surrounded by the world. They inevitably feel a lot of pressure coming from the world.

These are not people living in safe, little communes somewhere with tall walls, and they never have to interact with anyone outside of the church.

But James is noticing they aren't merely in the world. He notices that an alarming part of them is of the world. Notice what he says in chapter 4, verse 4.

This is pretty strong language. Just imagine your pastor getting up this morning and preaching something along these lines. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?

[37 : 20] So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God. You adulterous people, you are cheating on your bridegroom.

He says you're having an affair. You are acting unfaithful. You are acting like the world. That's quite an indictment. Now that's not 100% true.

In all cases, them acting like the world. I mean, James says they are double-minded. In some ways, they have the appearance of godliness and faithfulness. But in other ways, they don't.

Which again, is a very dangerous place to be. And you know, the temptation then is to fall back on your apparent righteousness, right? And think, well, I'm not a perfect Christian, of course.

But I could be much worse. David Gibson writes, we should never, as people who love the gospel say, that's just the way it is.

[38 : 29] No. The symptoms are a sign that something is terribly wrong. So what do we do with the double mind, the divided heart, and the fractured self?

The medicine is repentance. regular, daily, heartfelt, turning around, and running back to God again. Well, here's what James says in James chapter 4.

Submit to God. Submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable, and mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Notice verse 9 again. Be miserable, and mourn, and weep.

[39 : 33] Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to gloom. We should never, ever, treat sin as no big deal.

We should never make light of sin. We should never think to ourselves, well, it's not like I committed murder. No, we've just committed adultery against God.

Instead, we should despise our sins. We should take them very seriously, even when they feel like lesser sins. Again, letting those so-called lesser sins persist can be extremely dangerous for us, spiritually.

But please notice that James does not diagnose the problem and then stops. As the Bible says elsewhere, where sin multiplied, grace multiplied even more.

James says, draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.

[40 : 49] That's incredible to think about. After what James has just accused them of, here's what David Gibson says. God is so tender with us, so merciful, so patient.

Think how jilted lovers act. When someone discovers adultery, what happens? There's always anger, and then there's the cold shoulder and bitter exclusion.

The days of welcome, warmth, and intimacy are over. Almost inevitably, separation is followed by divorce. But what does God do? You adulterous people, draw near to God.

Imagine being cheated on, and in response, gently wooing the one who jilted you by saying, come close. James wants us to meet this God afresh.

God's grace abounds, and God's grace is the medicine. Better yet, it's the cure for our divided hearts, and that's precisely what we will see as we continue to study the book of James together.

[42 : 07] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this time in your word, and I pray that we all might be edified by what we've considered this morning.

I pray that we will draw closer and closer to you. Even those times, Lord, when we confess our hearts are divided, and we have been unfaithful in our thoughts, in our actions, in our words, I pray that we each will humble ourselves before you.

I pray that we will draw near to you knowing that in your grace, your incredible mercy, you have promised to draw near to us. Lord, we love you, and we seek to be faithful.

Help us to that end. In Christ's name I pray. Amen. We're dismissed. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.