

Through The Bible
Session #57 – James
February 15, 2006

James in the New Testament Church...

- James was a common NT name. We meet 5-6 James' in the NT.
- The James we often consider to be the author of this work was known as the first among equals of NT Church leaders.
 - Paul named James before Peter and John when identifying the pillars of the Church (see Galatians 2.9).
 - According to Acts 12.17, Peter reports to James upon his release from prison.
 - During Paul's first post-commissioning trip to Jerusalem he met with Peter and James (see Galatians 1.17-19).
 - Acts 15 and 21 portray James as the chief spokesperson for the Jerusalem Church.
 - Galatians 2 shows Peter, Barnabas, and other Jewish believers at Antioch yielding to James' concerns regarding table fellowship with Gentile believers.
- In summary, it seems that James is one of a group of leaders who stands out as a leading figure and dominating influence in the life of the early Church.

Authorship of James

- There are generally two options often provided for authorship:
 - a. James – the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem Church. If he wrote the letter, it seems it would have been written close to AD 62.
 - b. A later disciple who took James' teaching and used his name. If this anonymous person wrote James, then dating is too speculative.
- Modern scholars lean toward option "b" above...though it's not conclusively clear. If this later disciple was the author, then dating is uncertain.

What are the circumstances of those who first received James?

- It seems most likely the readers were Jewish/Christian – there is vivid Old Testament imagery in James. For example, in James 4.4, the author calls those who are side-tracked "adulterers." The Old Testament likens God's covenant with people as a marriage relationship.
- These Jews were probably poor people who were often taken advantage of by wealthy landlords (5.4-6), and were hauled into court by rich people (2.6).
- James' chief concern though is worldliness in the Church. See 4.4; 1.27.
- Something to remember about the early church...

- It's often assumed that the early Church was completely separate from the synagogue. The assumption is wrong! Christianity began as a reform movement of Judaism and the process of separation took a while.
- It's also assumed there was one version of Christianity. This assumption is also wrong! Just as we have different variations of Christianity under the Lordship of Jesus, there were different versions of Christianity in the early Church.

What kind of writing is James?

- The Church typically includes James as one of the 'general epistles' (along with 1st and 2nd Peter, 1st 2nd and 3rd John, and Jude). Why are they 'general'? It's because they appear to be addressed to the Church at large instead of a specific congregation.
- James starts out in letter form but then drops the typical letter format.
- He uses a collection of wisdom sayings (see chapters 1 and 5).
- James uses Scripture, though he doesn't seem to be interested in solely providing an exposition of Scripture like a sermon might.

James' theology

- Presents God as one (2.19).
- God is the creator of life and everything that is (1.17).
- God does not struggle with evil and is not the source of evil (1.13).
- God is the source of wisdom (1.5; 3.17).
- God is lawgiver and judge (4.12; 2.11).
- God is gracious and merciful to the humble (4.6).
- God is ready to be found by those who seek God with their whole hearts (4.7-10).

The book of James in the larger New Testament context

- Martin Luther called James, "an epistle of straw." He said that James "mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture." We should note that Luther put Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation in a similar 2nd tier status in the New Testament.
- Luther's criticism was based on his belief that James neglects justification by faith. Yet, Luther did not want to exclude James from the canon. He seems to simply put it in secondary status compared to other NT writings.
- Flat out rejection (like Luther's) is not that common among scholars and Church leaders. More common is neglect of James rather than rejection.
- For James, Christianity consists in fulfilling the commandments and instructions of the Lord.
- The most famous, controversial, and important contribution of James comes from comments made in 2.14-26 on the relationship between faith, works, and justification.

- In Luke 6.46, Jesus asks, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” These words from Jesus seem to be taken up in full in James.
- Christianity, for James, needs to include adherence to a way of life before God – the way that Jesus taught – and this letter serves as a handbook to that end.