

What's the Point....of James?

Mark Garner

From the start, James makes it clear that he will present a perspective on life that is markedly different from any viewpoint common in this world. He also establishes the importance of seeking the right kind of wisdom, the kind that comes from God. Unlike this world's wisdom, godly wisdom does not make us prideful or overbearing, for instead it leads to humility and sincerity.

Background To James

Since ancient times, Christians have attributed the book to James "The Just", the physical brother (or half-brother) of Jesus Christ. James was particularly highly regarded in the early church in Jerusalem. Because James died in AD 62 (he was illegally executed by the high priest), the epistle was written before that time, most likely in the late 50's or early 60's AD. James wrote this epistle as a sort of circular to teach and encourage believers, particularly new ones, to put the principles of the gospel into practice in their lives. James is noteworthy for the way that his teachings generally have close parallels in events or teachings in the gospels, particularly Matthew.

The Wisdom That Comes From Heaven - Overview Of James

James begins by reminding his readers that this life's trials and difficulties can strengthen their faith, and then gives several instances of the new perspective we should develop in Jesus, as we come to see things differently from the world's viewpoint. James then exhorts us to pay careful attention to God's Word, which he calls 'the perfect law that gives freedom' (James 1).

He then expounds upon principles that are contrary to worldly practice, and he also discusses how our faith and actions should work together, since they are not meant to be separate parts of our relationship with God (James 2). Next, James firmly cautions us about the things we say, reminding us that no one can tame the tongue. He then provides some deep insights into the differences between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom, calling us to consider what it really means to be wise and understanding (James 3).

Then the epistle reminds us that we should pull away from this world's influences and draw near to God, as indeed he created us to do. For life here is like a mist, and all of our worldly planning cannot change the impermanent nature of this world (James 4). The writer then provides some solemn cautions for our lives, in view of the certainty that God is near. The epistle then closes with more practical thoughts, including prayers for others that are particularly sick or weak (James 5).

Throughout the epistle we can see James's emphasis on seeking and following God's wisdom, regardless of what this world tells us. James does not hesitate to point out many ways in which the world is wrong in its beliefs and in its perspectives. This is done out of compassion, not anger, for the world's viewpoints, no matter how convenient or convincing they sound, are often a great danger to our relationship with God. The differences between godly wisdom and worldly wisdom run much deeper than mere ethical or moral concerns, for they reach to the heart of what our hearts value, desire, and seek.

What's the Point....of James? Caleb Dillinger

James is a unique book in the New Testament, as it is akin to Old Testament wisdom literature like Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. James talks only twice about Jesus. He acknowledges he is a servant of Jesus, and proclaims there is no favoritism in Jesus. Aside from those two references, he uses "God" and "Lord" to talk about who we worship. James, as seen in the book of Acts, was very Jewish in his faith, and this letter reflects that Jewish orientation. That said, it is still extremely relevant to living faithfully to God, even to modern day Christians.

The first chapter reflects on wisdom and enduring temptations and warning the dangers of the tongue. The second chapter explores the sin of favoritism and the dissonance of faith without works (while not saved by works, how can one claim to have faith and not do any good work?). The third chapter returns to the theme of watching one's tongue and concludes with a reflection on godly wisdom. The fourth chapter warns about fights and arguments and worldliness, especially when arrogance is involved. The fifth chapter concludes the letter looking at the danger of wealth that does not give, encourages patience in suffering, and reflects on the power of prayer. All of these themes remain relevant in the twenty-first century.

Some of the biggest points James makes deal with how we understand the relationship between the physical world and spiritual reality. For instance, when temptations come along, one could think God is testing us to be faithful. But James says that's not how God works. God does not tempt. That's how Satan works. Or when we have money, we might expect to be treated better or to use our power to earn more. But that is not in line with the teaching of Jesus that the first will be last and the last first, so James advocates service and humility because of faith in God.

What is so remarkable about reading James today is how logical he is, which works wonderfully for Western minds. What should you do if you're sick? If you lack wisdom? If you feel cheerful? If you see someone different than you? How should you feel about money? How should you use your tongue? What should you do when you face trials? James answers all these questions and more. Which is the point of James - he wants to give guidance so you, as a Christian, can know what to do in so many different circumstances. James can give you confidence in your faith. That's the point of reading James today.