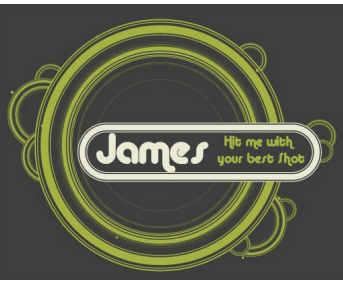
Introduction



Miraculous! Revolutionary! Greatest Ever!

We are inundated by a flood of extravagant claims as we surf the channels of our television or flip the pages of a magazine. The messages leap out at us. The products assure that they are new, improved, fantastic, and capable of changing our lives. For only a few dollars, we can have "cleaner clothes," "whiter teeth," "glamorous hair," and "tastier food." Automobiles, perfume, diet drinks, and mouthwash are guaranteed to bring happiness, friends and the good life. And just before an election, no one can match the politicians' promises. But talk is cheap, and too often we soon realize that the boasts were hollow, quite far from the truth.

"Jesus is the answer!"…"Believe in God!"…"Follow me to church!" Christians also make great claims but are often guilty of belaying them with their actions. Professing to trust God and to be his people, they cling tightly to the world and its values. Possessing all the right answers, they contradict the Gospel with their lives.

With energetic style and crisp, well-chosen words, James confronts this conflict head-on. It is not enough to talk about the Christian faith; we must live it. "What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? (2:14)" The proof of the reality of our faith is a changed life.

Genuine faith will inevitably produce good deeds. This is the central theme of James' letter, around which he supplies practical advice on living the Christian life. This book can be considered a 'How-to' book on Christian living. Confrontation, challenges and a call to commitment await you in its pages. So, as you read James, become a ***doer*** of the Word (1:22-25).

Introduction

A Sure Sign of Life

The book of James, controversial because of its emphasis on "good works," is perhaps best understood through the analogy of motion. In both the physical realm as well as the spiritual realm, where there is life there will be motion.

When a person becomes a Christian, new life begins, and inevitably that life must express itself through "spiritual motion," or good deeds. In James' words, "What good is it ... if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?" (2:14)

Movement does not cause life, but it does inevitably follow life. It is a sure sign that life is present. Similarly, genuine faith in Christ should always result in actions that demonstrate faith.

Does James Contradict Paul?

James is not writing about how to become a Christian, but rather how to act like one. Having all the correct beliefs about God will hardly suffice: even demons believe in God. Real, life-giving faith should produce motion, and James minces no words in describing the specific spiritual actions expected of Christians.

Christian thinkers, notably Martin Luther, have struggled to reconcile the message of James with that of Paul, who so firmly warned against slavish legalism. But Paul never belittled holy living. When he wrote to carousers, such as his letter to the Corinthians, he railed against immorality as strongly as James.

Evidently, James' readers were not even flirting with legalism. They lived at the other extreme, ignoring the laws that God had clearly revealed. James had a simple remedy: "Do not merely listen to the word .... Do what it says." (1:22)

Straight to the Point

Unlike the apostle Paul, James was no urbane man of letters. He was a simple, homespun preacher, perturbed at people who were not living right. His letter covers a wide range of topics, applying the Christian faith to specific problems, and commanding readers to live out their beliefs.

Be humble! James orders. Submit to God! Stop sinning! James is as forthright as an Old Testament prophet; it is hard to miss his point. Modern readers of James face the same dilemma as the first recipients of this unsettling letter. His words are easy enough to understand, but are we doing as he says? What kind of motion characterizes our spiritual lives? As Luther himself said, "You are saved by faith alone, but if faith is alone, it is not faith."

As leader of the headquarters church in Jerusalem, James knew how to speak with authority. You don't have to look for hidden meanings in this book. James tells you clearly how you should act in 54 direct commands. Note that many of these have parallels to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As you study these verses, keep in mind the diverse audience he was addressing which included the rich and the poor. Note, too, his "asides" to specific groups.

Megathemes

Theme	Explanation	Importance
Living Faith	James wants believers not only to hear the truth, but also to put it into action. He contrasts empty faith (claims without conduct) with faith that works. Commitment to love and to serve others is evidence of true faith.	Living faith makes a difference. Make sure your faith is more than just a statement. It should also result in action. Seek ways of putting your faith to work.
Trials	In the Christian life there are trials and temptations. Successfully overcoming these adversities produces maturity and strong character.	Do not resent troubles when they come. Pray for wisdom; God will supply all you need to face persecution or adversity. He will give you patience and keep for strong in times of trial.
Law of Love	We are saved by God's Gracious mercy, not by keeping the law. But Christ gave us a special command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19). We are to love and serve those around us.	Keeping the law of love shows that our faith is vital and real. When we show love to others, we are overcoming our own selfishness.
Wise Speech	Wisdom shows itself in wise speech. God holds us responsible for the results of our destructive words. The wisdom of God that helps control the tongue can help control all our actions.	Accepting God's wisdom will affect your speech. Your words will convey true humility and lead to peace. Think before you speak and allow God to give you self-control.
Wealth	James taught Christians not to compromise with worldly attitudes about wealth. Because the glory of wealth fades, Christians should store up God's treasures through sincere service. Christians must not show partiality to the wealthy or be prejudiced against the poor.	All of us are accountable for how we use what we have. We should not hoard wealth, but be generous toward others. In addition, we should not be impresses by the wealthy nor look down on those who are poor.