

SERIES OVERVIEW

REAL

FAITH

JAMES

REAL

LIFE

st bart's

This James Series Overview © 2022

by St Bart's Anglican Church, Toowoomba (www.stbarts.com.au)
is licenced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this licence,
visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Written to the scattered Jewish-Christian communities of his time, James writes with gusto, instructing Christians that *authentic faith* is that made manifest in *life*. Real faith is lived out in real life! With only 108 verses – but 54 commands – James shows practically how following Jesus should permeate every aspect of the human experience on every one of our frontlines. Real faith is tested and steadfast. Real faith obeys, loves, works, and speaks. Real faith is humble, patient, and prays. The living out of our faith is not the means by which we are saved but the evidence that we are.

Context

Author: Whilst there are a number of people named “James” in the New Testament, the author of the letter is none other than James the brother of Jesus. Whilst James – and all of Jesus’ family – were sceptical of Jesus’ claims prior to the crucifixion (cf. Mark 3; John 7), James goes on to be the leader of the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 15) and was martyred in AD62. This remarkable turnaround (noting he identifies himself not as the brother of Jesus, but as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”) is because of James’ own encounter with the risen Lord Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). The resurrection convinced James that Jesus truly was both the Messiah and Lord.

Date: Somewhere between AD48 to AD62.

Genre: Sharing many features of other letters in the New Testament, James uniquely also reflects forms of biblical wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs) due its concentrated use of pithy instructional statements.

Audience: James does not write to one particular individual or church community, but to the scattered Jewish-Christian diaspora (noting the reference to the symbolic “Twelve tribes of Israel” in James 1:1). The letter was intended to be circulated amongst these communities, but of course still holds significant relevance for all Christians.

Outline

Week 1	Real faith... is tested	James 1:1-8
Week 2	Real faith... is steadfast	James 1:9-18
Week 3	Real faith... obeys	James 1:19-27
Week 4	Real faith... loves	James 2:1-13
Week 5	Real faith... works	James 2:14-26
Week 6	Real faith... speaks	James 3:1-18
Week 7	Real faith... is humble	James 4:1-5:6
Week 8	Real faith... is patient	James 5:7-12
Week 9	Real faith... prays	James 5:13-20

Helpful Resources

- *SERMON SERIES*: All sermons and weekly small group resources will be available at: www.stbarts.com.au/james
- *BOOK*: James: The Wisdom of the Brother of Jesus (by John Dickson): <https://bit.ly/3uSZtFo>
- *COURSE*: Introduction to James: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/james-introduction/>
- *VIDEO*: Bible Project Overview of James: <https://vimeo.com/195667399>
- *WEBSITE*: The Gospel Coalition resources on James: <https://bit.ly/3PNSeqd>
- *TALKS*: Audio Teaching Series on James by Jen Wilkins: <https://jenwilkin.podbean.com/>

For Families

- *WEEKLY RESOURCES*: For each week in the series, access helpful resources for households and for use in churches. Visit: www.stbartskids.org

Adam Lowe

St Bart's, Toowoomba

JULY 2022

Weekly Outlines

WEEK 1: Real faith... is tested

James 1:1-8

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

Big Idea

Whilst we don't know the precise nature of the problems plaguing the Jewish Christian communities to whom James writes, we do know that they were undergoing significant trials. So how can James possibly say, "consider it *pure joy*"? Is he minimising their suffering, invalidating their challenges, or glossing over the significance of their pain? *No*. James is in no way diminishing the weightiness of the problems they face – and he's certainly not claiming that bad things 'aren't that bad' – but he's naming a confronting and sometimes uncomfortable truth: that *how* we respond to trials is one of the most significant determining factors of how we bear fruit for Jesus and grow in Christian maturity. That means that facing trial is not *testing* to see if we have a 'real faith', or if we are acceptable, but that testing can enable a refining of our faith. Persevering doesn't mean we ignore, diminish, or try to spin bad things as good. It means we can hold *grief and gratitude* together and not be crushed! Further, as we face trial, God invites us to ask for – and promises to give – his wisdom so that we can know how to live his way in his world.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can our response to trials be an opportunity to grow in Christian maturity?
- What are the ways in which trials tend to make us either *bitter* or *better*?
- Have you ever asked for wisdom from God? Is there a challenge right now in which you need God's wisdom?

WEEK 2: Real faith... is steadfast

James 1:9-18

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. James 1:9-10

Big Idea

One of the issues facing the Jewish Christian communities to whom James writes, was that the poorest were being taken advantage of (or being persecuted by) by the rich. Whilst in other places in the New Testament we witness concern for poor Christians through *tangible* provision (e.g., noting Paul's collection for the impoverished Jerusalem church, cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; Romans 15:14-32), here, James addresses the problem from a *spiritual* perspective. James encourages those who are poor ('humble' here does not mean those with *humility* per se, but those who are of *humble material circumstance*) that despite having little in the way of financial resources (and even being taunted for that which they lacked), it is actually they who are rich because of their position in Christ! The riches that they have in Christ can never be taken away! But the rich, who in this situation are far from Christ, well it is they who are truly poor. The rich – in fact everyone – should 'take pride in our humiliation', recognising that without Jesus we are spiritually bankrupt and completely unable to save ourselves. Therefore, to those who are being persecuted: press on for we know the future which has been secured for us. From verse 13 onwards, James shifts from the broader issue of trial to the specific nature of temptation. No doubt, in the face of trials, these Christians were not only tempted to sin but also may question where such temptation comes from. James is clear: temptation is not from God and we ought to be aware of how easily temptation can give birth to sin. We are to run to God, who is the giver of *every good gift*, encouraged that as we resist temptation our lives point to the new creation which is yet to come.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are the things often valued in our culture? *Do you ever buy into that? How?*
- Where does temptation come from? What resources does God give us to resist?
- What are the 'good gifts' that God gives? What 'good gifts' can you give thanks for today?

WEEK 3: Real faith... obeys

James 1:19-27

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. James 1:19-20

Big Idea

A real and living faith should be comprehensively evident in our lives. In particular, James asserts that our following of Jesus should be evident through a *slowness to anger*, *action that lines up with what we believe*, and *controlled speech*. Following Jesus transforms the disposition of our hearts, hands, and mouths! There's not a facet of our lives, nor a frontline on which we serve, which is left untouched by living in a way that reflects our Lord. Living in our world that is obsessed with self-expression (as a marker of identity) and empowered to do so with great amplification, there has probably never been a time in which people have been so enabled to speak quickly and project anger. However, followers of Jesus are not to take the *privilege of speech* or the *right to self-expression* for granted. No. Our attitude towards others, the consistency of our behaviour, and the use of our words are to be conformed to God's will and not our own. Christians are not meant to be mere listeners to the word (which would be akin to looking in the mirror and forgetting what you look like) but also doers of it. We are to work with the Spirit, so that the word planted in us will take root and bear fruit for God's glory.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Which do you find most challenging: slowness to anger, action that lines up with belief, or controlling your speech?
- Why is it so important that our lives lineup with what we believe?
- What resources has God given us to help us in this work of transformation?
- What can we do when we fall short in anger, action, or words?

WEEK 4: Real faith... loves

James 2:1-13

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. James 2:8-9

Big Idea

Despite being exploited by certain rich people (cf. verse 6 – those who were dragging some of the Christians into court), who were even blaspheming the name of their Lord, it seems that favouritism towards the rich was evident by some of the Jewish Christian communities to whom James writes. Not only was this neglectful of those who were most in need (e.g., the ‘hypothetical’ poor man who is told to stand or sit in a place of dishonour), but it was also incongruent with the very nature of God. By showing favouritism to the rich, these Christians were failing to keep the ‘royal law’ (i.e., that is the ‘supreme law’ – cf. Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 13:8-10) to *love your neighbour as yourself*. It seems they only desired to love their *rich neighbour*! Whilst we cannot know their motivation for such favouritism (e.g., reflecting what their culture valued or because they thought there was something to be gained?), James says that any form of favouritism amongst brothers and sisters in Christ is not acceptable. Showing favouritism is a failure to love according to God’s standard for us! The examples that follow (e.g., adultery and murder) are likely to demonstrate how the failure to love is often at the heart of our breaking of God’s commands. Followers of Jesus should seek to pour out God’s love indiscriminately amongst his church (that’s what is in view here), acknowledging that he is the judge of all, and the giver of the mercy we need.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do we have any blindspots in our culture when it comes to favouritism?
- Are there any people whom you are more likely to show favouritism toward?
- On one of your frontlines, what does it look like to *love your neighbour as yourself*?

WEEK 5: Real faith... works

James 2:14-26

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:14-17

Big Idea

Reflecting the key theme of the letter (that *real faith* is that which is made manifest in *real life*), James drives the point home with the assertion that: *faith without deeds is dead*. Whilst some in the past have been nervous that James was proclaiming a type of ‘works-based righteousness’ (in which we must earn our salvation), James is not asserting that we’re saved *through our action*, but that action is the fruit of a saving faith. James further presses the point, that *faith without action* is like that of evil (i.e., verse 19 – that even the demons believe that there is one God but do not accordingly act), of no use (i.e., verse 14 and 20), and dead (verse 26). Followers of Jesus are to have a faith that is living, like that of Abraham and Rahab who trusted in God and therefore acted accordingly. This of course does not mean that we’ll always get this right or that our action ‘adds to’ our salvation, but it is the very outworking of the salvation that we have received in Christ. Not only that, but as James explains, that as faith and action work together, our actions so often strengthen what we know to be true. In a society in which the biggest belief blocker to Christianity is hypocrisy (failing to act – or acting inconsistently – with what we say we believe), we should readily see why this really matters. Jesus calls us not simply to acknowledge him with our lips, but to follow him with our lives.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How does James describe faith without corresponding action?
- If action is critical, does that mean we are saved through it?
- Who are some Christians known to you who evidently live out what they believe?

WEEK 6: Real faith... speaks

James 3:1-18

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. James 3:9-10

Big Idea

In the ancient world, one of the key ways in which people could demonstrate wisdom was with *impressive* speech. Wise people were those who could speak eloquently and extensively. However, James not only knows that true wisdom is so much more (cf. verses 17-18), but that wise speech is orientated to God's purpose rather than the purpose to build up oneself. James warns that the tongue – *just like a bit in a horse's mouth, a rudder on a boat, or a spark which lights a forest fire* – is a small thing that has a big effect! In fact, James says that often our tongue is the place where our problems start, corrupting 'the whole body' and setting 'the whole course of one's life on fire' (verse 6)! Of course, having been on both the giving and receiving end of words, it only takes a scarp of self-reflection to recognise the power of our words for both good and bad. Further compounding the problem, James says that whilst all manner of animals in our world have been tamed, *no human being* can tame the tongue. What are we to do in the face of such a challenge? No doubt, we of course run to God for help, but part of the secret is to recognise the ultimate purpose of our words: that made in God's likeness, that our speech should be to the praise of God! That's the standard by which we speak. We speak not to be recognised as wise, not because of a right for self-expression, but all of our speech should be uttered for the purpose – and through the filter – of that which glorifies God.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Why do you think that the tongue is so hard to tame? When do you find it most difficult?
- If no human being can tame the tongue, why should we bother?
- What could help you to continually test your speech against the standard of that which glorifies God?

WEEK 7: Real faith... is humble

James 4:1-5:6

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? James 4:1

Big Idea

Many things cause fights and quarrels: problem solving, decision-making, trying to prioritise what's important. However, according to James, these are merely the *presenting issues*. The *real cause* of fracture within Christian community is not simply competing demands with others, but our sinful nature competing *with what God desires*. Selfish desire and coveting is at the heart of the problem. This of course does not simply mean a desire for material things (but could have been part of the problem in the communities to whom James writes, particularly considering the toxic nature of the rich exploiting the poor), but includes everything that cultivates *unloving* desire towards others. Note how bad things have gotten: instead of asking God to provide for their need, they instead covet what others have – and had they received what they wanted, James insists it would only be for selfish reasons. What a mess! What does God desire? That we would submit our whole selves – *our longings, ambitions, desires, resources, time* – in humility to God! James longs that the community would not be overcome by the relationship-breaking ambitions of the devil, but that God's people would seek to live single-mindedly for God. It seems that some in these communities pride themselves on their self-sufficiency. They have no desire to share with others and their confidence in the future rests in themselves. How they desperately need to be humble. James warns them that they shouldn't get too full - or too ahead - of themselves (verse 14, "you do not even know what will happen tomorrow"!). James of course is not against any form of planning, but he is against a type of selfish ambition which fractures our earthly relationships along with that with God.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What commonly creates quarrels and fights amongst Christians?
- What – according to James – really is at the *heart* of the problem?
- What does it look like for you to lay down your own desires and instead submit everything (your longings, ambitions, desires, resources, and time) to God?

WEEK 8: Real faith... is patient

James 5:7-12

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. James 5:7

Big Idea

In light of the future judgement of the world's oppressors, James calls upon his brothers and sisters in Christ to keep pressing on, waiting patiently for the Lord's return. Patience here speaks not of waiting for the traffic light to change green, but standing firm in one's faith – even amidst great trial and challenge – in confidence that Jesus is returning (soon!) to judge the world. This means that the ultimate basis for our patience, is not our inner strength or resolve, but the certainty that Jesus will return soon. As we wait, James implores these Christian communities not to grumble against one another (likely linked to the quarrels and fights mentioned earlier in chapter 4). They should be loving one another as if Jesus was standing right at their front door waiting. Is patience costly? Absolutely! But we can have a confidence – just like Job – that God is indeed working out his purposes and will bring them to an end. Finally, in verse 12, James makes an appeal to his brothers and sisters to be a people of truth. When James says, “do not swear—not be heaven or earth or anything else”, he is referring to an elaborate tradition of ‘oath-swearing’ of his day in which truthfulness would be graded depending on the type of oath given. James says, this simply won't do for the people of God. That as a people born of the ‘word of truth’ (cf. 1:18) that their entire lives (including every word) would be characterised by truthfulness.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- When are you most likely to find it hard to wait?
- As Christians, what helps you to stand firm as you wait for Jesus to return?
- Why as people born of the ‘word of truth’ is it so important for us to live lives of truthfulness?

WEEK 9: Real faith... prays

James 5:13-20

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

James 4:13-14

Big Idea

James' parting advice to the Jewish Christian communities is simple, but profound: in any circumstance – be it trouble, happiness, or sickness – pray! Why? Because as we pray, we are orientating our lives to God, expressing our dependence on God, delighting in the goodness of God, and enjoining ourselves with his action in the world. When James says in verse 15, that “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up”, he cannot possibly mean that every ‘confident’ prayer for a sick person will make them well before the Lord’s return. As James’ brothers and sisters in Christ endured trial, he would have only known too well that some people were healed whilst others were not. James of course is encouraging his brothers and sisters to pray confidently (hence the example of Elijah) – in the recognition that nothing is impossible for God – but also (in light of everything shared in the letter so far) that they must trust in God’s will even if things are not as they would prefer. That means that healing in this lifetime is not guaranteed, but that they can have every confidence – *in Christ* – that they are forgiven, and that the dead will be raised when Jesus returns. Finally, as James closes his letter, he encourages his brothers and sisters to look out for one another, especially those who may be drifting away. What a wonderful encouragement, that as we seek to follow Jesus authentically – that our faith might be reflected in real life – that our brothers and sisters are looking out for us, especially in times of trial when we may be tempted to step away.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- When does James suggest that his brothers and sisters should pray?
- What is the shape of your prayer life? What would help grow the depth of your prayer?
- How do you regularly help your brothers and sisters in Christ to keep on persevering, even amidst great trial?



If you have found this resource helpful or would like to explore other opportunities to grow, we'd love to hear from you. Simply scan the QR code to complete a *next steps* card.