



Background to James' letter

The Epistle from James is a letter written by James to the scattered tribes (1 v 1). Allberry says that 'The great pressing issues behind this letter are spiritual drifting – what James has called double-mindedness and spiritual adultery – and of the need to come back to God in wholehearted faith.' (2015, p152).

The identity of James is commonly held to be James the brother of Jesus (Mark 6 v 3). At the time the letter was written the Apostle James was already dead (Acts 12 v 2, AD44) and the other two NT James's were not influential enough to have written the letter (Barker 1987, p1839).

James, the brother of Jesus, saw the risen Christ (1 Cor 15 v 7) and was a leader at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15 v 13). He was well known to Peter (Acts 12 v 17) and Paul, who called him a pillar of the church (Gal 2 v 9). Jude self-identifies as 'a brother of James' (Jude 1 v 1) showing James' widespread recognition in the early church. James was martyred in AD 62 – he was stoned by scribes and Pharisees for refusing to renounce his commitment to Christ (Josephus). (All ibid).

James' pastoral letter, which could originally have been a sermon, was written to persecuted Jews, probably the diaspora following Stephen's martyrdom. This dates it pre-AD50, making it one of the earliest NT books. The overall message is one of consistency of faith and lifestyle, although there has often been said to be a loose connection between topics.

A historical criticism of James' letter is that it doesn't teach the gospel and contains only two references to Jesus. However, in defence of this, it was written to Christians who already knew the gospel and major doctrines of theology, but who demonstrated a problem with putting their faith into action. Moo states that 'the teaching of Jesus thoroughly

permeates the letter, without being directly cited...' (2004, p22) and reminds us that James frequently alludes to Jesus' teaching, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, as well as to OT figures.

There has also been historical debate regarding Paul's and James' teaching on faith and works, which on first reading may appear in opposition. Paul clearly teaches that salvation is by faith alone, James says that Abraham's 'faith was made complete by what he did' (2 v 22). (A lesson in not taking texts out of context...)

Moo responds with 3 clear objections to the claim that Paul and James oppose each other, aside from the obvious fact that God does not contradict himself:

1. They are combating opposite problems – Paul is writing to counter a Jewish tendency to rely on works. James is writing to combat an under-emphasis on works which has 'turned faith into mere doctrinal orthodoxy'. (2004, p46)
2. Paul refers to works that precede conversion, James to works that follow it.
3. In view of the above, the Gk word *dikaioo* (justify) has a different meaning in Paul than James. Paul uses it to mean 'make righteous' (the imputation of righteousness) and James uses it in the OT sense of a judge's verdict (the declaration of righteousness). Thus Paul and James agree. Paul says in 2 Cor 5 v 10, 'For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad', referring to the rewards of the faithful, not the final Judgement.

Bible studies from James

Structure of the studies.

These studies are designed for a group who are already Christians but should not exclude people who have not made a profession of faith. You may have to back-track sometimes to re-explain the gospel, in order to help people understand James' letter which was written to Christians, and thus assumes that the reader understands the gospel.

There are a lot of questions in each study, but you will notice that several are simple comprehension questions and should not take more than a couple of minutes. I

recommend that you do the study yourself before running it with prisoners so that you can have a good understanding of the answers, and where the study is going.

Each study is designed to last for about 90 minutes. I would suggest that you take a 10 minute break around half-way. If you only have an hour, just do the starred * questions.

Each study is written out twice, once for leaders (*with a guide to answers*) and once for participants. The studies are laid out in 2 sections:

What does the passage say and mean?

Please don't be put off by the number of questions in a study! The studies contain some comprehension questions – it is important that we understand what the passage literally says – these can be taken fairly quickly. Try not to go too deep with them - they just aim to set the background. There are also deeper questions to help the group to think and unpack the meaning of the passage.

There are also interactive questions to keep people with short attention spans engaged:

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING – SDL

3 questions that need to be prepared on flip-chart paper, spaced out with room to write the answers. Prepare enough flip-charts for the group to work in pairs, and provide marker pens for this. When they are finished, download the answers as a group, with a leader coordinating the discussion.

STICKERS

Write the question on the top of the flip-chart. Give the group stickers or post-it's and biros and ask them to write their answer on their sticker and stick it on the flip-chart. When they are finished, the leader reads out the answers, and usually explains the right answer.

SHOUT-OUT

Write the question on the top of the flip-chart. Ask the group to suggest answers while you write their answers so they can see the results of their brainstorm. If someone gives an answer that is unacceptably wrong (not just slightly wrong) don't write it up, but do explain why you are not writing it.

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Each study includes some application questions. It's important to remember that we cannot apply the Bible to our lives if we have not read and understood it first!

Bibliography

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Barker et al (1987): *New International Version Study Bible*, London: Hodder and Stoughton

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Motyer A (1985) *The Message of James, The tests of faith*, Leicester: Inter Varsity Press