

# James 1.1

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## *Wholehearted Devotion*

Amington Church

Sunday 8 April 2018

### **The Bible**

A new vicar moved into town and went out one Saturday to visit his parishioners. All went well until he came to one house. It was obvious that someone was home, but no one came to the door even after he had knocked several times. Finally, he took out his card, wrote on the back, 'Revelation 3.20' § and put it through the door. The next morning at church, he found his card in the collection plate. Below his verse was written, 'Genesis 3.10' §.

I hesitate to add, that is *not* a true story!

To some people, the Bible is a joke. To others it is an irrelevance, of little value to a modern scientific society. To others it is so dangerous it is illegal – in North Korea if you are found to own a Bible you and your entire family face imprisonment, torture and death. To others it is an object of study, to be picked apart and analysed like any other historical text.

What is the Bible to you?

To me the Bible is, ‘the most valuable thing that this world affords’  
(¶ words from the coronation of Her Majesty the Queen).

To me the Bible contains everything we need to know about God, our world, and ourselves, about salvation and the new life that follows it, about how God is bringing heaven to earth.

The words of the Bible may have been written down by human beings, but those words were inspired by God – in such a way that he speaks to us *now* by the words he inspired *then* – *even in another language*. When we read the Bible it isn’t like reading a novel – when we read the Bible, God by his Holy Spirit is speaking words of life into our hearts, *through* the words of the Bible.

When we read the Bible we catch a glimpse of God himself, hidden behind and revealed through human words.

When we read the Bible a miracle happens.

What is the Bible to you? I hope it is more than a door stop, more than a shelf-dust-gatherer. Because, if I could sum up the whole of James’ letter in one phrase it’s this ¶: **do not merely listen to the word... do what it says** (1.22). In other words, don’t ignore the Bible: read and listen to it *in such a way that your behaviour changes*.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Today we begin a new series looking at the book of James. I've learned from my past mistakes – trying to introduce a series *and* preach on the first section at the same time – so today our reading was one single verse (!)...

## James who?

..the first word of which is 'James'.

But that begs the question – § who *was* James? There are some clues in the letter, but no clear answer. However, although there are at least four people called James in the New Testament:

- James, the son of Zebedee, brother of John (of 'Peter, James and John' fame);
- James, the son of Alphaeus, one of the disciples, possibly the brother of Matthew (who wrote the gospel);
- James, the father (or brother) of the *other* Judas; and
- James, the half-brother of Jesus, who took over from Peter as the leader of the church in Jerusalem, with a concern for retaining the Jewish identity of the church...

..it seems most likely the author was § the half-brother of Jesus.

# Conflict

But what is much more interesting, is to whom he wrote this ‘letter’, and why. Paul’s letters in the main were written to address specific situations within churches, and often contain personal greetings, and people in the church family are mentioned by name.

There is nothing like that in James, which seems to be a more general letter, written to be widely circulated, particularly among the Christians with a Jewish background, scattered around the ancient world, escaping the persecution in Jerusalem.

As we shall see, conflict with the world is one of the key themes of the book – James encourages his readers to persevere, even under extreme trials (1.4, 12).

But possibly more important is the conflict *within ourselves*. One of my favourite bands wrote a song called *The War Inside*:

It’s where the fight begins  
Underneath the skin  
Beneath these hopes and where we’ve been  
Every fight comes from the fight within  
I am the war inside

*Switchfoot, ‘The War Inside’*

James isn't so worried about the battles the church is facing out there in the world – he's worried about the battles the church is facing in here *tap heart* – he's worried that the world is getting into the church **J**:

Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

*James 4.4 (NIV)*

This is the far more subtle fight. As the world creeps into the church, so we become double-minded – our love for Jesus and our desire to follow him become corrupted and we start desiring things that are not good for us.

As the world creeps into the church, we lose our focus on Jesus, we stop reading our Bibles, and so we lose our confidence, we start to doubt the solid ground on which we stand – we stop praying, we start drifting, and without knowing quite how it happened we find ourselves a long way from God.

Does that sound familiar? If it does hear one of the most precious promises in the whole letter **J**: **come near to God and he will come near to you** (4.8, NIV).

So then, this is what James is about: being wholehearted, devoted to God, finding our meaning, our life in *him* and in no other.

Does that sound like something you want?

Three guys went out to play golf. Moses teed off, and his ball landed in a water trap. He walked to the water, held out his club, and the water parted. He hit his ball onto the green.

Jesus teed off, and his ball went into the same trap. But he calmly walked across the water, hit his ball and it landed on the green.

The third player teed off, and his ball headed straight for the same water trap. But this time it landed on a lily pad, where it was grabbed by a frog who mistook it for dinner. But before it could swallow the ball, an eagle swooped down and grabbed the frog. As it flew off, the frog dropped the ball.

The ball landed on a car driving on the nearby road, bounced off the roof of the car, back onto the golf course, hit a tree, rolled across the green and into the cup for a hole in one.

Moses turned to Jesus and said, 'I hate playing golf with your Dad!'

# Holiness

The thing James is probably most (in)famous for writing, comes in chapter 2, when he deals with the question of ¶ faith and works. It's a crucial question, and one that is often misunderstood.

James insists that ¶ **a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone** (2.24). But *Paul* says that **a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ** (Galatians 2.16)?

And in fact they both quote the same verse in Genesis (15.6) to prove what appear to be contradictory points: are we saved by what we do, or are we saved by faith?

Friends, the theological arguments are probably not something you want to hear on a Sunday morning, but I will happily chat to anyone about this in more detail over a coffee (or three).

But the pastoral point – which is why James is so important – is critical. Picture a horse and cart. Where does the cart go? *Behind* the horse. It's so obvious that the cart goes behind the horse that ¶ we even have a cliché about putting the cart before the horse.

It's the same with faith and works: like the horse goes before the cart, so faith goes before works.

Paul often fought against the idea that we have to earn our way into God's kingdom. No, he said, that's simply not possible – no-one is good enough for that. What's important, Paul says, is *faith* – faith like Abraham, who believed God would provide him with children. *Faith* is what saves us, faith in the gift of God.

Paul insisted: *the cart must not go before the horse*.

James, on the other hand, came up against a misunderstanding of Paul's teachings, that we can do whatever we like, as long as we have faith. No, he said, that's simply not right – faith without action is simply empty words. What's important, James says, is *what we do* – like Abraham, who was willing to act on his faith in God providing him with a family – even to the point of sacrificing his only son. True faith, James says, *must* result in action:

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 2.15-17 (NIV)*



§ Paul insisted: *the cart must not go before the horse.*

§ James insisted: *the cart must go behind the horse.*

Do you see how they are different ways of saying the same thing?  
And do you see how it applies to you?

Friends, whatever you do, however hard you try, you can never earn your way into God's kingdom, you can never prove yourself worthy of God's love, you can never do enough good to undo the damage caused by sin.

Only God can remove the stain of sin, and remake us – in a few minutes we will be singing 'I am a new creation' – God does that, not us.

The way we respond to that is called 'faith' – we trust that when God says he is remaking us, from the inside-out, he's doing exactly that. We trust that when we stand before him on Judgement Day he won't give us the punishment we deserve, but find our names written in the Book of Life, written there by the blood of Jesus. We trust that he will never leave us nor forsake us, no matter what happens, no matter what we do, no matter how we fail, no matter how far we fall short.

This is faith, and it is a response to what God has done for us.

Paul insisted: *the cart must not go before the horse.*

But the fact that we can't save ourselves, but only receive life as a gift from God, doesn't mean we can do whatever we want. We know people accused Paul of saying that, but that isn't what he meant at all – and so James insisted: *the cart must go behind the horse.*

Good behaviour is not optional. When we become a Christian we are adopted into God's family, and as we begin to learn what it means to be truly loved and forgiven, how can we stay the same? God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who believe – how can we stay with same, with the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, at work within us?

If you are in any doubt, and you want some homework, perhaps read Matthew 5-7: the Sermon on the Mount. It is a big influence on James, and it is uncompromising in what Jesus tells us to *do*, how he tells us to *behave*. **'Be perfect,'** Jesus says, **'as your heavenly Father is perfect'** (Matthew 5.48, NIV).

Because, friends, faith is how we respond to God, **ƒ** and **holiness** is what faith **looks like**.

If faith is the horse, then holiness is the cart – the cart **must not** go before the horse, but it **must** come behind the horse.

The letter of James is intensely practical – but also challenging. The words in 1.22 echo through it **¶: do not merely listen to the word... do what it says**. I've written a prayer based on that bit of James 1 – please pray it as we study James together this summer.

Because James wants us to *do* stuff! His letter isn't full of theory; it contains command, challenge, even pleading – James knows the world is getting into the church, and he knows the solution: we need to be *more* Christian, not *less*. Instead of compromising, we need to be *more* like Jesus, *more* loving, *more* caring, *more* confident in who we are as beloved children of God, *more* confident in the Bible, in the truth and the good news that: Alleluia, Christ is risen!

As we focus ourselves on Jesus, so we become less double-minded and more wholehearted. As we listen to the word and do what it says, so we grow in holiness – and holiness is what faith looks like.

And as we grow in holiness, people will sit up and take notice. They will want to know why we aren't like other people, and we will be able to say, it's because of Christ within us, the hope of glory, the treasure in the jar of clay.

Friends let us listen to James, do what he says, and learn to be devoted to Jesus with all our hearts.