

# Doers of the Word

## A wake-up call, loud and clear from the Epistle of James

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

All preachers face the same danger: to teach beyond their lived experience. It has always been easier to talk about prayer than to pray. It has always been easier to preach about love and devotion than to serve our fellow humans – especially some of those we know! Very early (James may be the first NT book written), as the Christian faith began to consolidate in the known Roman world, James set himself to correct this weakness: “My dear brothers... every man should be slow to speak... Not many of you should presume to be teachers... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (1:19; 3:1). Perhaps you smile and think “thankfully I am not a bible teacher”. Wake up! James’ pointed call is for all of us: “But be **doers of the word**, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves”. He then praises those who are not “hearers who forget but **doers who act** - they will be blessed in their **doing**” (1:22, 25 NRSV)

### What do we know about James?

James is one of those interesting names which varies as it moves between languages. In Greek and Latin it is “Iakobos”, and in Hebrew “Yaakov”. In most modern languages, the name sounds like one of these. Yet we find some variants as we turn to Italian and French (Giacomo and Jacques), Catalan and English (Jaume and James), Portuguese and Spanish (Tiago and Santiago).

Mathew and Mark tell us that Jesus had sisters and provide the names of His 4 brothers: James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Although there is some debate, most agree that two of these half-brothers are the authors of the James and Jude Epistles. John tells us that during Jesus’ ministry, “his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:5). The apostle Paul informs us that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to “all the apostles” and to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). It cannot be proved, but some think it likely that this James was His half-brother and that this encounter with the risen Christ was the event that radically changed him. We next read of James as one of the leaders in the Christian assembly in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19) and a key figure at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:13). The apostle Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 9:5,6, suggest that this James was probably a married man, working full time for the Lord, who sometimes visited fellow believers together with his wife.

It is well known that the reformer Martin Luther had the Epistle of James in low esteem. In his mind, its focus was Jewish and lacked the heavy doctrinal thoughts of Paul's Epistles. He referred to James as a "right strawy Epistle". Given Luther's rediscovery of "salvation by faith alone" and his great battle to defend this truth, we can understand why he did not appreciate James' emphasis on "works". Yet the Epistle of James, together with all the other canonical writings, form the inspired Word of God. We do wrong if we downgrade any. The two letters written by Jesus' half-brothers are best understood as corrective Epistles: **Jude** seeks to correct deficient doctrine (Jude 3, 17) and **James**, as we shall see, seeks to correct deficient behavior.

The letter of James is similar in structure to the book of Proverbs, that is, it doesn't have much structure! James, like Solomon, has a number of themes or concerns which come and go and come again throughout his writings. Yet, in order to get a handle on this Epistle, I suggest the following outline:

## **Doers of the Word – No excuses!**

### **James 1**

James is tired of theological flowers and pretty mental patterns. He calls for action! If you believe God's word, act on it: "Do what it says" (1:22). It has been said that the only parts of the Bible we really believe are the bits we obey. James would say a big "amen" to that.

Are you going through a difficult time? Are you facing trials of many kinds? This does not justify slack in obedience. God will use these trials for blessing (1:2, 3). Is your passivity caused by confusion? Don't just stay there: ask God for necessary wisdom, "who gives generously to all without finding fault" (1:5). Stressed by doubts? If God says it, simply believe it. And then act on it! (1:6-8). Do you think you are too poor to be an active Christian? (1:9). Is the drive to gain more money limiting your effectiveness as a Christian? (1:10-11). Are you being distracted by subtle temptations? (1:12-15). Do other people make you angry? Does your bad temper discourage your strive for practical holiness? (1:19-20). For James these are distracting excuses. The Lord wants to change us through His word. James urges us to "humbly accept the word implanted in you" (1:21). He ends this first chapter with another common argument to justify personal inaction. Some of us may say "I profess a respectable religion", "I belong to a Bible believing congregation" or "I hold to conservative doctrine". James answers "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (1:26). True Christian religion becomes evident in the believers character and by what he says and does. How would James view your type of Christianity?

## **1. Do you have God's love in your heart? – Show it!**

### **James 2:1-16**

For James, the outside displays what is inside, our speech displays our state of heart, and our actions display our real theology. In this, James' straightforward approach is very similar to the teachings of Lord Jesus himself, who encouraged his listeners to look at the fruit in order to determine the type of tree (Matthew 7:15-23). The test proposed by James is simple: "Show it" (2:18; 3:13).

- a. **Favouritism:** We can imagine James enjoying the melodious new Christian songs in the Jerusalem congregation, such as “Oh, how I love Jesus” and “What a wonder to be part of the family of God”. Then a leading apostle stands up and addresses the congregation: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). The congregation responds with an enthusiastic “amen!” Amid this quasi-celestial scene, a discordant tone is heard: a wealthy man and a poor man walk into the congregation. Within seconds the wealthy man is led to a prominent comfortable seat, and the poor man still stands at the door. Half an hour later James looks again, and the poor man is now sitting on the floor. “My brothers” James exhorts them, “as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favouritism” (2:1). What do you think James would say if he entered into a modern Christian congregation which shows preference for a certain race, educational level or social standing?
- b. **Noble thoughts:** The meeting is over and the saints happily and thoughtlessly grab their winter coats and head home. Most are looking forward to a nice Sunday lunch. Again James’ keen eye spots a nasty stain: a poor sister and her children walk out into the cold air without a coat. Fellow saints smile and waive at them. “Have a nice day!” “See you next Sunday!” “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed” (2:14-16). Yet no one offers her a coat. No one invites them for lunch. “What good is it?” (2:16). No good! Charity without action is useless. Do you have the Lord’s love in your heart? How do you show it? Be practical: phone that sister who had a baby. Offer to do the shopping for that elderly brother who can’t get out. Look after those children so that the tired parents can have an evening out together. Be a generous driver. Make room for someone. Write that encouragement card or email. Send that gift. Invite that immigrant. Get the idea?

## **2. Do you have saving faith? – Show it!**

### **James 2:14-26**

James now turns to doctrinal matters. “Faith by itself” he says “if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (2:17). “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (2:26). Some think that James is contradicting or picking a fight with the apostle Paul who wrote: “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” and “The man who does not work but trust God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him a righteousness” Romans 3:28; 4:5. Interestingly, both James and Paul use Abraham to illustrate their point. There is no conflict here: Paul makes it abundantly clear that we are saved by faith when we trust in the Lord, when we unconditionally hand ourselves over to Christ. But then, adds James, this saving faith cannot remain static, it necessarily shows itself. New birth means new life. True conversion initiates motion. A change in heart leads to a change in lifestyle. If you were followed day and night, could a secret agent collect enough evidence to prove conclusively in that you have saving faith?

Saving faith is more than mental agreement with a set of correct doctrines. Even demons know that correct doctrines are correct! (2:19). Saving faith is more than happy feelings and moving emotions. Even demons “tremble” and “shudder” when confronted with the truth (2:19). Saving faith is based on correct doctrine and usually touches our emotions yet also involves an act of the will. Deep inside we acknowledge our sin and turn to Christ imploring His forgiveness. We hand our life

over to Him; we invite Him to take full control of our being. Saving faith is so simple that even a child can exercise it and be born again. And yet it is profound and life changing. Have you exercised saving faith? Have you been born again? Does your life show it?

### **3. Do you have wisdom from above? – Show it!** **James 3**

Perhaps most people feel they are wise enough to live a normal life. When in doubt, we can always call in the experts! In this letter, James distinguishes two kinds of wisdom: “a wisdom from above”, and “a wisdom that does not come from above”. This second kind of wisdom is also called “earthly, unspiritual, of the devil” (3:13-18).

Have you stopped to consider how you think? Do you reason like a godly person or like a godless person? What kind of wisdom determines your daily choices? Since we Christians read the Bible regularly, we are inclined to think that we function on “wisdom from above”. James would smile and ask: do you show it? In this third chapter, James points to two areas where “wisdom from above” should be evident:

- a. **The use of our tongue (3:1-12).** The wisdom from above is not theological correctness, neither is it Bible knowledge or doctrinal cleverness. The wisdom God gives leads to healthy relationships and a positive life. Like horses and ships are directed by a small bit and rudder, so our tongue - what we say and how we say it – determines the orientation of our life. Bits and rudders are controlled by an external force. Similarly, the Holy Spirit desires to use our tongue. Do you speak words that encourage others? Try it. Ask the Lord to use your mouth to build others up. Look at the good things around you and verbally reinforce them. Thank your wife for that nice normal meal. Praise that child who behaved well in Sunday school. Tell that leader in your church how much you value his dedication. Tell your husband how much you appreciate his faithfulness. Our Lord also desires to receive from each of us “the fruit of lips that confess his name” Hebrews 13:15. Words are mightier than thoughts.
- b. **Our daily behaviour (3:13-18).** Wisdom from above is described as pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (3:17). Do these qualities describe you in some way? James looks thoughtfully at each one in the congregation and then asks: “Who is wise an understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (3:13). In a world bent on conflict, those who have wisdom from above are recognized as “peacemakers” (3:18).

### **4. Are you a good friend of God? – Show it!** **James 4**

Good friends make life enjoyable. We need them. Although friendships are free, for each we must pay a price. Using James’ words “Don’t you now that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (4:4). In this fourth chapter, we find a number of qualities which make for good friendship:

- a. **Faithfulness:** Good friendships have many enemies, and our relationship with God is no exception. We can be self centered, have wrong motives or seek our own pleasures (4:3). We can seek popularity in a world that rejects our Lord (4:4). Rather than resisting, we can follow and cooperate with the devil (4:7). If we can't trust or if we can't be trusted, friendship can't develop.
- b. **Preference:** Good friends value each other's company. They thrive on time together. Do you make time to be alone with the Lord? Have you learnt to enjoy His presence? James' recipe is simple: "Submit yourselves, then, to God... Come near to God and he will come near to you" (4:7, 8). The Lord desires this fellowship with you. He has called us to it (1 Corinthians 1:9).
- c. **Humility:** Pride damages friendships. Therefore James encourages us to "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:10). Jesus himself invites us to come to Him and "learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart" Matthew 11:28, 29. In fact, this humility leads us to want to obey Him, and without this obedience, there can be no divine friendship (John 15:14).
- d. **Involvement:** Good friends take each other into account when making their plans. Friendship affects choices and decisions. James speaks to those who say "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money" (4:13). He does not wish to discourage planning. James wishes to encourage saints to take the Lord into account in their planning (4:15). To what extent does the Lord shape your dreams and projects?

## 5. Do you believe in the Lord's second coming? – Show it! James 5

In this last chapter, James makes two references to the "Lord's coming" (5:7, 8). The Lord made this plain to his disciples: "In my Father's house there are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" John 14:2, 3. You probably know these verses by heart, but do you really believe them? Does this happy expectation warm your heart? What else? Does it orient your choices in any visible way? James highlights three areas where this blessed hope should influence our living:

- a. **Order in personal life:** The first six verses make reference to wealth, modest living, generosity, correct personal finances and justice. If we would not like James to repeat: "You have hoarded wealth in these last days" (5:3), we may need to do some serious re-arrangement of priorities. Does the expectation of the Lord's coming influence the way you invest your resources?
- b. **Good interpersonal relationships:** We are called to be patient (5:7), to avoid complaining and grumbling (5:9) and to speak the truth to each other (5:12). As parents we know how sad we feel when we come home to find our children squabbling. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if the Lord's second coming caught us in the middle of strife and animosity? The apostolic advice is: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everybody" Romans 12:18.

c. **Prayer, pastoral care and evangelism:** In the last 8 verses of the Epistle we find 7 references to prayer, mainly intercessory prayer. James encourages us to pray for other people's needs, adding that "The prayer of the righteous man is powerful and effective" (5:16). But a saint who prays for others, also desires to help in some other way. As the Lord's coming draws closer, we should engage in pastoral visitation. The elders in every congregation should provide a good example of home visitation (5:14), but visitation is a task for every able Christian (1:27; 5:19). James ends the Epistle addressing "whoever" (5:20). He encourages each one of us to share the message of salvation in some way or another. After all, the "Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" 2 Peter 3:9. Do you really believe in the Lord's second coming? This promise, if we believe it, clearly adds urgency to the task before us!

## Conclusion

James is seriously concerned about works, about change, about action among God's people. This concern is shared by most inspired authors of Scripture. But a clear understanding of the role of such "doings" is an essential element of the gospel message: We do not do works in order to **become something**. We do works as evidence that we **are something**. "It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this not of yourselves, it is a gift from God – Not by works" Ephesians 2:8, 9, but then, just so that no one would minimize the importance of the practical externals, the apostle immediately adds that we Christians have been "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" Ephesians 2:10. Do we have eyes to see the good works which God has prepared for us to do today? Other people's needs may be our opportunities. Because we have been saved, because Christ and His love indwell us, because the Lord is coming soon, "let us not become weary in doing good... let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" Galatians 6:9, 10. Agreed? Awake? Now let's do something!

Philip Nunn  
Armenia, Colombia  
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