

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown

Overview Book of James

1/18/17

"MIRACULOUS!" . . . "Revolutionary!" . . . "Greatest ever!" We are inundated by a flood of extravagant claims as we channel surf the television or search the internet. 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 belying 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 the Christian faith, he says; we must live it. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?" (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.

James begins his letter by outlining some general characteristics of the Christian life (1:1-27). Next, he exhorts Christians to act justly in society (2:1-13). He follows this practical advice with a theological discourse on the relationship between faith and action (2:14-26). Then James shows the importance of controlling one's speech (3:1-12).

In 3:13-18, James distinguishes two kinds of wisdom—earthly and heavenly. Then he encourages his readers to turn from evil desires and obey God (4:1-12). James reproves those who trust in their own plans and possessions (4:13-5:6). Finally, he exhorts his readers to be patient with each other (5:7-11), to be straightforward in their promises (5:12), to pray for each other (5:13-18), and to help each other remain faithful to God (5:19-20).

This letter could be considered a how-to book on Christian living. Confrontation, challenges, and a call to commitment await you in its pages. Read James and become a doer of the Word (1:22-25).

VITAL STATISTICS

PURPOSE: To expose hypocritical practices and to teach right Christian behavior

AUTHOR: James, Jesus' brother, a leader in the Jerusalem church

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE: First-century Jewish Christians residing in Gentile communities outside Palestine

DATE WRITTEN: Probably A.D. 49, prior to the Jerusalem council held in A.D. 50

SETTING: This letter expresses James' concern for persecuted Christians who were once part of the Jerusalem church.

KEY VERSE: "But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds" (2:18).

THE BLUEPRINT

1. *Genuine religion* (1:1-27)

2. *Genuine faith* (2:1—3:12)

3. *Genuine wisdom* (3:13—5:20) James wrote to Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution. In their hostile surroundings they were tempted to let intellectual agreement pass for true faith. This letter can have rich meaning for us as we are reminded that genuine faith transforms lives. We are encouraged to put our faith into action. It is easy to say we have faith, but true faith will produce loving actions toward others.

MEGATHEMES

LIVING FAITH

EXPLANATION: 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.

IMPORTANCE: 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

EXPLANATION: In the Christian life there are trials and temptations. Successfully overcoming these adversities produces maturity and strong character.

IMPORTANCE: Don't 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 you strong in times of trial. Law of

LOVE

EXPLANATION: 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.

IMPORTANCE: 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

EXPLANATION: 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.

IMPORTANCE: 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

EXPLANATION: 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.

IMPORTANCE: 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 impressed by the wealthy nor look down on those who are poor.