



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Do This and Do That

A Tour of James

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Introduction

1. At a sermon seminar luncheon I once attended, the speaker told how he once approached a favorite college Bible teacher and asked, "How does one become a good preacher?" He was temporarily taken back by the answer: "Study the Bible and pray." Surely, he thought, it couldn't be that simple? But, of course, as he soon realized, in one sense it is.
2. That principle should undergird all Bible study, whether a preacher's or someone else's.
3. It should be step one as we begin to study any Bible book. Though tempted to learn *about* the book first, we are better served if we listen to the book before we learn from others.
 - a. Read it all the way through, preferably more than once.
 - b. Identify the author's argument and focus on the themes he emphasizes.
 - c. Look for clues about his readers' experiences, views or behaviors.
 - d. As you have questions – and if you're reading thoughtfully, you will – record them. Then, see if you can answer them from the text itself (context).
 - e. Having done all that, turn to the tools and learn from others — and then read it again.
4. As we begin our study, we'll apply this principle to James. Our aim is not to be exhaustive, but to get a feel for what James himself has to tell us about his book.¹

Body

I. Three of James's Biggest Ideas.

A. James helps our understanding of God.²

1. The titles James uses are instructive.

- a) "God" (θεός, *theos*) is used more than Jesus/Christ or the Holy Spirit (cf. 1:1, 5, 13, 20, 27; 2:5, 19, 23; 3:9; 4:4, 6, 7, 8).

¹ At the end of this series is a sermon, entitled "Reflections from James," that looks back on the book and focuses on what I believe is its major theme (and thus the basis for the series title—"Double-Minded No More"), a conclusion formed after studying and preaching through the book.

² "... [O]nce readers approach James on his own terms, they find a composition that is among the most 'theological' in the New Testament.... In 108 verses, James has at least 24 direct references to God" (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*, 34).

See also my short series that develops and applies this idea more: "Religion That Honors God: Life-Focus from James."

- b) “Lord” (κύριος, *kurios*) refers to God more often than to Jesus (cf. 1:7; 3:9; 4:10, 15; 5:4, 10, 11, 14-15 with 1:1; 2:1; 5:7-8).
 - c) God is our Father (1:17, 27; 3:9).
 2. Other references exalt him in different ways; among other things:
 - a) He is “Lord of hosts” who guarantees justice for the oppressed (5:4).
 - b) He is not tempted by evil, never solicits sin (1:13), and his righteousness does not indulge in sinful anger (1:20).
 - c) Author of a perfect, liberating law, he is lawgiver and judge (2:8-12; 4:12).
 - d) He is not distant, but gives grace and wants us to draw near (4:6-8).
 3. James wants us to “manifest the character of God rather than [merely] articulate the nature of God.”³
 - B. Although he mentions him in just three texts, James helps us understand Jesus.
 1. Jesus stands at the head of the book where he is exalted as the Lord unto whom James submits as a bond-servant or slave (δοῦλος, *doulos*) (1:1).
 2. “The faith of our Lord Jesus Christ”⁴ (2:1; KJV; ASV; RSV) is the model for the kind of faith that values others without favoritism (cf. 2:2-16).
 3. The coming (παρουσία, *parousia*) of the Lord was emphasized in order to motivate those who were enduring trials from rich oppressors (5:7-8).
 - C. James helps our understanding of faith.
 1. From the beginning of the book, we learn that faith will not be trouble free.
 - a) Trials will happen; James commands that we face them with joy (1:2).
 - b) Trials often (and this is prominent in James) result from the designs of wicked, this-worldly people (1:9-11; 4:1-3; 5:1-6).
 - c) Trials help strengthen our faith (1:3-4) by developing a steadfastness that puts us in great company and will result in our being blessed (5:10-11).
 2. But, James’s main point about faith is that it is “not confessional orthodoxy,”⁵ but actively works and displays the priorities of Jesus (1:22-27; 2:1-26).
- II. Three Other Things James Wants to Teach Us.
- A. Real wisdom is from God, not ourselves, our world, or our ways (1:5, 16-17, 21; 3:13-18).
 - B. How we treat people, especially people who can do nothing for us, shows our faith in and esteem for God (1:26-27; 2:1-4, 8-9, 14-16).
 - C. We are either friends with God or we’re friends with the world; active faith knows and shows the difference (2:22-24; 4:4-6).
- III. James’s Sense of Urgency.
- A. Although it was accepted into the canon late, overlooked in scholarly discussions, and ranked behind Paul’s writings, the book of James is beloved by many.
 1. One reason is that James does not have thorny passages like those found in Paul.
 2. Beyond that, James is practical, addressing us where we live every day.

³ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 68

⁴ τήν πίστιν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, *tēn pistin tou kuriou hēmōn Iēsou Christou*.

⁵ R. W. Wall, “James, Letter of,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, 558.

3. The danger that accompanies this love for the practical is that we come to think that James is a comfortable book. It is comforting, but not comfortable.
- B. To see how James can make us uncomfortable, consider his areas of ethical interest.⁶
 1. Speech ethics — he confronts our unbridled and unruly tongue, “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8; cf. 1:19-20, 26; 3:1-12; 4:15-16; 5:12, 13).
 2. Wealth ethics — James has tough words for the rich and their often oppressive ways, tying greed to murder and spiritual adultery (4:2-4) and comforting his readers with the promise of strict judgment against “the rich” (5:1-6; cf. 1:9-11).
 3. Time ethics — our schedules are in fact not ours; our plans are to be submitted to God’s reign (4:13-17).
 4. Humility — people who do not completely submit to God are subject to his judgment (1:9, 27; 2:5; 3:1, 13, 14; 4:6, 10; 5:15).
 5. Perseverance — faith is neither a part-time commitment nor a short-term sprint; it is to be working and willing to endure under trial (1:2-3, 12; 5:7-11).
- C. James’s urgency is especially evident in his use of 59 imperative verbs (in 108 verses) (cf. 1:2, 9, 19, 21-22; 2:1; 3:13; 4:7, 8, 9, 10; 5:7-9).

Conclusion

1. Kent Hughes captures James’s urgency in light of his practical themes: “James is a ‘Do this! Do that!’ book which, taken to heart, will dynamically affect our lives on every level. We will not be the same at the end of this study if we prayerfully ask the Spirit to apply what we learn.”⁷
2. James has absolutely no interest in leaving us where we are! He prods, pushes, and moves us closer to the maturity our Lord expects of us. But the blessings make the discomfort worthwhile.
3. We’ll begin well if we take seriously one of James’s key texts: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (1:21).
4. Are you ready to submit, repent, and grow?

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⁶ The breakdown of subjects used here is taken from McCartney, 74-75.

⁷R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 16.