



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Humbly Influential

James 1:1

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Introduction

1. In an article on reasons so many younger believers are leaving their faith, Drew Dyck relates the explanation one young man gave for leaving Christianity for Wicca.

Ultimately why I left is that the Christian God demands that you submit to his will. In Wicca, it's just the other way around. Your will is paramount. We believe in gods and goddesses, but the deities we choose to serve are based on our wills.¹

2. His candor and grasp of what "the Christian God demands" are refreshing. Christian faith is what he said it is – submitting to God's will, though the tendency to water down its demands has been around a long time, as James shows (e.g., 2:18-22).
3. Among our greatest challenges is living like we believe that true greatness is not found in our will, but in submitting to God's will. Or, as Jesus put it, learning that real life is found in losing ourselves for the sake of Christ and the gospel (Mark 8:34-35). Our author reminds us of the point in a different way.

Body

I. Who Was James?

- A. The brevity of his greeting leaves us wondering: who was this man named James?
 1. The wording suggests someone well known and confident about his influence.²
 2. Some have suggested an unmentioned James,³ but it is unlikely that a man of our writer's apparent stature would not have been named elsewhere.
- B. There are four candidates in the New Testament (all are found in Acts 1:13-14).
 1. James the son of Zebedee and brother of John.
 - a) He was favored as one of the inner circle (with Peter and John) who went with Jesus when the rest did not (e.g., Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33).

¹ Drew Dyck, "The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church," *Christianity Today Magazine*. Posted at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/27.40.html>, November 19, 2010. Accessed February 16, 2011.

² Contrast Jude 1 where James's name is invoked to apparently help authenticate that writer's authority.

³ "James" (Ἰάκωβος, *Iakōbos*) equals the Hebrew "Jacob," a name that would have been well known and among the Jews.

- b) Since Peter and John contributed so much to the development of the New Testament, we would expect the same from John's brother James.
 - c) But, James was killed by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2) just before Herod's death (12:20-23) in 44 AD,⁴ likely too soon to have written our epistle.
- 2. James, the son of Alphaeus is mentioned only in the lists of apostles (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13); he lacks the prominence suggested by James 1:1.
- 3. James, the father of an apostle Judas,⁵ is mentioned in passing only in Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13, to distinguish that Judas from Judas Iscariot.
- 4. James, the brother of Jesus.
 - a) Church history reports that this man, known as James the Just, was the prominent leader in the Jerusalem church before being killed in 62 AD.⁶
 - b) The gospels record his name in Matt. 13:55 and Mark 6:3 and tell us that the brothers did not believe during Jesus' ministry in John 7:5.
 - c) Given his reference to him as "the Lord's brother" in Gal. 1:19, he is doubtless the James to whom Paul said Jesus made a resurrection appearance (1 Cor 15:7); this fits with Acts 1:14 where "his brothers" are included among those waiting for Pentecost.
 - d) It fits with later historical testimony and the above that the same man was the Jerusalem church leader in Acts 15:13-29; 21:17-26; Gal. 2:9, 12.
- C. What we know about James and his circumstances fits what we find in the epistle.⁷
 - 1. The letter includes ideas we would expect in a mid-first century Jewish church.
 - a) Address: "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (διασπορά, *diaspora*) (1:1).
 - b) The prophet-like reference to unfaithful people as "adulteresses" (4:4).
 - c) The emphasis on the Law (1:25; 2:8-12; 4:11).
 - d) The monotheistic confession (2:19).
 - e) The reference to the synagogue as the assembly place (2:2).
 - 2. Similarities exist between the epistle and the speech attributed to James in Acts 15:13-21 and the letter sent to Antioch in 15:23-29.⁸
 - 3. It fits what would be expected from a mid-first century Palestinian church leader wanting to reassure believers in the tough circumstances of that time and place.⁹

II. A Humble Man Commending Humility.

- A. That James was so "connected" makes his greeting all the more fascinating.

⁴ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 19.8.

⁵ Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18 have his name as Thaddaeus.

⁶ Commentators typically discuss this evidence in more detail. See, for example, Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 20-24.

⁷ The focus in these notes is on the internal evidence that implies Jacobean authorship. Corroboration is found in the attribution of the writing to James throughout most of church history. See McCartney, 20ff., and Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 2 for more discussion of this evidence.

⁸ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 10 for additional discussion.

⁹ See e.g., Moo, 10. This includes geographical and weather references, famine, general economic distress, buying up of the land by rich landowners who then oppressed their laborers, etc., though some caution that these can be overly stressed.

1. Few today would fault him had he begun with something like this: “James the Just, from the sacred womb of Mary, congenital sibling of Christ his brother, confidant of the Messiah.”¹⁰
2. Instead, James focuses on being “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1), stressing exalted titles more than any familial connection he had.¹¹
3. Notice especially the word, “servant” (ESV; δοῦλος, *doulos*), or “slave” (NLT).
 - a) “The English word *servant* is sometimes used to describe even executives and rulers (who refer to themselves as ‘public servants’), but the social class of δοῦλοι typically had only slightly more self-determination than slaves of recent centuries” (McCartney, 78, n. 3).
 - b) James’s servitude is what mattered. That surely explains the echoes of Jesus’ teaching in the epistle and his obviously authentic authority.
- B. Thus, James had no problem calling for humble submission from his readers.
 1. The words “lowly” and “humble” (ταπεινός, *tapeinos*; ταπεινός, *tapeinoō*) bracket much of the main body of teaching (1:9; 4:6, 10).
 2. “Meekness” (πραῦτης, *prautēs*) also appears in crucial texts (1:21; 3:13).
 3. When facing trials, we are not to be self-reliant, but should “ask God” for “wisdom” (1:5), that ultimately comes “from above” (3:17).
 4. In contrast, temptations, including those that lead to strife, come when a person “is lured and enticed by his own desire” (1:14; cf. 3:15-16; 4:1-3).
- C. James shows understanding of Jesus, who said: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43b-44).

Conclusion

1. We must ask, does anything cause more problems than trying do our will instead of God’s?
2. An important passage (4:1-3, 6-8, 10) highlights the problem and calls us to God’s way. Will you cleanse your hands, purify your hearts, and humble yourself before God? Will you draw near to God and let him transform you into the humble influence he wants you to be?

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¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 17.

¹¹ “... we must remember that, when a Jew put the words ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ together, the Lord in view could only be God (cf. 1:7, where ‘from the Lord’ means ‘from God’). No matter how the verse is read, James is setting forth a very high Christology identifying Jesus not just as Christ (Messiah) but also as Lord, mentioned in the same breath with God. . . .

“... It is easy to forget that to a first-century Jew, ‘Christ’ was not a name but a title, meaning ‘anointed one’ (‘messiah’), the deliverer and king expected by the Jews.... [F]or him, ‘Christ’ means the expected deliverer of Israel” (McCartney, 78-79).