



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

James: Urgent and Uncompromising

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While serving as the pulpit preacher for a church in Memphis, Tennessee, I was invited to teach a short class series on the letter of James at an event in Nashville. Since my wife had grown up in the area, we arranged to have dinner with the family of a woman she had known all her life. When our hostess learned my subject, she said, “Oh, I just *love* the book of James!” Carlynn’s emphatic reply surprised her: “I don’t!”

Because each was focused on something different, I knew that both were making valid points. Our hostess was thinking about how straightforward and practical James is; unlike Romans, for example, James develops no elaborate doctrinal argument, though the book is not devoid of doctrine. James is also known for its down-to-earth appeal to let our faith impact the activities of our daily lives. It’s that practicality that our hostess had in mind when she said how much she loved James.

Carlynn appreciated those aspects of James, but she was also acutely aware of how *uncomfortable* James’s teaching can be. He is direct, urgent, forceful, and uncompromising. As we say today, he “gets in your face.” He challenges us to think hard about our lives and often makes us uncomfortable as he calls on us to deal with things we would rather not address. (Any teachers reading this who would like to skip over James 3.1-12 instead of opening yourself up to what it

says about teachers and speech?) As Kent Hughes writes, “James is a ‘Do this! Do that!’ book” (Hughes 1991, 16).

In future installments, I will undertake an exposition of James’s 108 verses (1745 Greek words). But before beginning that journey, I want to think about some of James’s big ideas.

Two Traits

First, consider his urgency. Of the letter’s 358 verbs, 54 are imperatives (commands), 15% of the total. That amounts to an imperative verb every other verse. Of course, imperative verbs are not unusual in the New Testament, but when we compare based on the length of the respective writings, James uses them about three times more frequently than the New Testament as a whole.

Since James is so urgent, we are not surprised to see, *second, that he has so much to say about deeds and doing.* The words for “faith” (πίστις, *pistis*; 16 times) and “believe” (πιστεύω, *pisteuō*; 3 times) appear a total of 19 times in the letter. “Work” (ἔργον, *ergon*) appears 15 times; the verb that means “to do or make” (ποιέω, *poieō*; 12), along with the noun “doer” (ποιητής, *poiētēs*; 4), together appear another 16 times. And, while most occurrences of “faith/believe” and “works” are in one passage, 2.14-26 (26 of the 34 appearances), the words for doing appear just once in that passage (v. 19). In other words, James’s emphasis on deeds and doing is spread throughout the entire letter.

Two Ways

Like the Old Testament and intertestamental Jewish writings, James emphasizes the exclusive and strong disjunct between “two tendencies” (see McCartney 2009, 73) that characterize all people: good or evil (cf. 1.14-15; 4.2). He warns about being “double-minded” (1.8; 4.8) and about compromising with “the world” (1.27; 2.5; 3.6; 4.4). He draws a distinction between “human anger” and “all moral filth and ... evil” (CSB) on one side and the reception of “the message implanted within you, which is able to save your souls” on the other (1.20-21 NET). He devotes an entire section to the difference between human wisdom that is “earthly, unspiritual, [and] demonic” and the wisdom “from above” that “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (3.15, 17). He then directly calls us to account for the quarrels, fights, murders, greed, self-centered passions, slanders, and judgmental attitudes that occur when we try to live by earthly wisdom (4.1-3, 11-12).

But, despite his candor about human failure, James offers hope to his readers. He shows us how to live wisely in order to overcome double-mindedness. He tells us to submit and draw near to God, actively resist the devil, cleanse our hands and purify our hearts, mourn over our sin, and, ultimately, “humble [our]selves before the Lord” (4.6-10).

Is that doable? James says it depends on whether we aim to be the world's friend or God's (4.4). If we choose the way of human wisdom, we will, like the Israelites of old, be spiritually "adulterous people" who are counted among God's enemies (4.4; see Ezek 16.38; 23.45; Hos 2.13; 9.1; Jer 3; Isa 1.21; 50.1; 54.1-6; 57.3). But if we pursue the course of godly wisdom, we will develop the kind of faith Abraham came to have and prove ourselves to be God's friends (2.23; 4.4). To do that, we will need to implicitly trust God and activate our faith, taking him at his word and doing what he says (2.14-26).

A Choice for All of Life

Our commitment cannot be halfhearted for James says it will impact every area of life.

- It will affect our *speech*, requiring us to resist the restless evil that so often characterizes our language (1.19-20, 26; 3.1-12; 4.15-16; 5.12-13).
- It will affect our *resources*, challenging the rich and powerful who are tempted to be both self-sufficient and oppressive (1.9-11, 26-27; 2.1-13; 4.2-4; 5.1-11).
- It will affect our *time* and the tendency to think our schedules are our own and completely under our control (4.13-17).
- And, perhaps most importantly, it will impact our *endurance* as we encounter troubles that are part of life and often become the source of temptations to relax our determination to be God's friends (1.2-4, 12; 3.13-18; 5.7-11).

As we think about these things, is it any wonder that James's little letter evokes both a love for his message and discomfort with his directness?

Works Cited

R. Kent Hughes (1991). *James: Faith That Works*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

Dan G. McCartney (2009). *James*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

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