



Lenten Study 2025: Being People of Peace & Justice

The Epistle of James has been dismissed over the years by several thinkers, including Martin Luther, for being an example of “works righteousness” (the belief that our actions are all we have to be concerned about as proof of our following Christ). Luther thought it failed to show the necessity of grace in Christian belief, going so far as calling it a “straw epistle” or letter devoid of significant faith references. . To counter that argument, others suggested the Epistle was more accurately a response to commonly held mistaken assumptions of faith development at the time of writing, and that faith is just words until put INTO action. The writer of the Epistle

of James is very firm in our need for faith as well as our need to be grounded in the gifts of God, that nothing we do has significance unless we first recognize it comes from God.

Structurally, the Epistle of James is not really a letter, at least not in a familiar formatting we see in other letters in the Christian Scriptures. It is addressed to the Hebrew diaspora, not a specific community. There is almost nothing for salutation, and it does not include a signature. In many ways it is a list of theological talking points.

Some scholars have compared it to Proverbs, saying it is the 'wisdom literature' of the Christian scriptures. However, that does not fit either, as Proverbs is a book of wisdom thoughts without connection, while James has a very obvious through line of social awareness and resisting the temptations that destroy community.



The Epistle of James is a manifesto: This is what we need to be aware of, this is what we need to guard against, this is how we should behave, and this is where we owe our thanks for being God's people.

[My own historical scholarship places this Epistle c. 120 CE, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who made space for Christianity to develop, and was not interested in persecuting believers simply because of their profession of faith.]

Week 3: Faith into Action

The Epistle of James was written by Greek speakers who were very familiar with the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. There are countless references to the Torah, or first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and in one annotated version of the scripture,

the page included 3/4 commentary to 1/4 verse. It is a heavily crafted work with intention of placing the followers of Christ within a Hebraic faith context far more than a legalistic one. In fact the writer of James takes pains in saying obsession with legalistic religion prevents believers from really experiencing full faith in Christ.

There are many similarities between the contents of this epistle and the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. This is seemingly a telling of blessings and woes from a spiritual perspective.

First, do not test God, or rush into a situation without knowing what is happening. Do not react emotionally, take time to assess the situation, and be aware of the risk of temptation.

Secondly, ground yourself. Acknowledge that our strength and energy to make social change does not come from our own will but from the graciousness of God. This is how we will be able to sustain ourselves over the long process of change.

Thirdly, be slow to anger. There is no acknowledgement that anger can sometimes be positive, simply a warning against becoming overwhelmed by anger as it is a destructive force. We should watch so we are not caught in the negativity of any situation or rhetoric.

Fourth, for those who identify as 'religious', mind that this is actual faith and not "ethical piety". The writer of James underscored that simply following rules because rules were there was not the same as living a life of faith. Rules can sometimes be misused by those who pick some as being more significant, but the writer reminds us that if we are following the rules, we have to follow all of them equally, otherwise those we choose to follow hold little value.

Fifth, care for the vulnerable the "widows and orphans", a metaphor as well as actual groups of concern, and the poor. We are to be in solidarity with those struggling, not those who hold wealth and power. The rich are oppressors, the epistle argues.

Sixth, faith alone is empty. We have to turn our faith into action. This is the core tenant of the epistle.

Seventh, most of us should not be teachers. The epistle does not make suggestions about what we should be instead, just that those who teach must be held to a higher standard, which most of us fail regardless. Do not feel the need to rush into leadership simply because we have a renewed sense of faith and inspiration.

Eighth, do not get caught in worldly arguments, they serve no purpose and are just a distraction.

Ninth, do not get caught in speaking poorly of each other. Tearing apart allies does not help any situation. We do not have to seek perfection in each other simply to work together for social improvement.

Tenth, when we are suffering - pray. When we are cheerful - praise. When we are sick - ask for healing. When we have sinned - ask for forgiveness. The liturgy of our faith underscores the practices of our action. In this way we are in a constant state of worship.

The Epistle of James does not tell us what actions to engage in as all social action is valid. However, it does give parameters of how to conduct ourselves and not get caught up in the chaos and destruction of others.

We are warned to watch pitfalls along the way, and the writer helps us to identify the largest ones.

Our texts this week is the entirety of the Epistle of James, not copied in this week's study guide.

