

The Global Message of James

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The message of James is that those who have been truly saved through the gospel must manifest that salvation in practical ways in their lives. A transformed life of love for others should be the result of experiencing God's love.

James and Redemptive History

The grand theme of the book of James is wisdom. Much like Proverbs in the Old Testament, James should be seen as an example of Jewish wisdom literature. Wisdom in Jewish tradition and Scripture does not refer to intelligence in a strictly intellectual way but rather to upright living. A wise person exhibits a godly kind of skill in the practical matters of everyday life. To live wisely is to act with humble integrity.

The letter of James enables God's people to flourish as they journey through life in this fallen world. It is for those who, though sinners, have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus himself is the true and ultimate embodiment of wisdom: he is the one "who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

Global Exhortations from James

As with Proverbs, the main point of James is that godly wisdom works. True wisdom does not sit still. Throughout James the church is confronted with several strong exhortations as to how wisdom works, all of which speak clearly to the church today.

Trials. James begins by urging his readers to gladly receive the trials that wash into their lives, since these trials produce steadfastness (James 1:2-4). James returns to this theme at the end of the letter, and there too he links suffering with steadfastness (5:7-11). In 1:2 James refers to hardships "of various kinds." Whatever global Christians are suffering today, they must be patient and steadfast (5:7-11).

Wealth and poverty. Throughout his letter James raises the issue of wealth (James 1:9-11; 2:1-7; 5:1-6). Each time, he says just the opposite of what the world says about money. "Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation" (1:9-10). "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?" (2:5). "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (5:1). To a contemporary world drunk with the desire for material wealth, James reminds us of the emptiness of such pursuits and the final judgment that is fast approaching.

A living faith. James is impatient with those who hear the word but do not do it (James 1:22–25) and those who profess faith but do not live it out (2:14–26). Healthy believers display “conduct . . . in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). The question here is not whether we are saved by faith alone or by faith plus works. The apostle Paul and James agree that it is faith alone that saves. The question James raises is, what *kind* of faith saves (James 2:14)? Authentic religion, expressing authentic faith, consists of not only orthodox theology but also upright living (1:26–27).

The tongue. James mentions the use of the tongue a few times in chapters 1 and 2 (e.g., James 1:19; 2:12) then in chapter 3 he turns his full attention to this important topic. With striking imagery, he shows how the impact of what we say with the tongue is all out of proportion to the size of this small body part. Like a rudder on a ship or a bit in the mouth of a horse, the tongue is small but is able to direct the whole course of our lives. Echoing the teaching of Jesus, James reminds us that our words are simply the overflow of what is within us (3:10–12; compare Matt. 7:16; 12:37).

Worldliness. Chapter 4 of James deals with the quarrels and fights and pride that come from worldliness. James reminds us that “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (James 4:4). The global church does well to remember that we are called to be in the world but not of it (John 17:14–16).

Humility. James has much to say about the beauty of humility. Those who are truly wise are also humble (James 3:13–15). God gives special grace to the humble (4:6). Humble people understand the fragility of life and the sovereignty of God (4:13–17). James encourages the church, today as in his day, to take comfort in the small, humble life of faithfulness which, judged by the world’s standards, is insignificant. For, on the contrary, this is where God’s power lies (4:7–8). Such humble faithfulness will one day result in true glory (1:12).

Prayer. James teaches the value of prayer throughout his epistle. He encourages prayer for wisdom (James 1:5–8), rebukes prayer that is motivated by impure motives (4:2–4), and advises believers to pray in a variety of life situations, assuring them that under God prayer changes things for the better (5:13–18).

In all these matters, James calls his readers to cultivate the kind of wisdom that should characterize all those who have been truly born again through the gospel (James 1:18). Believers everywhere are summoned to receive James’s words with receptive ears, living out in their own corner of the world the life of authentic faith that James describes.

Responding to James: Both Realism and Love

The church today does well to pay heed to the exhortations of James. Confronted with a host of global issues and concerns, it is not hard to find tangible ways to live out the teaching of James.

However, the summons of James must be handled with care. On the one hand, it would be easy for global Christians to feel unduly guilty for not doing more to alleviate the world's needs. We must be realistic. While concerted sacrificial efforts by a united Christian church will go a long way to reducing the tangible miseries of the world, there will always be more to do.

On the other hand, the letter of James issues a resounding call to believers around the world to engage the world around them, especially fellow believers. This is the path of love, as we have been loved. "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" ([James 2:8](#)). James rebukes those who speak peace to the needy but do not provide "the things needed for the body" ([2:16](#); see also [1:27](#)). Believers around the world are called by the letter of James to examine themselves, consider their actions, and adjust their lives accordingly.