

“The Letter of James”

James 1:1

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

I am very excited to begin this new series with you today on this our “Kickoff Sunday”. We are going to be for the next few months looking at the book of James in our New Testament.

Now, our preaching calendar is very purposeful. If you recall in the Spring, we covered doctrine – and we talked about what we believe as Christians concerning the essentials of our faith and WHY what we believe matters.

In an effort to give you a well-balanced diet of the scripture, we are preaching the book of James here in the Fall because it is known as the most practical book in the Bible.

We will see in this study that James desires us to have a sincere and genuine faith – he wants us to know what we believe – BUT his biggest concern...the question James puts forward first and foremost is, “does what we believe affect the way we behave?”

James is after action. He is after a faith lived out...he’s more of a “show me what you believe” rather than just “tell me what you believe” kind of guy.

Now, if you’re taking notes, I’ve entitled the message today in the most brilliant and creative way possible.

I’m calling it: **The Letter of James**

This is an introductory message, and what we are going to do this morning is identify who James is...we’ll learn a little bit about the target audience he was writing, and then we’ll cover a general overview about what we can expect to or hope to learn in studying this book.

So, let’s begin by first, identifying who James is. James was a very common name during the New Testament time and there were some significant men named James that if you’ve been in church for a long time, you are probably aware of.

We know that two of the disciples were named James. One is the brother of the disciple named John, who’s dad’s name was Zebedee. There was another disciple named, James described as the “Son of Alphaeus” – many believe this was the same James that was given the nickname “James the less” to distinguish him from James, the brother of John, the other disciple.

Neither of these two men is the author of the book we are studying. James, the author of the New Testament book that bears his name is actually the half-brother of Jesus.

So, Mary would have been his mother and his father was Joseph. We say “half-brother” of course because while Mary was his mother, it was God who was his father.

This is what makes Jesus different. He's the only person to ever live with two natures – humanity and divinity inseparably united. He is 100% man and 100% God!

According to scripture, Jesus had four half-brothers (including James) and two half-sisters. And here is what is interesting about the family, specifically Jesus's brothers and sisters...now, get this: outside of Mary and Joseph – his siblings didn't believe he was God growing up! And can you blame them?

I mean after-all, he looked like them...ate like them...did chores like them. It's not like he went around performing miracles as a kid to prove who he was – at least if he did, we don't have record of it!

Illus. Growing up – I was thinking about this, this week. I have an older brother and younger sister. Got any middle children, here...we'll have a prayer time for us after the service!

Now, when you think about my older brother – I know this is an old school reference but think Wayne from *The Wonder Years*. I feel like most of his downtime was thinking about how he could terrorize me. Classic big brother...Eric outweighed me by over hundred pounds, three years older – there was no fighting back. You just took it!

My sister, Michelle is three years younger than me. And if I even looked at her mean – she would scream, “Jarrett!!! Stop it!!!” And then I would get yelled or disciplined by my parents.

I'll be the first to admit and I know this is probably a shocker to most of you, but I was not perfect as a child. Being the middle child, I can assure you, I knew how to “stir the pot”...got a Ph.D. in it!

All this to say that with an older brother and younger sister, if there was a pinch of divinity on me, I would have displayed it to my brothers and sisters first! Oh, man...I'd have them worshipping me or else! When I think about it, what I'd probably do to them would be more demonic than divine!

Jesus never put on a show though! And then...when he did begin his earthly ministry, his family – specifically his brothers and sisters thought he'd lost his mind!

Mark 3:20-21 – “Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

Jesus' brothers and sisters thought he'd lost it! In John's gospel, we are told that Jesus was staying in and around Galilee because essentially, he was a wanted man. If he showed up in Jerusalem, the chief priests and religious leaders would have him arrested. And listen to what his own brothers tell him.

John 7:3-5 – “So his brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. ⁴For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.”

⁵ For not even his brothers believed in him.”

“Come on, Jesus...if you are the Messiah, don’t just hide out and tell people in Galilee, go to Jerusalem and show the world!” THIS is what his own family was saying!

In Matthew’s gospel, we’re told that one of the main reasons Jesus did not do many miracles in his own hometown of Nazareth is because of the unbelief of the people there which included the unbelief of his own family.

Matt. 13:57 – “But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.”

So, I just want us to pause and consider what we are talking about here when we say James, the half-brother of Jesus wrote this letter that’s ALL about living your faith out in everyday life.

- We’re talking about a man who lived in the very same house as Jesus growing up, but didn’t believe he was the Messiah!
- We’re talking about a guy that was privileged enough to see some miracles early enough in Jesus’ ministry that could be offered up as proof of his divinity and yet he still didn’t believe Jesus was the son of God!

You know what that says to me? That says to me that if it’s possible to live with Jesus and not believe, it’s VERY possible to go to church and not believe! Hello?!

Proximity to Jesus...familiarity with Jesus...knowing about Jesus...does NOT equate to a saving belief in Jesus! So, we have to ask this question:

- “What happened between John 7. Mark 3 and Matt. 13 (not believing) and James writing this letter to encourage persecuted Christians about having genuine faith?
- What caused James to go from saying, “Jesus, you’re out of your mind!” to being referred to in Gal. 2:9 as a “pillar” in the early church?

We’re talking about a span of 10-15 years max if James is written in the early to mid 40’s. What happened to cause such a radical shift in the life of James? The answer is found in:

1 Cor. 15:3-7 – “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”

What changed James life? What made him go from an unbeliever to a believer? From a skeptic to a scribe?

One thing: The resurrection! James saw the resurrected Jesus!

Now, I just want you to know seeing the resurrected Jesus will change anyone! And I'm not just talking about in the very limited way of seeing Jesus physically as James and others saw him. I'm talking about seeing him spiritually and believing in him – it will change a person's life!

This is truth for us today. Remember Thomas? He wasn't going to believe until he had seen Jesus with his physical eyes. Jesus shows up and says, "Here you go, Thomas! Place your hands in my hands...in my side...see and feel the scars." Thomas believes.

John 20:29 – “Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The miracle of the resurrection is that when one hears about it through the teaching and preaching and sharing of the gospel (evangelism so important!) - it's IN this that God reveals himself!

And while we don't see the resurrected Jesus physically, God when he is calling people to himself allows us to see him spiritually (the Spirit of God softens hearts and unveils eyes) and our lives are changed forever and there are hundreds here that can testify to it!

The resurrection of Jesus changed everything for James and for any sincere seeker, it will change everything for you – but you must come to him by faith!

? – Has the resurrection changed you? If it's true...if Jesus came back from the dead and demonstrated he is who he says he is...just think about it – if he beat death – the only person to ever do it, then he is worthy to be followed!

If he resurrected from the dead, then ALL of our life revolves around him!

This is the main point of the letter James writes. Jesus can turn your life around just like he did with James, but it takes true belief...true faith. And true faith is not just a head knowledge about who Jesus is and what he has done. True faith is yielding ALL of your life to the resurrected Jesus.

Wouldn't you have loved to have eavesdropped on the conversation James and Jesus had? What did Jesus say to him?

- Did he give him a heads up that you are going to lead the first Christian church based in Jerusalem?
- Did he tell him to buckle up because tough times are ahead...he was going to have to lead through a famine and persecution?
- Did he tell him he was going to be a martyr and die from being clubbed to death by a religious mob?

We don't know what Jesus said to him during this conversation, but we know James was a changed man.

He was there in the upper room praying with the other disciples and have to assume he was there when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

Acts 1:14 – “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”

As mentioned, James becomes the lead pastor/elder in the church in Jerusalem. We know this because when the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 takes place, it's James that is the one that is speaking authoritatively on how the Church should react to Gentiles coming to faith in Christ.

Now, this is a HUGE moment for the Church! A LOT is at stake here! Are we going to make Gentiles be circumcised and live by the mosaic law – in other words is salvation by faith alone OR is it faith PLUS works? His response culminates in:

Acts 15:19 – “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God...”

And after hearing this, all the leaders (Barnabas and Paul and Peter and James – these are heavy weights!) they write a consensus letter that is read at Antioch and was meant to circulate to all the churches informing them that there should be no barrier (i.e. circumcision and observing Mosaic law) from Gentiles coming to faith in Christ.

Illus. Kickoff Sunday – kids and students moving up – keep bringing them to church – even when you don't think it's making a difference! Read Acts 15 in your own time alone, but James bases his reasoning for not making the Gentiles jump any hurdles when it comes to faith in Christ out of a prophecy in the book of Isaiah and Amos.

How did he know those prophecies? Because he was raised in a God-fearing home! He was taken to synagogue. James went with his family to Jerusalem during the holy weeks to celebrate and worship and be taught from the Law and Prophets. And after he came to know Jesus as Savior, everything he had learned as a child was revealed!

You keep bringing your children to church – because they may not get it now, but after they see the resurrected Jesus, they will get it and God the Holy Spirit will bring it back to their mind!

This James we are talking about...that wrote this letter was a leader! He was well-respected. He was a pastor at heart...we'll see this in the topics he deals with in this letter. He was humble. We see this in how he starts his letter.

James 1:1 – “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...”

Notice how he describes himself...a servant of God! If I was writing this letter, it would start more like this:

“Jarrett, the half-brother of Jesus #scoreboard...I am the leader of the first Christian Church in Jerusalem #scoreboard. Let’s just set the tone here and do what I command you to do. I am a big deal – remember Jesus appeared to me personally and we had a one-on-one conversation #scoreboard.”

That’s how I would have started the letter! But not James! He begins it describing himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

A “servant” – the word “doulos” in the Greek. This was a type of service that was a slave to master type service. In fact, it could be translated as “slave”. A slave disregarded his own interests, living for the express purpose to serve and meet his owner’s interests.

And notice WHO he is a slave to – “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Right out of the gate, he expresses WHO he is a servant to - God, the Father – the Creator of the world and all that is in it and, Jesus. He uses a title, “Lord” – which means sovereign and “Christ” – which means anointed one...Messiah!

This is convicting. Even while writing this sermon, it was as if the Holy Spirit was asking, “Jarrett, does this describe you?” Have you given up your interests and are you living for the express purpose of meeting Jesus’s interests?” This is what it means to be a servant...a slave!

Am I bowing down...is my life revolving...am I making decisions about how I spend my time...my money...how I raise my children...what I do at my job – does it filter through this grid:

Am I reflecting the attitude and living as a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ?

We are never more like our Savior than when we have/live with a posture and heart to serve. And we are never more like Satan than when we live in pride, acting and believing that the world revolves around us.

James was and saw himself...his identity was in being a servant of Christ! Now, let’s look at WHO James is writing. He tells us in the second part of verse one.

James 1:1 – “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”

The audience is mentioned as “twelve tribes”. James is speaking to Jews here. It’s a way of saying if you have a Jewish lineage, I’m speaking to you. But more specifically than that, James is writing Jewish Christians.

We know this because of his use of the word “brothers” throughout the letter (1:2, 9, 16, 19 – that’s just chapter one!). Also, notice the phrase “in the Dispersion” or some of your Bibles may say, “scattered among the nations.”

Now, we know there was a great dispersion of Christian Jews right after the stoning of Stephen the deacon.

Acts 8:1b – “...And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

So, look even deeper at who James is writing. He is writing his congregation. He is writing people that he was pastoring...that he cared deeply for...and now, they are spread out everywhere.

Can I just tell you as a pastor, I can't imagine going through and feeling what James was feeling. I mean, just imagine for a moment what that would be like...for something to happen and all of the sudden you all are dispersed all over the country and yet there is a sense of accountability and desire to shepherd you:

- Who is looking after you?
- Who is teaching you?
- Who is warning you?
- Who is encouraging you?
- Who is calling you if there is a loss in your family?
- Who is checking in on you to make sure your needs are being met?

Illus. Fred Luter (Franklin Avenue) - Dr. Luter in 2005, had 7,000 members in his church in New Orleans. This is where our Averri Lamelle, our Jersey Village Campus Pastor started in ministry.

That year, Hurricane Katrina hit and thousands of his members were displaced...his church was under 10 feet of water – completely destroyed. For nearly two and half years you know what Dr. Luter did?

The first and third Sundays of the month, he preached at 7:30 a.m. at another church in the area for his members. On the same afternoons, he would travel over an hour to Baton Rouge, where he preached a 1:00 p.m. service hosted by another local church for his members that had gone to Baton Rouge. Then on the second and fourth Sundays of the month, he would travel 11 hours from Birmingham (where he had to relocate and live with his daughter until their home could be rebuilt) to Houston to preach a 1:00 p.m. service hosted by Houston's First Baptist Church.

That's a pastor with a heart for his people! This is the kind of heart James had. His church for the most part was dispersed, but that was NOT going to stop him from pastoring them...shepherding them...loving them.

I pray this is the kind of heart I have and the pastors on our team have. I hope you know this is our desire. Pray for us in this...that we would have a heart to shepherd you as Psalm 78:72 states with a skillful hand and upright heart.

Illus. Shepherd staff (Phase Two widow's ministry)

As a shepherd, James loved them, but his love involved speaking the truth to them. And we're going to see in this letter that James does not hold back.

As mentioned previously, this is considered the most practical book in the entire Bible. Out of 108 verses over 50 of them are commands...imperatives.

James cuts to the chase! He is not "seeker sensitive". He is not afraid to hurt feelings. He is as confrontational as it gets and if I do my job in preaching his letter accurately, fair warning: You may leave here on some Sundays in this series saying "Ouch!" instead of "Amen!".

- He deals with how we are to go through trials and face various temptations that come our way...
- He writes about the way we should treat one another and talk to one another...
- The way we resolve conflict...
- The way we handle our money...
- The way in which we pray...

I'm telling you, this book hits on so many topics that are relevant and applicable to our lives today. So, I want to encourage you each week to come ready to hear from the Lord! Bring your Bibles. Bring your journal or notebook and take notes.

Lean in and let this small letter in the New Testament make a BIG impact in your life. My prayer as we go through this series is that God will use our time together in this book to make us ALL, in the words of James, to be – "doers of the word".

Isn't THIS is what our world needs more than anything? Hey, let's localize it – isn't this is what Northwest Houston needs...what Jersey Village and Cypress and Klein and Spring and Tomball need MORE than anything?

It needs people who say they are following Jesus, actually talking, acting and living like Jesus. THIS is what we are going to learn from James, so get ready! It's going to be a great series.

Let's pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.