

“Be Doers of the Word, and Not Hearers Only”

Texts: James 1:19-27; Deuteronomy 11:13-32

The First in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

When I first announced that I was going to preach through the Book of James, there were two common responses. The first was “good, about time we get to something practical.” [I’m not quite too sure how to take that comment—I thought the Book of Judges was very practical]. The second (and more common) response was “ugh . . . there’s no gospel in that epistle of straw.” My hope and prayer is that both groups will find something of value in our series on the Book of James.

The Book of James is about as straight-forward a book as you will find in the New Testament. There is a higher percentage of imperatives (commands) in the Book of James than in any other book of the Bible. James did not write this epistle to instruct his reader, as much as to exhort persecuted Christians to put their faith into practice. If you want “practical,” this is a book for you.¹ But James is also chocked full of theological insight and interpreting this book correctly—which entails understanding the context in which this epistle was written—will eliminate many of the fears people commonly have about the Book of James, i.e., that it contains no gospel, and that James’s doctrine of justification is in conflict with Paul’s.

That said, the Book of James can be quite difficult in places because this letter is not structured like most of the other epistles in the New Testament (i.e., the epistles of Paul). Many of you know of Martin Luther’s reservations about the Book of James—Luther called it an “epistle of straw,” although Luther cites from James many times, and often encouraged Christians to read it and study it. Calvin’s assessment was much more balanced. Calvin stated that James “seems rather reluctant to preach the grace of Christ than an apostle should be” but Calvin goes on to say, “we must remember not to expect everyone to go over the same ground.” In fact, says Calvin, James “is a rich source of varied instruction, of abundant benefit in all aspects of the Christian life.”² I think Calvin got this absolutely right.

Unlike the letters of Paul, the Book of James is a more “general” letter written to the church at large, not to a specific congregation facing a particular set of circumstances. This is why James is known as a “catholic” or “general” epistle, and is placed in the canon with the other so-called “catholic” or general epistles; 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John and Jude. While James draws much of his material directly from the teaching of Jesus—which is not surprising since James is the brother of our Lord—this epistle is written to Jewish Christians, who, at the time of the epistle’s composition, were scattered throughout Palestine and Syria, and who were, apparently, facing a great deal of persecution and hardship because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. James’ readers were facing very difficult times and surely were tempted to take the easy way out and make “friends with the world” as James puts it (4:4) so as to avoid persecution.

Some scholars have argued that the Book of James lacks any kind of clear internal organization and moves somewhat randomly from topic to topic without any apparent logical order. But James’ internal

¹ Douglas Moo, *James*, TNTC (Eerdmans, 1985), 36.

² Calvin, *The Epistle of James*, Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. 3 (Eerdmans, 1980), 259.

structure (or lack thereof) is easily explained if we see James' epistle as his preaching put into written form.³ In effect, this letter is a divinely inspired sermon, intended to be read in the refugee churches throughout Palestine. If we carefully consider the date of this epistle, and the circumstances under which it was written, many of the supposed problems associated with James just simply disappear.

But make no mistake about it, when it comes to the Book of James the pink elephant in the room remains James' statement in chapter 2 v. 24. "*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*" On its face, this assertion seems to be a direct contradiction to Paul's statements in Romans 3:28—"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law"—and Galatians 2:16—"yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." If you've ever talked with a knowledgeable Roman Catholic, or anyone else for that matter who does not like the doctrine of justification *sola fide*, you'll find them citing James 2:24 as though James' understanding of justification somehow takes precedence over the teaching of Paul. If you've ever witnessed the examination in Reformed doctrine I give ordinands at classis, you know that I don't believe any man is fit for the gospel ministry who cannot quickly resolve this apparent contradiction. This is one of those issues which, if you get it right, makes sense of the whole of the New Testament. But if you get this one wrong, you create great confusion about the gospel and the saving work of Jesus Christ.

As we will see, James *does not* contradict Paul. In fact, the apparent contradiction is easily resolved if we understand the basic history of the apostolic church, specifically, the relationship between James and the controversy over justification which arose in the churches in the Galatian region (Turkey). While we will cover the supposed contradiction over justification in some detail when we get to James 2:14-26, we will touch on this matter briefly as we consider the circumstances under which this epistle was written.

To put things as directly as I can, Reformed Christians need not stumble over the many imperatives in James. After all, we have a category to make sense of these commands (guilt, grace, gratitude) without undoing the biblical doctrine of justification found elsewhere. Nor do we need fear James' statements about "justification by works" in chapter two, especially when we consider that James' main purpose in writing this epistle was to exhort Christians to be more than mere "hearers of the word." James is not writing this epistle to evangelize non-Christians, nor is he explaining how God justifies sinners. James is writing to the churches—presumably people who are already Christians. The fact of the matter is that James' is exhorting his reader to do those things commanded of us throughout the Scriptures, to put our faith in Christ into action. Nothing more, nothing less. When we put these exhortations in the proper perspective—our response to the grace of God, the result of our union with Christ, as empowered by the Holy Spirit—we will see that James is not some kind of Christianized form of Jewish legalism as often charged. Rather, James gives us a very direct and useful book of exhortations, which show us what a life of gratitude should (in part) look like.

Since it is so important to understand when and why this epistle was written, we will spend the bulk of our time this morning covering introductory matters. We will conclude by looking (briefly) at some of the major themes we'll be addressing in the coming weeks.

The place to start is with the author. In verse 1, he identifies himself as "*James, a servant of God and of*

³ Douglas Moo, The Letter of James, PNTC, (Eerdmans, 2000), 6-9.

the Lord Jesus Christ.” Almost from the beginning, the church identified this particular James (there are four men named James who appear in the New Testament) as the James who was the brother of Jesus. Since there are four “James” in the New Testament, we simply use a process of elimination to determine which one of the four is the author of this epistle. Three James are mentioned in Acts 1:13. But two of the James’ can quickly be eliminated because one is an alternate name (to avoid confusing someone with Judas Iscariot) and the other is a rather obscure figure mentioned only once in the New Testament.⁴

One of the other candidates is the James—who along with Peter and John—formed the “inner circle” of disciples, those men who were the closest to Jesus. This particular James was a witness to a number of Jesus’ miracles (including the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter—Mark 5:37) as well as the transfiguration (Mark 9:2). We do know from Acts 12:2, that this man (who was the brother of John, and a son of Zebedee) was put to death with the sword by Herod Agrippa around A.D. 44—making him one of the first Christian martyrs. And since the Epistle of James was written around this time or shortly thereafter, it is not likely that James the disciple was the author of this epistle.

This leaves us with the “other” James, a man who is repeatedly identified as “the brother of Jesus.” This James is mentioned in Mark 6:3 along with Joseph and Mary’s other naturally conceived children. According to Mark, Jesus’ family questioned his actions in the early days of his messianic mission. Along with his brothers and mother (Mary), James attempted to get Jesus to return to the family home in Nazareth and end his mission. In two places we read that James did not become a believer until after our Lord’s resurrection from the dead (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:7; John 7:5). But according to Acts 12:17, James eventually become a leader in the Jerusalem church. In fact, he will play a very significant role at the famous Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). According to Acts 21:18, Paul paid James a visit when Paul returned to Jerusalem, at which point James informed Paul that Jewish believers were very zealous for the law, but they were a bit worried that Paul was teaching Gentiles to disobey Moses. This is why James counsels Paul to be very careful to observe Jewish customs while in Jerusalem, so as not to cause believing Jews to stumble. Clearly, James does not want Jewish Christians believing that Paul’s Gentile mission is somehow driving a wedge between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul mentions James three times in his letter to the Galatians, including this reference in 1:19, “*but I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.*” So, James was clearly a prominent leader among Jewish believers in Jerusalem, and people identified him as Jesus’ brother.

According to the account of famed Jewish historian Josephus, James was put to death by stoning at the instigation of the high-priest Ananus about A.D. 62.⁵ This means that the Epistle of James must have been written before that time. As I will argue shortly, James was likely written much earlier, at a point before the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 48, making James the first book of the New Testament.

Why is the date of the writing of James so important? Well, it is here we find a simple resolution to the problem with James’ statement about justification supposedly being in conflict with Paul’s doctrine. As recounted in Acts 15, the key date is A.D. 48, and the key event in the Jerusalem Council. At some point shortly before the Jerusalem Council was convened, Luke (the author of Acts) reports in verses 1-2 of chapter 15, “*some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had*

⁴ Moo, The Letter of James, PNTC, 9.

⁵ Josephus, Antiquities, XX ix.

no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.” The controversy is this: Certain Jews (we know them as the Judaizers) were insisting that when Gentiles come to faith in Christ (the Jewish Messiah), they must also live as Jews. Like Jews, Gentiles must keep the ceremonial law, including the feast days and dietary laws.

But the heart of the controversy centered in the Judaizer’s insistence that Gentile converts undergo circumcision, so that they might be justified by faith + circumcision (i.e., “works of law”). This caused a huge controversy in the church, and led to Paul’s stinging rebuke of the Judaizers in his letter to the Galatians, written about a year after the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 49). In his Galatian letter, Paul contends that the Judaizers have embraced another gospel (which is no gospel) and that having fallen from grace (4:5), they have come under God’s curse (1:9). Paul goes on to state the matter as clearly as the Greek language will allow: *“We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified”* (Galatians 2:16). In other words, we are justified (counted righteous before God) through faith in Jesus Christ (faith alone). We are not justified not by faith + works of law (i.e., circumcision). To add anything to faith in Christ, Paul says, was to teach another gospel and to come under God’s covenant curse!

Now, *if* James wrote his epistle before the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 48, and before the dispute about justification arose among the Jewish-Gentile churches in Galatia, then in his epistle James is exhorting Jewish Christians who profess faith in Christ, but who seek to avoid persecution from their Jewish countrymen, to put their faith (which justified them) into action (works). James is simply saying, “if you claim to be a Christian, you should be unwilling to conform to the standards of the world,” in order to avoid being persecuted. True faith in Christ will manifest itself in good works. But if James is written at some point after the Jerusalem Council (and after Paul’s epistle to the Galatians), then it may indeed appear that James is saying something about justification which conflicts with Paul.

I think another powerful argument that James was written before the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 48, is found in Acts 15:6-21, one of the most important moments in the history of the early church.

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.’

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

As we see in the rest of the chapter . . .

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

From Luke’s account of the Jerusalem Council, it is crystal clear that James is in full agreement with Paul, with Peter, and with all the other elders and leaders of the church who reached a consensus about Gentile salvation—“by grace, through faith in Christ, apart from works of law,” the same way God had saved believing Jews. This indicates that James’ comment in 2:24—*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*—is written in an entirely different context (persecuted Jewish Christians scattered throughout Palestine), and likely before the controversy between Paul and the Judaizers got underway.

Yet, another factor pointing to an early date for the composition of James (before the Jerusalem Council), and an additional indication that James and Paul are on the same page when it comes to justification, is the fact that James never once commands his reader to be obedient to the ceremonial aspects of Jewish law, the source of the controversy in Galatia. James says nothing about dietary laws, feasts, circumcision, etc. In fact, much of what James exhorts his readers to do can be directly traced back to the teaching of Jesus (what is often called the “moral law”). While James says little about the person and work of Jesus, no New Testament epistle shows more of a direct influence from the ethical teaching of Jesus.⁶ This—it seems to me—indicates that James was written quite early (before any of the gospels were written), and before any significant controversies about justification had arisen, such as those addressed in the letters of Paul and by the Jerusalem Council (in A.D. 48).

Whereas Paul was facing continual controversy about how Gentiles are saved (and how Jews and Gentiles relate to each other in the purposes of God), James is faced with a completely different problem. James is writing to instruct a scattered and persecuted flock about the teaching of Jesus. Like Jesus, James makes use of vivid illustrations and metaphors, he speaks in concise terms, and he exhorts his readers not merely to hear the word, but to put it into practice! Those who trust in Christ (and who are

⁶ Moo, *The Letter of James*, 27.

presumably already Christians), says James, must put their faith into action, and this means making every effort to avoid contamination from the world (i.e., unbelieving ways of thinking and doing).

III. With these introductory matters behind us, we conclude by briefly surveying the basic contents of this epistle.

If any one passage from this epistle summarizes James' primary concerns, it is possibly our New Testament lesson this morning (James 1:19-27): *“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”*

James exhorts his reader to realize that it is God's word (the message of the gospel) implanted in us which saves our souls, and which, as a result, produces the conduct James expects to see in the lives of his hearers. This conduct (in the face of the temptation to become like the unbelievers around us so as to avoid persecution—the very essence of worldliness according to James) includes being slow to anger, the production of the righteousness of God (as used here, probably akin to Paul's “fruit of the Spirit”), and putting off all moral filth and wickedness. Says James, we must do those things found in the word which God has implanted in us, and we are not to be satisfied with knowing what God requires of us, and then not doing it. James tells us to bridle our tongues, and he reminds us that true religion will manifest itself in concrete action, such as taking care of the afflicted, and any widows and orphans in our midst.

Notice carefully that James is not telling us to do these things in order to be saved, but we are to do them because these are the fruits of that faith which God has created in us through the word. James repeatedly exhorts us to realize that true wisdom comes from God as revealed in his word. As a Jew, who has come to faith in Jesus, James will frequently echo Old Testament passages like Deuteronomy 11 (our Old Testament lesson), in which wisdom is found in God's word through understanding the blessing-curse principle as stated there. Such divine wisdom is based in the knowledge that Jesus Christ has borne all of the covenant curses (for us, and in our place), and that the temporal blessings promised to Israel before entering the promised land as recounted in Deuteronomy 11, (a fruitful land, material prosperity and wealth, and peace in the midst of our enemies) can now be seen as graphic pictures to us of how in Christ, the temporal promises are utterly transformed by Wisdom incarnate, Jesus Christ. Wisdom is found in God's word, and his spiritual blessings will indeed come to us when we act in accordance with that word which God himself has planted in us.

But those lacking faith, and who therefore do not seek divine wisdom, obey the commands of God in a mistaken attempt to earn favor with God (blessing) and so as to avoid God's curse. But James tells us that because the word has already been planted within us, we are to do these things commanded of us because the father of lights has given us every good and perfect gift in the person of his son, Jesus. Those who hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (James 2:1), will indeed seek the wisdom of God, and will do everything possible to avoid all contamination from the world. As James reminds us, “faith apart

from works is dead” (James 2:26). A living faith perseveres under trial. A living faith does the word after hearing it. A living faith moves us not be partial to the rich. A living faith will manifest itself in works, and a living faith will seek to bridle the tongue. A living faith seeks wisdom from above, will not boast about tomorrow, nor allow us to place our trust in riches. A living faith even finds joy in the midst of suffering and persecution.

And where does this living faith come from? As James puts it verse 18 of chapter one, “of his own will, [God] brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creation.” This living faith arises within us because God has given us his word, implanting it (and the knowledge of the doing and dying of Jesus which that word contains) within us. Therefore, let us embrace that word of truth—the good news that Jesus has died for our sins, that he was perfectly obedient to the commandments of God for us, and in our place, and that because he was raised from the dead and ascended on high, he brings us forth as the first fruits of a new creation.

And because his blessed word is within us, therefore let us be doers of the word and not hearers only.