



James is notoriously difficult to outline, because the author moves rapidly from topic to topic. Sometimes he spends a paragraph or so on a topic, but often he changes subjects after only a few verses. Below is an arbitrary framework for the book.

James

Greeting (1:1)

I. Endurance of Testing (1:2-18)

II. Obedience to the Word of God

A. Pure Religion (1:19-27)

B. The Royal Law (2:1-13)

C. Genuine Faith (2:14-26)

III. Responsible Speech (3:1-18)

IV. Submission to God (4:1-5:6)

V. Preparation for the Lord's Coming (5:7-20)

Martin Luther was fairly critical of the book of James, primarily because he felt it did not measure up to the tremendous theological teachings of Paul.

Subsequently he relegated it (along with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation) to an appendix in his German translation of 1522. After commending the books of **John, 1 John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians**, and **1 Peter**, Luther is often quoted saying, "Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." R. V. G. Tasker, however, in his brief *Tyndale Series* commentary puts **James** in a broader context. "This epistle would seem to be of special value to the individual Christian during what we might describe as the second stage in his pilgrim's progress. After he has been led to respond to the gospel of grace, and come to have the joyful assurance that he is a redeemed child of God, if he is to advance along the way of holiness, and if the ethical implications of his new faith are to be translated into practical realities, then he needs the stimulus and the challenge of the **Epistle of James**" (p. 11).

Samplings from James

I. ENDURANCE OF TESTING (1:2-18)

What a paradox James begins with in **1:2**! How can a believer reckon it as supreme joy when he finds himself surrounded by every sort of trial in life?! The truth is that trials in life will come. This is reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the wise builder. The wind and rain and flood came upon the wise man and the foolish. James reminds us that trials will effect a valuable result in our lives—steadfastness. The picture is of a soldier bearing up under the weight of his pack. This steadfastness is a deep component of character that matches any situation. It is staying power, and it comes to us as we go through difficult situations. This faithful endurance is a means to an end. It brings about in our lives a completeness of character, mature, fully developed in all its parts, and pleasing to God (**v. 4**).

In **1:12** James returns to the topic of perseverance and uses the Old Testament formula of beatitude—blessed is the man.... The image is of the athlete who has stood up under the hardship of the competition and receives the victor's crown (the same metaphor we last saw of Paul at the end of his life and ministry, **1 Tm 4:7-8**). In the next verse James uses the same Greek word (*peirazo*) but with its alternate meaning, not “testing” but “tempting.” The context will determine which way it should be translated in a given passage. The difference between the two is significant. “Testing” has its source in God and is for our strengthening. “Tempting” comes from Satan, who has our downfall as his goal. We are to submit ourselves to God but resist the activity of Satan (**4:7**).

In **1:14** the emphasis is not on Satan but upon the human element in succumbing to temptation. In some way we tempt ourselves, or as A. T. Robertson has stated, “Snared by one's own bait.” The word “desire” can also be either positive or negative in meaning, and here it is clearly the latter (as interpreted by the NIV). It can mean any strong desire (even for good things) outside of God's will for us. This is probably a hunting or fishing metaphor. Like a fisherman with his lure our evil desires draw us away (better than “dragged off” when in parallel with “enticed”) from our position of safety. Like the naïve young man ensnared by the prostitute (**Proverbs 5 and 7**), a person is minding his own business when suddenly bait appears. He is lured out of his security and is shocked when the hook is set and he cannot escape. Our tendency is to shift the blame to someone or something else. But in many cases we are responsible for our own temptations.

In **1:15** the imagery shifts to illegitimate birth. An evil seductress entices someone, and then conceives a terrible offspring. When desire gives birth the name on the birth certificate is “sin.” When sin reaches maturity it too takes part in a terrible conception and produces the monstrous offspring death. Note the three generations of this awful family: lust, sin, death. God is not the father of this family! Death is here contrast with life in **verse 12**, which is the reward of the faithful (enduring versus yielding). A man's own evil desire plays the part of the seductress enticing him with the thought of sinful pleasure. The will, which consents, is his also—he is doubly guilty! So don't be tricked, my beloved brothers and sisters (**1:16**)!

II. OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD (1:19-2:26)

Who is right, Paul or James?

Romans 3:28—For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

James 2:24—You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

The best known section of James is found in **2:14-26** in his discussion of faith and works. James argues that true faith is always marked by obedience and only such faith evidenced in works will bring salvation. When James speaks about justification by works is he contradicting the Apostle Paul's doctrine of justification by faith? No! It must be understood that James and Paul are speaking from two different perspectives. James is describing a life as it is to be lived. He is speaking about pilgrimage not the entrance to the Christian life. Paul is describing how one enters the Christian life through faith. He is addressing the question of initiation. (Paul also teaches good works as a consequence of true faith, but this is not his main point.)

It is poor hermeneutics to try and interpret one word the same way in every situation. The word "justify" (*dikaion*) has a range of meanings (compare **Rom 3:4** where Paul speaks about God being justified). When Paul speaks about "works" (*ergon*), it means abominable legalism. If he wants to speak of works in a positive light, he has to qualify it with an adjective (for example, **Eph. 2:10**—For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works). But James never qualifies "works." For him it is always that good, sincere reflection of true motivations. We see the same thing when we study the word for "faith" (*pistis*). For Paul this is always true salvific faith, the entrance requirement for the Christian life. Paul is aware that some faith turns out to be vain, but he does not qualify the word in his discussion of it. But James always qualifies this word. For him faith that is alone is empty and dead. It is faith alone that saves, but faith that saves is never alone! If salvation could be described by the following formula,

grace + faith = salvation + works

then Paul emphasizes the first half while James insists on the second half. James resolutely opposes the tendency all too common among Christians to rest content with a halfhearted, compromising faith.

III. RESPONSIBLE SPEECH (3:1-18)

James cautions those who would be quick to enlist as teachers in the church, because God holds a higher standard for them. The words we speak are so

powerful, and those who stand in an authoritative role had better take that seriously. James goes on to describe the power of the tongue with three well known and easy to understand illustrations from every day life: a horse's bit, a ship's rudder, a fire's spark. To worship God with our lips on Sunday and curse our fellow man on Monday is an unacceptable inconsistency. To underscore this lesson he points to things you will never see in nature—a spring gushing both fresh and salt water, a tree bearing both figs and olives, or a vine bearing both grapes and figs.

IV. SUBMISSION TO GOD (4:1-5:6)

James also warns against friendship with the world, which he equates with hatred towards God (4:4). God has a divine jealousy towards us, and the proper attitude of our heart should be humility and humble submission to Him (4:6-7). You can drift away from God into sin, but you will never “drift” back to God. In 4:7-9 James describes the steps of how a person can return to God.

- ▶ Draw near to God, like the Prodigal Son, and He will draw near to you (v. 7)
- ▶ Cleanse your hand (outward) (v. 8; cf. Ps 24:3-4)
- ▶ Purify your hearts (inward) (v. 8)
- ▶ Mourn, weep, wail (v. 9)
- ▶ Change your laughter/joy to mourning/gloom (v. 9)

These are steps of repentance which show what true humility and submission look like. Of course, God does not expect us to abandon joy and laughter forever. This is a hallway to pass through, not a room in which God wants us to remain. But for those caught in the grip of sin and awakened to find themselves in a land far away from the Father, it is a necessary road to travel back home.

In 4:13-17 James also addresses the arrogant attitude of planning our lives without taking God into consideration. He uses another common seen from ancient life, which could easily parallel a present day business man. Several men are overheard making both short range plans (about time, mobility, and location) and long range plans (about duration and expected outcome). James is not suggesting that God is against planning out our work. What God does stand against is the presumptuous attitude we see in the parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16-21). Not acknowledging God's sovereignty for the Christian is illogical and unspiritual. If you read letters from the 19th century you may come across the letters “D.V.” occasionally used when a person mentions future plans. These two letters stand for Latin words which mean “If God wills.” This would not be a bad practice for believers today if the thought were serious and not flippant.

Not only does James give a warning to merchants but also to landlord (5:1-6). Those who hoard wealth for themselves at the expense of their employees will not find mercy from God. The hoarded gold and silver is described as eating the flesh of its owner like fire, and the wages withheld from the workers are given tongues to cry out against the landlords. God cares for the poor and will defend them. Those who lived in the lap of luxury on earth are compared to the sacrificial animals fattened for the slaughter (cf. the parable of the rich

man and Lazarus, **Lk 16:19-31**).

V. PREPARATION FOR THE LORD'S COMING (**5:7-20**)

The final section begins with an encouragement to be patient for the Lord's return like a farmer waiting for the harvest (**vv. 7-9**). The perseverance of Job is lifted up as an example to follow (**vv. 10-11**). An exhortation is given concerning oaths, which follows closely Jesus' teaching in **Matthew 5:33-37**. The example of Elijah is given as a man of prayer (**vv. 17-18**). The book closes with instruction that we should pray for one another, especially for physical healing (**vv. 14-15**), and that we should watching out for one another that none wander away from the truth (**vv. 19-20**).