

## PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

### JAMES 1 v 1

**From James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ: Greetings to all God's people scattered over the whole world.**

In this series of studies, I want to introduce you to the book of James. Perhaps you need no introduction to it. You may be very familiar with the contents of the book, having read it many times and studied it in some depth, either on your own or as part of a bible study group. However, it is always a useful exercise to turn to the familiar pages of scripture again because there are always new insights to be gained. In the following studies, I will be considering the main themes that James writes about.

The title I have given the first study is 'Practical Christianity'. This is also the overall title of the series. One of the things I am very passionate about is living out the Christian life in a practical way. Frequently I have been unapologetically critical of a conservative evangelical pietism i.e. an over emphasis on a spiritual, individualistic relationship to God through faith in Christ with little or no relevance to living in our secular society. One of the reasons why the church is now regarded as irrelevant is because generally speaking, it has very little to say about the social & political issues of the day. In some Christian circles the only things that matter are personal salvation, a private spirituality and getting to heaven. Of course, there is a spiritual dimension to Christianity. James says in chapter 1 v 18a; *'By his own will he brought us into being through the word of truth'*. But that is only the beginning. The Christian life must be lived out each day in practical ways, otherwise it has nothing of any relevance to say to people in our secular society. It is for this reason that I have been drawn to the practical book of James.

Most likely this first-century letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus, to far-flung churches across the Mediterranean. It is heavily influenced by the biblical Wisdom tradition. Like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, James focuses on a lived-out wisdom; what it is to be wise in a world of contrasts. James calls us to become what we are; 1 v 18b. Michele Smart writes; **"James is an extremely practical book. This wisdom is not some elite, intellectual knowledge, but rather a practical knowhow that helps us to negotiate life better. The letter features pithy sayings and a series of short discourses as we learn what it is to endure hard times, how to view our finances, the importance of caring for the needy, the need to control what we say, and what personal purity looks like"**. In a world obsessed with individualism, James challenges us on the importance of Christian community. The thrust of James' letter is that ultimately the wise person is someone who lives well with others.

The book of James has had a controversial history. This was particularly obvious at the time of the Reformation just over five hundred years ago. For Martin Luther, the major sticking-point was the theological tension that he perceived between James and the 'chief' New Testament books such as Romans and Galatians over the doctrine of 'Justification by Faith'. Luther said; **"James mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture"**. Luther characterised the letter as **"an epistle of straw"**.

However, Luther did not exclude James from the canon of scripture. It has been estimated that Luther cites over half the verses in the book of James as authoritative in his writings. Enough by way of an introduction. Let's begin our study. James begins in chapter 1 v 1.

From the content of the letter, we are able to learn something about the people to whom it was written. It is almost certain that the readers were Jewish believers. Douglas Moo wrote; **“The letter is thoroughly imbued with the spirit and imagery of the Old Testament and Judaism – so thoroughly that it must reflect the readers’ background as well as the author’s”**. The letter implies that these Jewish believers were mainly poor people who were caught in a situation of considerable social tension. They were oppressed and taken advantage of by wealthy landlords; they were hauled into the courts by rich people who also scorned their Christian faith. James exhorts his readers to be patient and he reminds them that the coming of their Lord, the judge and deliverer, is at hand. The letter encourages the Christians to face up to the trials they are going through with steadfast endurance, so that their Christian character might reach full maturity and their reward, ‘the crown of life’, be secured.

As we will see as we go through the contents of James’ letter it is clear that he is concerned with the church being too heavily influenced by worldliness. James warns his readers that ‘friendship with the world is enmity with God’. He challenges them to be unstained from the world. James highlights how worldliness has blighted the church resulting in a fawning deference to the rich and callous indifference to the poor; uncontrolled, critical speech, dissensions, violent quarrels and arrogance. James was challenging his readers about their failure to put their faith into practice. He calls on them to repent from their worldliness and to humble themselves before the Lord so that he might exalt them.

James is a challenging book for two reasons. Firstly, we cannot live out the Christian life in isolation. We must engage with society where our Christian faith must have a cutting edge and makes an impact. Secondly, we must ensure that worldliness does not infiltrate into the life of our church community. We will explore this in some depth in later studies. As we do so, we will realise that Christianity is a practical religion.