

James: How Real Faith Acts Introduction

Sometimes we Christians speak in such generalities that we ourselves hardly know what we are talking about. We talk in glowing terms about such things as faith, love, and Christian fellowship. We often, however, fail to pin down what we mean in practical, everyday terms that communicate what someone might look like if he or she were exhibiting such a quality.

The Book of James deals with making quite plain what real faith means, what it looks like, and how it acts. We may not like what James says, but we cannot accuse James of being vague. Like the Old Testament prophets before him, James forthrightly, specifically, practically defines how real faith acts.

As we study the Book of James, we will see that it often seems to move from topic to topic rather than to develop an extended treatment of a theme. This lack of topical organization seems especially evident in James 1, with its short teaching units. The teaching units in James 2—5 are generally longer than those in James 1, though how they connect still may not be readily apparent. Even so, various ways of connecting the teaching units can be seen. Some teaching units are connected thematically. See, for example, how both 2:1-13 and 2:14-26 deal with aspects of faith in action. Other teaching units are joined by key words. For example, note the word "lacking" in James 1:4 (NASB, NIV, NRSV) and the word "lacking" (NRSV) or "lacks" (NIV, NASB) in 1:5 in treating topics that seem unrelated.

The Book of James defined a Christian style of life, a life that demonstrated the reality of faith, for a Christian congregation sometime in the latter half of the first century AD. The traditional view is that James, the Lord's half-brother, is the author. If this view is correct, a date earlier than AD 62 is necessary, for this James was martyred in AD 62.

The Book of James is considered to be one of the general letters of the New Testament. The general letters are letters either that were written for more than one congregation or for a congregation or congregations whose location is now unknown. We would like to know where this congregation was and what it was like. Various suggestions have been made, but the basic answer is that we do not know for sure. Suggestions have been made that the congregation was in Jerusalem or perhaps in the area of Antioch of Syria. Points can be made that would support both suggestions. If we knew more, we perhaps could understand better some of the finer points of the letter. We likely will find the message of James quite clear enough, however, to cause us to ponder what we should do in response to its challenge.

The Book of James contains plain talk about what real faith means. The book's message is conveyed in the form of commands, not suggestions. Most of us don't like commands. We at least want room to wiggle out of the commands. We should be

careful, though, in trying to adjust James's instructions to our desires. Wouldn't it be better to learn from James's message about how real faith acts and change our lives accordingly?

Session 1	Faith Reaching Toward Maturity	James 1:2-8, 11-15, 22-27
Session 2	How to Tell When Your Faith Is Real	James 2:1-19
Session 3	Watch What You Say	James 3:1-12
Session 4	Stop Quarreling	James 4:1-12
Session 5	Foolish Living	James 4:13—5:6
Session 6	What Church Ought to Be Like	James 5:7-20