

## Catholic Letters Lesson 2

# The Letter of James, the first Catholic or General Letter

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**Who wrote this letter?** The name James was very common, so it is not surprising that up to five men called James appear in the New Testament. These are:

James, the son of Zebedee, called the Greater, an apostle (Mt 10:2; Luke 8: 51; Acts 1:13; 12:2);

James, the son of Alphaeus, called the Less, also an apostle (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13);

James, "the Lord's brother" (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3);

James, bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; Gal 1:19);

James, an eyewitness of the Resurrection (1 Cor 15:7).

Scholars are generally agreed that the "brother of the lord," (that is, his cousin or relative) is the bishop of Jerusalem, to whom the risen Lord appeared. In summary, it is fairly clear that the letter was written by James, "the Lord's brother" and the leader (bishop) of the Jerusalem church. James led the Jerusalem church for more than a decade prior to his martyrdom in AD 62, when he was stoned to death by the Jews. James was not only a leader; he was a man of wisdom who taught the wisdom of the kingdom of God in a style reminiscent of Jesus himself.

**When was it written?** It was written probably between 45-49 AD. It was written for the Jewish people who fled Jerusalem during the persecution of Stephen. James identifies his audience as the "twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (1:1).

**The purpose of the Letter** 1. To encourage Christians to endure tribulation which they suffer from the Jews and to explain the meaning of temptation on the light of the cross of the Suffering Lord. 2. To encourage them to be steadfast in faith, the practical faith. 3. To clarify the concept of living faith and its correlation with deeds. 4. To reveal dangers of some sins, which some may have thought them trivial.

**Its characteristics and relation with the other letters** 1. It adopted the practical style regarding the holiness of the Christian life. 2. Its expressions are easy, clear and richly depicted in brief. 3. It is similar to the "Sermon on the Mount," from the point of the many practical commandments, to the extent that some thought it is gathering of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Both have mentioned the spiritual outlook of the Law in its depth, about the fatherhood of God, and choosing between the love of God and the love of the world. We find some striking similarities between the teachings of James with the teachings of Jesus in the sermon on the Mount

5:2ff.	Moth and rust spoiling riches	<u>Matt. 6:19</u>
5:12	Against oaths	<u>Matt. 5:33-37</u>

5:10	The prophets as examples	<u>Matt. 5:12</u>
4:4	Friendship of the world as enmity against God	<u>Matt. 6:24</u>
4:11-12	Against judging others	<u>Matt. 7:1-5</u>
3:18	Blessings of peacemakers	<u>Matt. 5:9</u>
2:13	Blessings of mercifulness	<u>Matt. 5:7</u>
2:10	The whole law to be kept	<u>Matt. 5:19</u>
1:5	Asking for good gifts	<u>Matt. 7:7ff.</u>
1:4	Exhortation to perfection	<u>Matt. 5:48</u>
1:22	Hearers and doers of the Word	<u>Matt. 7:24ff.</u>
1:20	Against anger	<u>Matt. 5:22</u>
1:2	Joy in the midst of trials	<u>Matt. 5:10-12</u>

**Various themes:** The book of James is full of practical wisdom for everyday living. Genuine faith will manifest itself in righteous acts that come out of a pure heart. This study will take a close look at how our faith is worked out in everyday life by understanding the principles of godly wisdom. How to deal with trials, tribulations and temptations through godly wisdom? How to control our tongue from rumors and gossip? How to develop patience, endurance and humility? How to be fair and impartial?

**Brief Summary:** The Book of James outlines the faith walk through genuine religion (1:1-27), genuine faith (2:1-3:12) and genuine wisdom (3:13-5:20). This book contains a remarkable parallel to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. James begins in the first chapter by describing the overall traits of the faith walk. In chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 he discusses social justice and a discourse on faith in action. He then compares and contrasts the difference between worldly and godly wisdom and asks us to turn away from evil and draw close to God. James gives a particularly severe rebuke to the rich who hoard and those who are self-

reliant. Finally he ends with encouragement to believers to be patient in suffering, praying and caring for one another and bolstering our faith through fellowship.

**Practical Application:** We see in the Book of James a challenge to faithful followers of Jesus Christ to not just “talk the talk,” but to “walk the walk.” While our faith walk, to be certain, requires a growth of knowledge about the Word, James exhorts us to not stop there. Many Christians will find this epistle challenging as James presents 60 obligations in only 108 verses. He focuses on the truths of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount and motivates us to act upon what He taught.

Genuine Religion:

*James 1:2-4 Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

**How to be joyful during trial?** James does not say *if* we face trials but *whenever* we face them. He assumes that we will have trials and that it is possible to profit from them. The point is not to pretend to be happy when we face trial but to have a positive outlook (considering it a pure joy) because of what trials can produce in our lives. Trial is part of our life in the fallen world that we live in. We all go through trials. Now what is the joy about it? Trial is evil and no one can justify it. The Lord does not want us to go through trials as pleasures but teaches us the outcomes of trials. Trials test our faith producing patience and endurance. When we go through trials, we begin to grow in faith. We begin to pray and we learn to trust. Now here’s the joy. When we go through trial we find God’s provision and His comfort and His presence with us making us stronger as believers. It exercises our spiritual muscle and we find ourselves stronger. Tough times can teach us perseverance. It is an opportunity to exercise our spiritual muscles. When we meet people and hear what they are going through we can minister to them. We know exactly what they are going through. It gives us an opportunity to reach out to the body of Christ-to other people- to encourage them. But we must know, no matter how much we know others’ suffering, it’s not the same as experiencing it. Trials are the method God uses to provide His provision and His care. If we read about the great Christian women and men in history, the missionaries who endured unbelievable sufferings for the sake of the gospel. They were giants in faith because they allowed their suffering to produce this fruit-patience and endurance. God blessed them greatly for it. Trials create maturity and endurance. David says in [Psalm 119:71](#), It is good for me that I have been afflicted. I have learned your word. (Romans 5:3-5/ 2 Cor 6:3-7)

**How to grow mature?** We truly know the depth of our character during the times of pressure and how we react to them. It is easy to be kind to others when everything is going well but can we still be kind when others are treating us unfairly? God wants to make us mature and complete, not to keep us from all pain. Instead of complaining about our struggles, we should see them as opportunities for growth. We need to thank God for his presence with us in our rough times. He will not leave us alone with our problems. He will stay close and help us grow.

**How to grow in God's wisdom?** Making right choices, seeking right people's advice and following diligently, keeping right attitudes are the marks of growing in wisdom. By wisdom, James is talking not only about knowledge but about the ability to make wise decisions in difficult circumstances. Whenever we need wisdom, we need to pray to God and He will give generously supply what we need (King Solomon asked for wisdom 1 Kings 3:1-15)

**What is wisdom?** It is a practical discernment. It begins with respect for God, leads to right living, results in increased ability to tell right from wrong. God is willing to give us this wisdom but we will be unable to receive it if our goals are self-centered instead of God-centered. In our prayer, we must put away our critical attitude. A mind that wavers is not completely convinced that God's way is best. It treats God's word like any human advice and it treats the option to disobey. To stabilize our wavering or doubtful mind, we need to commit ourselves to God wholeheartedly.

***1:9 The brother in lowly circumstances should take pride in his high standing:*** This brother in low circumstance is a person without status or wealth. Such people are often overlooked but they are not overlooked by God. They are great in the eyes of God.

***1:9-11 the rich one in his lowliness, for he will pass away "like the flower of the field.....***

The poor should be glad that riches mean nothing to God. Money is lost easily. We find true wealth by developing our spiritual life, not by developing our financial assets. What we have in our heart matters to God and endures for eternity. God is interested in what is lasting (our soul), not in what is temporary (our money and possessions). We should be careful about the false sense of security brought on by prosperity and the desire for things. A life packed with materialistic pursuits deafens us to God's word. Better stay free from worldly riches

**1:12 Who receives the crown of life?** The crown of life is like the victory wreath given to winning athletes (1 Cor 9:25). God's crown of life is not glory and honor here on earth but the reward of eternal life - living with God forever. The way to be in God's winners' circle is by loving him and staying faithful even under pressure.

**How to handle temptations?** (1:12-15) Temptation comes from evil desires inside us, not from God. It begins with an evil thought and becomes sin when we dwell on the thought and allow it to become an action. Like a snowball rolling downhill, sin grows more destructive the more we let it have its way. The best time to stop a temptation is before it is too strong or moving too fast to control (Matthew 4:1-11/ 1 Corinthians 10:13/ 2 Tim 2:22)

**1:13-14 Does God tempt us?** People who live for God often wonder why they still have temptations. Does God tempt them? God tests people, but He does not tempt them by trying to seduce them into sin. God allows Satan to tempt people, however in order to refine their faith and to help them grow in their dependence on Christ. We can resist the temptation to sin by turning to God for strength and choosing to obey his word.

**What are the common excuses or justifications that we make for our evil thoughts and wrong actions? (It is the other person's fault. I could not help it. Everybody is doing it. It was just a**

**mistake. Nobody is perfect. The devil made me do it. I was under pressure to do it. I did not know it was wrong. God is tempting me).** When we make excuses we try to shift the blame from ourselves to someone or something else. As Christians we accept responsibility for our wrongs, confessing them and asking God's forgiveness.

**1:14-19 Listening and Doing:** when we talk too much and listen too little, we communicate to others that we think our ideas are much more important than theirs. James wisely advises us to reverse this process. We need to keep track of our talking time and listening time. When people talk with us, do they feel that their viewpoints or ideas have value?

**Control anger:** Anger erupts when our egos are bruised- "*I am hurt, my opinions are not being heard*". Anger is justifiable when injustice and sin occur because others are hurt. But we should not become angry when we fail to win an argument or when we feel offended or neglected. Selfish anger helps nobody at anytime. James tells us to get rid of all that is wrong in our lives and humbly accept the salvation message that we have received (planted) for our salvation.

**1:22-25 Hearers and Doers of Word of God:** it is important to listen to what God's word says but it is much more important to obey it, to do what it says. We can measure the effectiveness of our bible study time by the effect it has on our behavior and attitudes. Do we put into action what we study?

**What is Religion and what is it for?** In the first century, orphans and widows had very little means of economic support. Unless a family member was willing to care for them, they were reduced to begging, selling themselves as slaves or starving. By caring for these powerless people, the church put God's word into practice.

1:27 When we go through trials, how to make the right choices, whose advice to take, how to persevere and how to keep right attitude. We need to pray and seek the Lord. His wisdom will enable us to get through the trials. To keep ourselves from the pollution of the world, we need to commit ourselves to Christ' ethical teaching and moral system and not the world's. We are not to adapt to the world's value system, which is based on money, power and pleasure. True faith means getting away from the world's contamination.

## **Genuine Faith in James 2**

In this chapter James argues against favoritism and for the necessity of good deeds. He presents three principles of faith.

1. Commitment - it is an essential part of Faith. We cannot be Christians simply by affirming the right doctrines or agreeing with Biblical facts (Pharisaic attitude). We must commit our mind and heart to Christ.
2. Right Actions: If our faith is real, it will result in our actions which are the natural by-products of our true faith. We will have a changed life if our faith is real.
3. Faith should be manifested in actions: Faith without good deeds does not do anybody any good. It is useless. James' teachings are consistent with Paul' s teachings that we receive salvation by faith alone. Paul

emphasizes the purpose of faith (to bring salvation) while James emphasizes the result of faith (a changed life)

**2:1 Condemnation against favoritism:** It is a human tendency to align with the rich and powerful, being impressed by status, wealth and fame. We do this because we would rather identify with successful people than the apparent failures. Loving the 'haves' and ignoring the 'have nots' is sinful for James because God views all people as equals and if he favors anyone, it is the poor and the powerless. We should follow not only his preferential option for the poor and the powerless but also his own coming as a humble servant, being born in the manger and washing the feet of the disciples.

**Showing favoritism to the rich is wrong.** Why? It is inconsistent with Jesus' teachings. It results from evil thoughts. It insults people made in God's image. It is a by-product of selfish motives. It goes against the Biblical definition of love. It shows a lack of mercy to those less fortunate. It is hypocritical and sin.

**2:2-5 Dont judge a person by his or her economic status because it is wrong.** Wealth may indicate intelligence, wise decisions and hard work. By honoring someone just because he or she dresses well, we are making appearance more important than characters. Sometimes we do this because poverty makes us uncomfortable and we don't want to associate with the poor. Perhaps we may do this because we want to be rich and wealthy and we want to use the rich person as a means to that end. Many times we are happy associating with the rich for our benefit financially. All these motives are selfish. Money is a commodity to be used but human being is God's creation to be loved and cared for but in our society of greed and selfishness, just the opposite is taking place: Loving money and Using people. If we say that Christ is our Lord, then we must live as he requires, showing no favoritism and loving all people regardless of whether they are rich or poor. The greatest barriers for the rich to salvation is their pride, selfishness and false security. For the poor, the bitterness can often bar the way to acceptance of salvation. Let us not assume that rich go to hell and the poor go to heaven automatically. Everyone has to work out their own salvation by living a righteous life, lived out by Jesus.

**2:8 The royal law is the law of our Jesus Christ:** "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Jn 15:12). This law, originally summarized in Leviticus 19:18, is the basis for all the laws of how people should related to one another. Christ reinforced this truth in Matthew 22:37-40/ Romans 13:8-9. We must treat all people as we would want to be treated. We should not ignore the rich. There are so many rich people with lot of love and compassion for the poor humanity. Let us not be jealous of their handwork, optimism, and success in life. But we must not favor them for what they can do for us, while ignoring the poor who can offer us seemingly so little in return.

### **2:14-26 Faith without work is dead and useless**

This is a very famous statement in the book of James. "Is salvation by faith alone (St. Paul) or by faith plus works (St. James)?" This is perhaps the most important question in all of Christian theology. This question is the cause of the Reformation, the split between the Protestant churches and Catholic Church. This question is a key

difference between biblical Christianity and most of the "Christian" cults. Is salvation by faith alone, or by faith plus works? Am I saved just by believing in Jesus, or do I have to believe in Jesus and do certain things?

Some see a difference between Paul (salvation is by faith alone) and James (salvation is by faith plus works). Paul dogmatically says that justification is by faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9), while James appears to be saying that justification is by faith plus works. This apparent problem is answered by examining what exactly James is talking about. James is emphasizing the point that genuine faith in Christ will produce a changed life and good works (James 2:20-26). James is saying that a person who is truly justified by faith will have good works in his/her life. If a person claims to be a believer, but has no good works in his/her life, then he/she likely does not have genuine faith in Christ (James 2:14, 17, 20, 26). Paul informs us that we were created to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). Paul expects just as much of a changed life as James does: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). James and Paul do not disagree in their teaching regarding salvation. They approach the same subject from different perspectives. Paul simply emphasized that justification is by faith alone while James put emphasis on the fact that genuine faith in Christ produces good works. The theme of James is that genuine faith will always show itself through righteous living.

Deeds of loving service are not a substitute for but a rather a verification of our faith in Christ. Although they sound different in wording, they mean the same content. While it is true that our good deeds can never earn salvation which is purely a free gift of God, true faith always results in a changed life and good deeds. Abraham (willing to sacrifice his son Issac) and Rahab (hid the spies of Israel and helped them to escape) are true models of faith manifested in their deeds.

**James 3: 1 Responsible teaching:** "Not many of you should become teachers". Teaching was a highly valued and respected profession in Jewish culture and many Jews who embraced Christianity wanted to become teachers. James warns that although it is good to aspire to teach, the teachers's responsibility is great because their words and example affect others' spiritual lives. The church is a teaching authority and all those who in church's hierarchy are expected to be responsible in teaching the church's doctrines.

**Responsible use of tongue 3:2-8:** what we say and what we don't say are both important. (Speech is silver and Silence is gold). Proper speech is saying right words at the right time. Before we speak, we have to ask ourselves, is it necessary is it useful and respectful? Is it important at this time? James compares the damage that the tongue can do to a raging fire. The uncontrolled tongue can do terrible damage. Satan used the tongue to divide people and pit them against one another. A few words spoken in anger can destroy a relationship that took years to build and so before we speak, we better remember that the words are like fire.

3:9-12 at times our words are right and pleasing to God but at other times, they are violent and destructive. The tongue gives us a picture of our basic character. We are made in God's image but live in a fallen world. But when we allow our words to the Holy Spirit, He purifies our thoughts and words by giving us self control.

**True wisdom 3: 13-18** Our true wisdom can be measured by the depth of our character. Just as we can identify a tree by the type of fruit it produces, we can evaluate one's wisdom by the way we speak and act.

Foolishness leads to disorder but wisdom leads to peace and goodness. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition come from the devil. It is easy to be drawn into wrong desires by the pressures of the society and sometimes even by well-meaning Christians. By listening to the advice: "assert yourself," "Go for it," "Set high goals", we can be drawn into greed and destructive competitiveness. Seeking God's wisdom delivers us from the need to compare ourselves to others and to want what they have.

**What is the most common problem in our prayer?** (4:1-4) Not asking or asking for the wrong things or asking for the wrong reasons. When we talk to God, what do we really ask him? Not so much of our desires but seeking his approval for our plans and projects if they are His will. There is nothing wrong with wanting a pleasurable life. God gives us good gifts that he wants us to enjoy. But having friendship with the world involves seeking pleasure at the expense of others or at the expense of obeying God. Humility is the cure for evil. Pride makes us self centered and leads us to conclude that we deserve all we can see, touch or imagine. Humbling ourselves means recognizing that our worth comes from God alone.

James in Chapter 5 proclaims the worthlessness of riches. Today's money will be worthless when Christ returns, so we should spend our time accumulating the kind of treasures that will be worthwhile in God's eternal kingdom. We all need money to live and support our families. Missionaries need money to help them spread the gospel and churches need money to do their work effectively. Money is not evil but the love of money is the root of all evils. It is a warning to all Christians who are tempted to adopt worldly standards than God's standards.

**Anointing of the Sick (5:14-15).** James is referring to someone who is incapacitated physically. In scripture, oil was both a medicine (the parable of the Good Samaritan Luke 10) and the symbol of the Spirit of God (used for anointing the kings). Thus oil can represent both the medical and the spiritual spheres of life. Jesus Christ is Lord over both the body and the spirit.

5:16-18 The Christian's most powerful resource is communion with God in prayer. The results are often greater than we think. Some see prayer as the last resort to be tried when all fails. This approach is backward. Prayer should come first because God's power is infinitely greater than ours.

**How do I apply St. James letter?** More than any other book in the New Testament, James places the spotlight on the necessity for believers to act in accordance with our faith. How well do our actions mirror the faith that we proclaim? This is a question that we all struggle to answer well. As we read the letter from James, we focus on those areas that he mentioned: our actions during trials, our treatment of those less fortunate, the way we speak and relate to others, and the role that money plays in how we live our life. Let us allow James to encourage us to do good, according to the faith we proclaim.