

James 1:1

Greetings

Main idea: James encourages us to recognize Jesus as Lord, and live like it in very simple, practical ways.

I read a story about a man named Bryan Anderson who saw an old lady stranded on the side of the road. He was dirty and dressed shabby after a long day of work, but he saw that she needed help, so he stopped to help.

At first, the woman was apprehensive about him because of his rough appearance. He looked so dirty and poor, and she was afraid he wasn't safe. Seeing she was frightened, he tried to calm her, saying, "Don't worry. My name is Bryan Anderson, and I just want to help you."

When he finished changing her tire, and he was even dirtier than before, she asked how much she owed him for his help. Inspired by the Pay-it-Forward movement, Bryan just smiled and said, "If you really want to pay me back, the next time you see someone who needs help, help them."

That evening, the old woman stopped by a small cafe. Her waitress was sweet, but appeared to be nearly eight months pregnant, and she could tell that she had spent the whole day on her feet.

After she finished her meal, she paid with a hundred dollar bill. The waitress went to get change and when she came back, the lady was gone. She left a note that said, "You don't own me anything. Somebody once helped me, and now I'm helping you." Under the napkin, the waitress found four more one hundred dollar bills.

That night when the waitress went home, she told her husband about what had happened. They were both so incredibly thankful that the woman had blessed them like that, because they really needed the money, especially since the baby would be arriving so soon. As they went to bed that night, still in shock that someone had given them exactly what they needed, the waitress kissed her husband and whispered, "I love you, Bryan Anderson."

Now, I don't believe in karma, and that story might not even be true, but it does illustrate how we're to serve people in very practical ways. Maybe you don't feel like you have much to contribute, but the Bible is clear that we all have things that we can do, sometimes very simple and practical things, that can help others and point them to Jesus.

For the next four or five months, I'm going to be preaching through the book of James. It's one of the most simple and practical letters in the New Testament written to encourage and instruct believers. The fact that this letter is in the Bible is interesting, though, because it actually almost didn't make the cut. Some well-known Christians throughout history didn't like it or think that it measured up to the same standard that the other letters of the New Testament set. But it's become the favorite of many Christians today because of how simple and practical it's proven to be.

Today, as an introduction to the book of James, we're going to read and focus on just the first verse. James 1:1. It says this.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.
(James 1:1)

Father, thank You for giving us Your word. Thank You for preserving it in such a way that even when we're challenged by its message, or confused by its message, that we can still know that it's Your word, given to us so that we might know You and serve You all our lives. Do that in us this morning. In Jesus's name, Amen.

When you meet someone for the first time, and they say, "Tell me about yourself," what do you say? Maybe you tell them about your hobbies or your accomplishments. Maybe you tell them about your job or your dreams. Maybe you don't know what to say.

So, tell me about yourself in the chat. How would you briefly introduce yourself to someone you met for the first time?

I think I would tell them, "I'm a pastor, I have a beautiful wife, four kids, and I love pizza rolls." Those are probably the things that most define my life. What would you say?

Well, like nearly every letter in the New Testament, the book of James begins with the author of the letter introducing himself. It says, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Many, if not most, Christian scholars believe that this James was Jesus's half brother. It mentions him a few other places in the Bible, such as in Matthew 13 when Jesus visited his hometown. Starting in verse 54, it says:

He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? (Matthew 13:54-55)

So, evidently, after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary came together and had other children as well. They were not Jesus's fully biological siblings, because Jesus didn't have an earthly biological father, but they were siblings in every practical way, just like how we have many blended families today.

But that makes it even more interesting that this James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote this letter. Because we also read in the gospels that Jesus's siblings didn't believe in Him or follow Him at the time. John 7:5 says quite plainly:

Not even his brothers believed in him. (John 7:5)

And can you blame them? I mean, imagine growing up with Jesus. Jesus was always right! You could never blame him for doing something, because He never did it!

I love this article I read by Jon Bloom.¹ He wrote:

I'll bet it was difficult to have Jesus for a brother.

First, Jesus would have been without peer in intellect and wisdom. He was astounding temple rabbis by age 12. A sinful, fallen, gifted sibling can be a hard act to follow. Imagine a perfect, gifted sibling.

Second, Jesus' consistent and extraordinary moral character must have made him odd and unnerving to be around. His siblings would have grown increasingly self-conscious around him, aware of their own

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/jesus-unbelieving-brothers>

sinful, self-obsessed motives and behavior, while noting that Jesus didn't seem to exhibit any himself. For sinners, that could be hard to live with.

Third, Jesus was deeply and uniquely loved by Mary and Joseph. How could they not have treated him differently? They knew he was the Lord. Imagine their extraordinary trust in and deference to Jesus as he grew older. No doubt the siblings would have perceived a dimension to the relationship between the oldest child and their parents that was different from what they experienced.

And when swapping family stories it would have been hard to match a star appearing at your brother's birth.

So I'm sure growing up with Jesus was not easy. James would have likely been resentful, bitter, and skeptical about Jesus all his life.

And yet, after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, we find out that James became a follower of his brother Jesus. Along with the disciples in the Upper Room after seeing Jesus ascend, it says in Acts 1:14:

All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1:14)

So James was there. He was with the disciples, waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend on them for the first time. He became a leader in the early church, possibly even being what we would call the senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem after Peter's death.

And I don't know about you, but if I were Jesus's brother, I'd throw that around a little bit. I'd be like, "Hey, me and Jesus are like this! You all might know Jesus from a distance, but I know Him personally. After all, I'm His brother."

It's strange, but have you ever noticed how people often pay more attention to certain people just because they're related to somebody important? For example, Daniel, William, and Stephen Baldwin all became actors because of the success of their older brother, Alec Baldwin. Joel Osteen is a huge name because he inherited the church he pastors from his dad. And you can't tell me Miley Cyrus would be popular if not for her dad Billy Ray Cyrus. She's just not that talented!

So yeah, if I had a famous family member, I'd probably milk that for all it's worth!

But James doesn't do that. He begins his letter with, "James, servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." He introduces himself not as a brother, but as a servant of Jesus.

Here's the thing. If we want to glorify God as His children, we've got to stop thinking we're something and realize that Jesus is everything. We've got to humble ourselves before God.

How do we do that? Two things.

First, recognize God as your God. James called himself a servant of God. We exist to serve God, and not the other way around. Sometimes we treat God as our genie in a bottle. We pray for all the things we want, without even stopping to wonder if God wants them for us. And it's good to pray for anything and everything. I'm not

saying otherwise. We often have not because we ask not. And yet, what we ask for and how we ask for it often displays what we think about God. Does He exist to serve us, or do we exist to serve Him?

You know, God did serve us, big time, when Jesus died on the cross for our sin. But because of that, we ought to also desire to give Him all of our lives.

During the American Revolution a man in civilian clothes was riding his horse past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. The man noticed that their leader was shouting instructions at them, but making no attempt to help them. The man asked the leader why he was shouting at them, but not helping them, and the leader retorted with great dignity, "Sir, I am a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted his horse, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. After the job was done, he turned to the corporal and said, "Mr. Corporal, next time you have a job like this and not enough men to do it, go to your commander-in-chief, and I will come and help you again." Apparently the corporal had not noticed that he was speaking with George Washington, the President of the United States.

We get ourselves into trouble when we think of ourselves as more highly than we ought. We are not the highest authority in our lives. We're to worship and serve God. So that's the first point. Recognize God as your God.

Second, recognize Jesus Christ as the Lord. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. He's the Lord, and He is our Lord.

C.S. Lewis wrote this in his book, *Mere Christianity*.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised.

But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

So if you say that Jesus is your Lord, don't hold anything back from Him. If you want to honor God, don't reserve the bulk of your life for your ambitions and goals and pleasures, and then just give Jesus what's leftover. No. Give all of yourself to Jesus, seeing Him as your Lord, because He's already given all of Himself to you.

So after introducing himself, James then names who he's writing to. He continues in verse 1:

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. (James 1:1b)

So James was writing not to a specific church, as most of the letters in the New Testament are, or to a specific individual, as a few of the letters do, but to the twelve tribes of Israel, specifically, who we, today, would call Messianic Jews. These were all the Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah when Peter preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost and in the days and years to follow. At first, they

were all gathered together in Jerusalem. But then many of these Messianic Jews left Jerusalem not long after this when Stephen was stoned to death, becoming the first Christian martyr. They scattered not only to avoid persecution, but also to start sharing the gospel all over the region, so that the gospel would be spread to all the nations. They were literally dispersed, so James calls them the twelve tribes of the Dispersion.

So James wrote a letter to them, seeking to instruct and encourage them in their faith.

And we can get the same encouragement from it today. We're going to see these things in the weeks and months, but in the first chapter alone, James tells us how we can have joy all the time, and wisdom from God, and how we can stand firm when tempted, and practice true religion that actually pleases God. These are some of the most amazing, practical, and extraordinarily simple commands in all of the New Testament.

Listen, church attendance is important. But if you think that the primary way that you live out your faith is by going to church, you're in for a wake up call from the book of James. James is going to challenge us to live out our faith in ways that go far beyond the walls of the church building. He's going to challenge us to not just make a room in our house for Jesus, but to allow Jesus to tear down our walls and remake us in His image.

This is what the Bible calls sanctification. We're to be sanctified, set aside, to serve God alone.

One last thing. The last word in verse 1 is simply, "Greetings." And I think this sets the stage for the rest of the book. James is a simple book, full of simple instructions, presented in simple language.

Even from the very first verse of James, we get a picture of how James will encourage us. James encourages us to recognize Jesus as Lord, and live like it in very simple, practical ways.

Is Jesus your Lord? I'm not asking if you obey Him perfectly, but rather if you even see Him as someone you want to obey. It starts by seeing what Jesus has done for you. Jesus came down from heaven, lived the perfect life that we fail to live, and then died on the cross for our sins. Through His death, we receive God's grace and forgiveness. But then, Jesus didn't stay dead. He rose from the grave and ascended to heaven! And in the same way, James is calling us to rise from our dead lives, and live new lives that glorify God.