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Lesson 1 — *Real Faith: An Overview*

BACKGROUND

1. Acceptance

- Martin Luther criticized it (neglected, not rejected it) as “an epistle of straw” due to its lack of doctrine and probably also due to its abuse by the Roman Catholic Church.
- That it is indeed divinely inspired Scripture was recognized by the early church Christians when they included it in the biblical canon. Many have referred to it as the “Proverbs of the New Testament” because it is proverbial and practical in its focus on godly living, which cannot be separated from sound doctrine. Furthermore, this book echoes the social justice sentiments of Amos, and though many references and allusions, it also echoes the kingdom ethic taught by Jesus Himself in the Sermon on the Mount.
- We categorize it with the “General Epistles” because it was not written by Paul, nor was it written to a specific church or group.

2. Author

- There are four men named “James” in the New Testament.
 - James, the father of Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16)
 - James, the son of Alphaeus — one of the original 12 disciples, also known as James the Less (Matthew 10:3; 27:56)
 - James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Matthew 4:21) — one of the original 12 disciples

- James, the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Galatians 1:18-19)
- James, the brother of Jesus, is the most likely author.
 - His person described:
 - James initially rejected Jesus as the Messiah (John 7:5), but later came to accept Him, most likely after the resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:7)
 - He became the recognized head of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:13; 12:17; 15; Galatians 2:9), and because of his effective ministry there he was eventually given two nicknames:
 - “Camel Knees” — due to his spending many hours kneeling in prayer
 - “James the Just” (or righteous) — due, early on, to his desire to adhere to the Mosaic Law (cf. Galatians 2:12) but ultimately for his concern for godliness, holiness, piety, and wisdom (Acts 15:12-21; 21:17-26)
 - James was martyred, according to Josephus, in AD 62.
 - The proof of his authorship:
 - James, the son of Zebedee, was martyred too early (Acts 12:2).
 - The pious character of “James the Just” fits the practical and pious tone of this book.
 - James’ strong Jewish roots seen in Acts 15 and Galatians 2:12 fit with the strong Old Testament grounding in this book (e.g., referencing the gospel as a “law of liberty” in 2:12, and referring to their meeting place as

a “synagogue”) and the audience to whom it was written.

- There are unique verbal nuances in this book that match James’ speech in Acts 15. For example: (1) the simple use of “greetings” (Gk. *chairen*) in 1:1 and Acts 15:23; (2) the reference to God as “the Lord of hosts” (Gk. *sabaoth*) in 5:4.
- The authoritative tone of this book matches the reputation and respect of James in Acts 15 and 21.
- James undoubtedly ignores highlighting his physical relationship to Jesus due to a position of humility (cf. James 1:1), a reputation that was well-known and respected, and his recognition of the futility of “knowing Jesus according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 5:16; cf. Matthew 12:47-50).

3. Date

- That James doesn’t reference the Jerusalem Council (~AD 49) or any Gentile-related issues, even though he wrote to scattered Jewish believers who would have benefitted from that information (cf. Acts 16:4; 21:25), suggests that this epistle was written before then.
- Furthermore, there isn’t much similarity to Paul like you would expect if it came later (see, for example, 1 and 2 Peter). Also, he uses the Greek term “synagogue” in James 2:2 to describe their Christian assembly, which would suggest an earlier period in Christianity that was largely confined to Jewish circles.
- A date of AD 44-49 is given, which makes this the first New Testament book to be written.

4. Audience

- According to verse 1, James is writing “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.”

- So, he is writing to Jewish (i.e., “twelve tribes”) Christians (i.e., “my brothers” in v. 2) who have been scattered (Gk. *diaspora*) away from Palestine due to persecution (perhaps the persecution referenced in Acts 8:1 [Gk. *diaspeiro*]).
- For many of them, James would have formerly been their pastor. And so, with responsible and loving concern, he now seeks to pastor them from afar. And he does so with practical, concise, and picturesque language.

5. Purpose

- *Illustration:* Stephen Jory has been called Britain’s Greatest Counterfeiter. His infamous life of crime began in his early twenties when he bribed a perfumer in order to obtain the recipes for some of the best-selling perfumes. After mass producing the fake fragrance, Jory would sell it in designer bottles as the real thing. Reportedly he sold nearly \$500 million worth of phony perfume before being arrested. However his prison experience didn’t reform or deter Jory’s criminal lifestyle. After being release he began a counterfeit currency operation. He and his gang perfected the forgery of the British sterling pound in 20 pound denominations. Before Jory was captured in a police sting called Operation Mermaid (1998), his counterfeit currency had flooded the British markets. It is reported that his bogus currency made up two thirds of the total counterfeit bills in circulation between 1993 and 1998. So effective was his work that the Bank of England was forced to change the entire design of the 20 pound note and add more security to deter others from following in Jory’s footsteps.
- Counterfeits, forgeries, imitations, and knock-offs abound in every market and in all walks of life. Sadly, this also includes the church. Some who have professed faith in Christ are eventually discovered to be phonies and frauds. The Apostle John would lament, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19). Against such counterfeit faith, **the book of James was written to describe**

the nature of real faith and thereby give us a series of tests to identify and authenticate real faith.

- It is in the context of pressure that the true nature of our faith is especially evident. In the sunshine, we may be masterfully faking; but in the firing line, the mask often comes off. So, James writes to these persecuted believers and encourages them to “examine themselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5; 2 Peter 1:10) and to practice the marks of real faith.
- To put it in the vernacular, James essentially says, “Shut up! I don’t want to hear about your faith; I want to see it!” Therefore, James shows the difference between “hearing” and “doing” God’s Word (1:22-25), “saying” you are religious and practicing true “religion” (1:26-27), showing “partiality” and “loving your neighbor as yourself” (2:1-13), “dead faith” and faith that “works” (2:14-26), “earthy” and “demonic” wisdom and wisdom “from above” (3:13-18), “asking” God and asking the “right” way (4:1-3), “friendship with the world” and “enmity with God” (4:4), being “humble” and being “double-minded” (4:6-10; 1:6-8). James provides us with these striking contrasts so that we might evaluate ourselves to be sure that we’re not being duplicitous in our profession, but do indeed possess and are practicing real faith.
- One commentator puts it this way:

*This epistle sternly insists upon Christian practice consistent with Christian belief, heaps scathing contempt upon all empty profession, and administers a stinging rebuke to the readers’ worldliness. Its stress upon the gospel’s ethical imperative makes the epistle as relevant today as when it was first written. The presence of this practical epistle in the New Testament canon is a magnificent monument to the moral sensitivity and concern of the Christian church. (D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* [Chicago: Moody, 1979], 11).*

6. Outline — The Marks of Real Faith:

- Real faith endures in trials (1:1-12)

- Real faith escapes temptation (1:13-18)
- Real faith receives the Word (1:19-27)
- Real faith forsakes favoritism (2:1-13)
- Real faith practices good works (2:14-26)
- Real faith controls the tongue (3:1-12)
- Real faith produces godly wisdom (3:13-18)
- Real faith rejects worldliness (4:1-5:6): desires, attitude, conversation, planning, money
- Real faith evidences patience (5:7-12)
- Real faith participates in community (5:13-20)

EXCURSUS

Before we start next week to study the various marks of real faith, I want us to look at a parallel passage in Hebrews 3-4 that provides an exhortation similar to James to “examine [ourselves], to see whether [we] are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

- *The original situation* — The Jewish Christians were scattered from their homeland, were surrounded by both Jews and Romans who disdained them, and were wondering whether following Jesus was worth it. The author writes to affirm to them that Jesus is better and to challenge them to press on in following Him!
- *The contemporary challenge* — Hebrews 2:1; 3:6 — The author’s unmistakable thesis is that **real faith perseveres!**

See, within the umbrella of the unquestionable doctrine of eternal security, the Bible teaches both that God preserves His people and that His people will persevere. 1 Peter 1:5 says that we are “kept by the power of God through faith” (KJV).

- We are kept “by God” — preservation (cf. John 10:28-29; Romans 8:31-39; Philippians 1:6; cf. Jeremiah 32:40 with Luke 22:31-32 and Jude 24-25)
- We are kept “through faith” — perseverance (cf. Hebrews 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39).

We never need question God's preservation, as it's a key tenant of the New Covenant (cf. Jeremiah 31:31; 32:40). But especially within convenient, complacent, cold, calloused American Christianity, we need to hear the warnings and exhortations of God's Word to "examine our faith" and to "persevere in our faith."

So, how do we persevere in our faith?! The writer of Hebrews suggests two simple and practical methods.

1. Consider Christ (3:1-6)

a. How to consider Christ?

- "To give very careful consideration to some matter" (LN)
- To contemplate, to analyze, to evaluate
- To do the math and come to a conclusion

b. Why to consider Christ?

- "**Apostle**" — Jesus is the "sent one" (John 7:29; 17:3; 20:21; 1 John 4:14).
- "**High Priest**" — Jesus is able to sacrifice for us (Hebrews 2:17), serve us (Hebrews 2:18), intercede for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25), and advocate for us as our Lawyer (1 John 2:1).
- "**Builder**" — Jesus led a better "exodus" than Moses (Luke 9:28ff; cf. Matthew 16:18).
- "**Son**" — cf. Hebrews 1:1-5

So, do the math! Thoughtfully think about Jesus, compare Him with whomever and whatever you would like — who is like unto this Jesus?! Consider Him! Keep following Him!

2. Continue with Christ (3:7-4:19)

a. The peril of unbelief (3:7-19)

- **The path of unbelief** (vv. 7-11 [Psalm 95:7-11]) — The characteristics of unbelief are:
 1. Doubt — disbelieve God

2. Disdain — criticize God
3. Disregard — ignore God
4. Demand — use God
5. Disobey — rebel against God

- **The protection of belief** (vv. 12-19) — We may guard our faith by:

1. Taking heed to ourselves (v. 12) — Evaluate yourself to see if you are drifting away.
2. Encouraging one another (v. 13) — Remind each other that sin is deceptive and dulling.
3. Holding fast to the gospel (vv. 14-19) — Preach the gospel to yourself every day.

b. The possibility of rest (4:1-10)

- **An alarm** (vv. 1-2) — We may think we are okay and not be because we aren't believing the gospel.
- **An assurance** (vv. 3-10) — There is the real possibility of entering God's rest, pictured in the creation week, promised in God's Word, and illustrated in the weekly Sabbath.

c. The power for persevering (4:11-19)

- **The purpose of the tools (v. 11)**
 1. To help us discover our unbelief
 2. To help us deal with our unbelief
- **The list of the tools (vv. 12-19)**
 1. God's Word (v. 12)
 2. Judgment (v. 13)
 3. Prayer (vv. 14-19)

Hebrews 6:9-12; 10:39 — The life of real faith is a continual balance between restful confidence (i.e., "I'm okay!") and committed responsibility (i.e., "I must press on!"). May the God who gives real faith grace us to continue in it!