

Week 1: Introducing James

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[0 : 0 0] well if we could with the lord's help and the lord's guidance this evening turn to the letter of james letter of james as we begin our study of this letter james chapter 1 and i just want us to read the first verse james 1 verse 1 james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the 12 tribes in the dispersion greetings as those who live in the 21st century we live in a day of self-sufficiency where we can do everything ourselves from self-banking you can put in your checks and your cash into the bank or you can also attend a self-checkout and i suppose i was thinking about this that the acronym diy do it yourself it's broadened to mean far more than just doing a little maintenance around the house because nowadays there have never been so many how to books books which teach us how to do everything everything from from gardening to fixing our car to growing vegetables or cooking or cleaning or sewing whatever it is it's all there so that we know how to do it without the help of anyone else and you know that's how i'd like us to think of the letter of james i want us to think of it as the how-to book of christian living because if there were no christians around us and if there was no church to guide us or encourage us and direct us on how we ought to live and act as a follower of jesus christ we would struggle and we would struggle to apply the gospel to our lives and live out our faith in a manner which is distinct from the world around us yes we could say that we've denied self and we've taken up our cross and we've begun to follow jesus and that we've come to jesus for our forgiveness we have forgiveness of sins we have cleansing through the blood we believe the gospel and we believe the good good news story of god's salvation through jesus christ and that's good it's wonderful and it's amazing to have come face to face with our sin and our self and to bring it to jesus christ in the gospel but the question which james wants to address is what does the gospel look like in our everyday day-to-day lives what should a person who has been transformed by the grace and power of god look like living in a fallen world and i believe that that's why james wrote his book on how to christian living because as james says here in this introductory verse he says that he's writing to the 12 tribes in the dispersion and the phrase the 12 tribes is just a euphemism for the people of god but what had happened to the people of god was that they were part of this dispersion or the diaspora which literally means the scattering they had all been scattered and the dispersion was a term used to define or identify jews who had converted to christianity they'd converted out of judaism into christianity and they were now living

outside of outside in the land of palestine and the reason these jewish christians had been scattered or dispersed outside the land of palestine was because they would have been persecuted by jews who hadn't converted to christianity they were being persecuted and they were being driven out by their fellow country men and women whom they had grown up with and whom they knew they were being driven out because they had turned to jesus for their salvation and because this persecution and this dispersion because it had happened relatively quickly after the resurrection and ascension of jesus there were no churches in place for them there were no real structures set up to disciple these young christians because their faith was new their their conversion was recent and their love for the lord was was strong but they were living in a gentile world they were living in a hostile environment and one which didn't know the gospel it didn't know it yet and it's for this reason that james he was compelled to write this letter on the subject of practical christianity so that in the meantime while all these churches are being established and unrooted in all these dispersed areas outside the land of palestine these christians can be taught how to live out their faith in a fallen world and so as we begin our study of the letter of james i want us to think of this letter as the handbook to christian living because james's greatest concern is not information but application he wants us to be able to apply the gospel to our lives and live out our christianity in a practical way but before we come to look at all the practical lessons in the weeks to come all these lessons which james wants to present to us in his letter i'd like us to begin our study this evening by just asking three introductory questions who why and what who who was james why why did james write his letter and what what does james want to teach us who was james why did james write his letter and what does james want to teach us so we look first of all at who who was james who was james says in verse one james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the 12 tribes in the dispersion greetings now james begins his letter in the same manner as the apostle paul and the apostle peter because he begins by introducing himself to the recipients of his letter and that was the way in which letters were always written in the ancient world which as you know it's the opposite of the way we write letters or the way we would write we would write an email because when we write a letter on an email we begin with dear joe blogs blah blah blah from myrdo but in the ancient world the letter was always initiated by saying who it's from that's the way paul began his letter he says paul an apostle of jesus christ by the will of god to the churches that's the way peter begins his letter peter an apostle of jesus christ to those who are the elect exiles of the dispersion and the same is true for james james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the 12 tribes in the dispersion greetings but the issue arises when we don't know which james wrote this letter because there are so many people called james in the new testament and the author of this letter has he has been an area of debate

for centuries because james never specified who he was or what role he had within the church and even though we might be tempted to think well that it doesn't really matter which james wrote this letter we can just skip that wee bit but i think that when we understand the author of the letter or we understand the author of a book it helps us to understand the content of their work far better when we understand the person who penned it we understand what he's saying far better and so who who who was james who was james well it's interesting in acts chapter 1 in verses 13 and 14 it's the time when jesus has just ascended to heaven to the right hand of the father and all the apostles they've all gathered together in the upper room and we're told everyone who was present there we're told that peter and john and james and andrew philip and thomas bartholomew and matthew james the son of alpheus simon the zealot and judas the son of james and we're also told that all these with one accord they devoted themselves to prayer together with the woman and mary the mother of jesus and his brothers and in that upper room meeting the name james it's mentioned three times there was james the brother of john the son of zebedee there was james the son of alpheus and there was james the father of judas not iscariot and first of all it's unlikely that james the father of judas wrote this letter because he's only mentioned in order to differentiate the judas between judas the son of james or and judas iscariot jesus's betrayer so the other not so well known james was james the son of alpheus and he's only ever mentioned in the list of the apostles in the gospels you know when the disciples are called they gives the list of who he who jesus called and one was james the son of alpheus and so well we don't know enough about him and he's not well known enough to have been given this authoritative letter to persecuted christians but john calvin he believed that it was james the son of alpheus who wrote this letter and we're not sure why calvin believed this probably because james the son of alpheus was an apostle and calvin believed that well he has apostolic authority and we don't often like to disagree with calvin but it seems that his suggestion was wrong but what about the other james the more well-known james james the brother of john the son of zebedee he's the most prominent james in the gospels and as you know he was a fisherman called by jesus to be a fisher of men and you'll remember the occasion when james and john they were they were mending their nets and jesus he passed by and he said follow me and they began to follow jesus and james along with peter and john they were all part of this inner circle you remember the inner circle that was always with with jesus the inner circle of his friends they were privileged to witness the resurrection of jesus's daughter they were privileged to see the transfiguration of jesus and they were also privileged to be with jesus in the garden of gethsemane but the reason why we can't conclude that it was this james who wrote this practical letter is because he was the first of the disciples to be put to death in acts chapter 12 we're told that james was put to death by herod agrippa which was in the year

ad 44 which was also before this letter was written and so well that leaves us pretty much clueless as to who this james was because we concluded that it wasn't james the father of judas it wasn't james the son of alphas and it wasn't james the brother of john so who was it who was james well what's interesting is that during that upper room meeting with the apostles in acts chapter one there was one other james which wasn't mentioned by name and he's included in the statement mary the mother of jesus and his brother and he was included because jesus had a brother called james well technically he was his half brother because jesus didn't have a biological father he was conceived by the holy spirit but we know from the gospel accounts that jesus had four brothers there was james joseph judas and simon but the brothers of jesus they weren't always supportive of jesus's ministry in fact we're told in john's gospel that the brothers of jesus didn't believe in him they refused to believe in him and they refused to follow him which means that in his youth james the brother of jesus he certainly wouldn't have described himself as he does right here in this letter he would have never have said that he was the servant of god and of his brother the lord jesus christ and you know although we can only speculate it must have been difficult growing up with jesus in your home when you think about it to be faced with constant perfection and as a result you're always seeing your own failures you're living with a brother who never sinned he didn't answer back he didn't disobey his mother he always honored his father and he did as he was told and it must have been hard for these four other brothers and inevitably it brought jealousy and resentment and ultimately rejection of jesus but what's remarkable is that jesus didn't reject them and he certainly didn't reject james because in first corinthians 15 i know i'm throwing all these passages of scripture at you but in first corinthians 15 paul gives this list of when jesus was resurrected all the people he visited or he went to see and that when he rose from the dead he appeared to all these people and included in that list in first corinthians 15 was his brother james and you know such a personal experience with the resurrected christ his brother meeting with james it must have convinced james that his brother really was the savior of sinners and you know it's remarkable to think that james was so close to jesus for so many years and yet he rejected him he knew about him yet he didn't know him and i'm sure that many of us can say the same that we were brought up with jesus in our home brought up with jesus amongst our family where we often heard the name mentioned in family worship or we were when we were when we were in school we heard the name jesus or even when we were at work we heard people speaking about jesus jesus was all around us and he was so close to us he was in our home and in our families and yet in so many ways we were so far away from him and there were many years where we knew about jesus but we didn't know him we didn't know him like we know him now there were many years

years that we refused to follow jesus and to serve jesus but our desire now is to follow jesus and to serve jesus well what but what changed well what made the difference in our lives was it not what made the difference in james's life when jesus came to us personally and he revealed himself to us personally he made himself known personally and he made himself known to us as the savior and friend of sinners and like james we were once slaves to sin but now we confess that we are a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ but the other reason the letter of james would carry with it some authority and spiritual weight is because james became the leader of the church in jerusalem during the first general assembly the general assembly of the church which is recorded for us in acts 15 you could say that james was appointed the moderator in which he moderated the church in all her discussions at the jerusalem council discussions which were heated because of this increasing animosity between jews and christians and it's for this reason that the apostle paul he refers to james as the pillar the pillar in the christian church but what made james stand out as a pillar in the church and what makes any christian stand out as a pillar in the church is not their leadership skills but their humble and gracious character and that was true of james because history tells us that as a leader of the christian church he was hated by jews and he was hated so much so that the pharisees they threw him off the top of the temple and then they beat him to death but the story goes that as james was being beaten to death he followed the example of his brother by praying for his murderer and it's said that he prayed the same prayer that christ prayed father forgive them for they know not what they do and you know it's no wonder that james wrote such a practical letter to persecuted christians because he knew what it was like he knew what it was to be persecuted for righteousness sake but it seems that james's greatest desire was for the world to know about his brother and his lord not only by our mouths but also by our actions which brings us to our second introductory question why we've asked who but why why did james write his letter why did james write his letter james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the twelve tribes in the dispersion greetings we mentioned earlier that the phrase the twelve tribes it's a euphemism for the people of god they were converted jews who would certainly have been familiar with the concept of the twelve tribes the twelve tribes of israel which corresponded to the sons of jacob but as we said these converted jews were part of the dispersion part of the scattering who were living outside the land of palestine because of persecution and because this persecution and dispersion had happened soon after the resurrection as we said there was no churches there was no real structure for them in place to disciple these young christians their faith was new their conversion

[20 : 22] had just taken place but they were full of the lord but they were living in a gentile country and they were facing a hostile environment and because they were young christians without an established church and without structures and consecutive teaching well as you can imagine and as you can expect there were problems problems had arisen within the fellowship of god's people and it was not only causing division but it was also stunting spiritual growth because the christians in the church they weren't living up to what they professed to believe there were some who were facing temptations from the world and struggles with worldliness there were others who were straying from the fellowship of god's people thinking that they didn't need to attend church as often because they knew it all already there were some who couldn't control their tongue there were others who were only interested in a certain class and a certain type of people where they were showing favoritism towards the rich and excluding the poor and there was also some who were full of jealousy they were competing for positions within the church but the root cause of all their problems whether it was worldliness temptation gossip pride or jealousy the root cause was immaturity the root cause was immaturity they were immature in their faith and they needed to grow up yes they would have been relatively young in their faith but they weren't growing they weren't learning they weren't developing they weren't maturing instead they were only stunting their growth by all their distractions and as a result they were going they were going to have no impact upon the world around them that was already hostile to the gospel and so the message of james to the churches was simple and straightforward grow up grow up you know one commentator he put it so bluntly when he said spiritual maturity is one of the greatest needs in churches today too many churches are play pens for babies instead of workshops for adults he's blunt but that's what james wants us to avoid he wants us to avoid the play pen and develop as christians and grow and go on to maturity so that we in turn will be able to to teach other people to bring other people in and the emphasis which james stresses he says that we will become perfect that we will become perfect and james uses that word perfect he uses again and again throughout his letter you'll notice it when you you read through the letter the word perfect but james he's not talking in the sense of being sinless perfect without sin he's talking in the sense of maturing and growing and being balanced in our views of christianity and he actually expresses this longing right at the beginning read verse two he says counted all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing james wants us to progress in our christian lives so that we will become perfect men and women not sinless but mature christians who will make an impact upon a fallen world and you know this problem of immaturity it wasn't confined to the churches which james wrote to it was everywhere paul experienced the same troubles with when he wrote to the

corinthians and also to the philippians but it was the writer to the hebrews who wrote to encourage jewish christians who had converted to christianity and they were also being persecuted for their faith and the writer to the hebrews he wrote that because they were being persecuted he wrote to them because many of them were turning away they were turning away from christianity and backsliding into judaism they were going back into judaism but the reason they were backsliding says the writer to the hebrews and not going on to maturity was because they were neglecting the meeting together of god's people and i've said it before and i'll say it again this is where every christian should be on a wednesday night not because i'm preaching but because this is where the lord's people are to be found and the lord's people ought to be coming together like this around the word of god because it's that word which they cherish so dearly in their heart and i know that there are times that we can't make it or there are genuine reasons as to why we can't be here children and all these other things but you know from the moment i was converted i cannot understand any christian who has no desire and who makes no effort to be here on a wednesday night because as james will tell us in our study neglecting the meeting of the people of god will stunt our growth and it will lead to an instability in our christian life he says a double-minded man is unstable in all their ways and that's what the writer to the hebrews is also highlighting that because they neglected the meeting together of god's people they're stuck on the milk stuck drinking milk he says he says by now you ought to be teachers you ought to be passing it on to people you ought to be showing others the way to go but you need someone to come and teach you again the first principles of the bible you need milk not solid food and using the same word james uses the writer to the hebrews he encouraged all christians to go on to perfection to go on to maturity to grow in your faith to build upon the salvation that they've already received and enjoy through jesus christ and grow into mature christians who are willing to live out their faith and serve the lord in a practical manner although he thought it was a different james who wrote this letter calvin stressed in his commentary the importance of this letter for every christian he says that just as he opens his commentary on this he says this epistle is full of instruction on various subjects the benefit of which extends to every part of the christian life there are here he says remarkable passages on patience prayer to god the excellency and fruit of heavenly truth humility holy duties the restraining of the tongue the cultivation of peace the repressing of lusts and the contempt of the world we would do well says calvin to take heed to them and employ them in our lives and so in our introductory questions to studying the letter of james we've asked who wrote the letter of james we've concluded that it was the lord's brother we've asked why why did james write this letter

it was in order to encourage christians to go on to spiritual maturity but lastly i'd like us to ask what what does james want to teach us what does james want to teach us well apart from dealing with spiritual immaturity james wants to address the division which is often made between information and application when i was training to be a minister in the free church college ets as it is now it was always stressed to us that we have to strike the balance between information and application between drawing out from what the passage says all the things that will help increase our knowledge and our spiritual growth but also trying to balance it with how does this passage affect our day-to-day life and whether it affects the believer or the unbeliever and i always we were always taught to ask the question well what is the outworking of this passage going to look like how is the bible relevant to the listener in their present situation whatever that situation may be and as you can appreciate it's hard to balance information and application but for james it seems so simple because the letter it's full of memorable illustrations such as the rudder of the ship the tongue that set on fire the bit in the horse's mouth elijah the man who's so like us but james's letter it's also full of memorable phrases be a doer of the word not a hearer only a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways every good and every perfect gift is from above faith without works is dead we all remember these statements they've all stuck in our mind and from all these memorable statements we can see why james is one of the most quoted books of the new testament in fact it's because of these gems of wisdom you could say that the letter of james it has been likened to a new testament equivalent of the book of proverbs but not everyone was a fan of the letter of james the reformer martin luther regarded the letter of james as an epistle of straw he considered it to be worthless and that it should be ripped out of the bible because it's of no benefit to the christian of course martin luther's view was a total contradiction to his contemporary john calvin but the reason luther was very wary of the letter of james was because james doesn't mention the cross doesn't mention the death of jesus and he doesn't use any theological terms that would indicate its usefulness to the church but in luther's mind this epistle of straw it was the straw which broke the camel's back that the straw was to do with what james wrote about the balance between faith and works he had a massive issue with what james said about faith and works because james writes in chapter 2 he writes in chapter 2 if faith does not have works it's dead but someone will say you have faith and i have works show me your faith without your works and i will show you my faith by my works and unfortunately luther had misunderstood what james was teaching because as you know luther he had been embroiled in a battle with the roman catholic church over the issue of faith and works

where luther he had stressed that we are righteous in god's sight by our faith alone in christ alone and that our salvation is not based upon what we do but upon what jesus has done on our behalf it's not about our works it's about the work of christ on the cross but luther's dismissal of this letter proves that even the best of men are only men at best because james wasn't teaching works instead of faith as the catholics do and other religions do james was stressing works as a result of faith he was emphasizing that works are an outworking of our faith and so martin luther may have questioned james's theology but james's desire wasn't to produce a systematic theology like the apostle paul his desire was to produce a handbook on practical theology and although james didn't at all discredit the importance of systematic theology and knowing all the doctrines of the bible he certainly didn't want it to overshadow practical theology and the need to live out our faith in a fallen world because in james's mind he believed that it's good to have faith and it's good to enjoy all the doctrines of grace but what use is that faith to those around you if all it is is knowledge because the problem which can arise from gaining knowledge of the bible is that we do nothing with it and james writes his letter with a concern that christians can become content in their salvation we can fill our minds with knowledge resting upon the sovereignty of god and the result is lazy christianity a faith that doesn't have works it's not a sign of spiritual obesity it's actually a sign of spiritual immaturity because we're sitting back and doing nothing with our faith and so james says that we don't need a faith without works no we need a faith that works we need a faith that works and james puts it so bluntly to us that when he says that christians who do nothing with their faith he says they're dead christians not dead spiritually but they're dead in their activity for christ christians who just live their lives and have no real change and make no real impact upon their home or their workplace or their community james says you're a dead christian and it's blunt but sometimes that's what we need to hear because it's not all about information it's also about the application it's about applying the teaching of jesus to our lives and living out the gospel of course it's good for us to believe the gospel it's good for us to know the gospel it's good for us to be able to understand the gospel and all the benefits which the gospel provides for us it's good for us to know about atonement and reconciliation and redemption and propitiation and adoption and justification and sanctification and glorification it's good to know all these things and what they mean and how the lord has worked in our life how the lord is working in our life and how the lord will work in our life in the future but what concerns james is what about every day as we live out our faith in this world what makes us different from the world because we have been called out of darkness into the

marvellous light of the gospel we've been called to be holy men and women of god we've been chosen to serve the lord but how do we do that and how does that look what characteristics am I to possess as a christian what does christianity actually look like not what I think it looks like not what other people tell me it looks like but what does genuine biblical christianity look like and it's for that reason we're beginning our study of james so that we all ensure myself included this sermon was as hard to prepare as it was to preach but it's all so that we ensure that we do not have a faith without works but a faith that works and so in a word we're introducing james who was james james was the brother of jesus why did james write his letter in order to address spiritual immaturity and what what does james want to teach us that we need to ensure that we do not have a faith without works but a faith that works james a servant of god and of the lord jesus christ to the twelve tribes in the dispersion greetings may the lord bless these thoughts to us let us pray oh lord our gracious god we give thanks to thee that thou art the god who has revealed thyself to us in his word we thank thee oh lord that thou art the revelation made in and through thy son jesus but we bless thee oh lord that thou art the god who has also given to us a revelation of how we ought to live and how we ought to emulate christ the christ who loved us and the christ who gave himself for us help us then we pray thee ought to be stewards of thy word to pray as we were singing with the psalmist show me thy ways oh lord thy path so teach thou me and do thou lead me in thy truth therein my teacher be that we would see thy word as our teacher as the school master to lead us evermore to christ help us we pray to or be humble in thy presence help us to have a teachable spirit and help us lord to learn to learn to be more like jesus for he is the one who has promised that he who hath begun a good work in you will bring it on to completion in the day of christ jesus bless us lord we pray bless us in our being together bind us lord together with cords that cannot be broken go before us and do us good for jesus sake amen we shall conclude by singing in psalm 119 psalm 119 singing from the beginning page 399 from the beginning down to the verse marked six psalm 119 from the beginning blessed are they that undefiled and straight are in the way who in the Lord's most holy law do walk and do not stray.

[40 : 04] Blessed are they who to observe his statutes are inclined and who do seek the living God with their whole heart and mind. Down to the verse marked 6 of Psalm 119.

To God's praise. Blessed are they that judge defies and straight are in the way, who in the Lord's most holy law do walk and do not stray.

Blessed are they who to observe his statutes are inclined and who do seek the living God with their whole heart and mind.

Such in his ways to walk and they do know iniquity Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts carefully.

For thou thy statutes to observe the woods my ways tireless.

[41 : 57] Then shall I not be shamed when I thy precepts all respect.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.

Amen. Amen.