

JAMES 1:1  
**PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY—WHERE IT BEGINS**

Introduction:

The letter written by James is the most practical book in our New Testament. It addresses several of the themes that Jesus addressed in His Sermon on the Mount. It has much in common with the Wisdom section of the Old Testament—especially the book of Proverbs. However, you must keep in mind that everything in this book presupposes a personal relationship with Jesus.

What do we mean by a personal relationship with Jesus? A careful look at the opening verse in the book should help you understand this. It requires a little exploration into the life of the man who wrote this letter.

Consider the following facts about the human author of this little letter about Practical Christianity—

- James is the Greek form of the name Jacob. This is a reminder to us that the man who wrote this epistle was a Jewish man of the first century.
- This James is the younger brother of our Lord Jesus. This is what catches us by surprise. Our first inclination is to identify this letter with James the Apostle and the brother of the Apostle John. But this

James was a younger son of Mary and Joseph who grew up in the same family as Jesus.

- This James became the acknowledged pastoral leader of the Jerusalem church. This is true even though he did not become a follower of Jesus until after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Actually none of the family became disciples with exception of His mother Mary until after the resurrection. The Jude who wrote the little letter in the New Testament by that name was another brother in the same family.
- This James became prominent in the Acts of the Apostles—he may have become the actual pastor of the church. He was surely an influential figure at the church conference in Acts 15.
- His letter deals with the practical, every day practice, of Christianity. While most of the letters of Paul have a major exposition of doctrine, James deals with the issues that you deal with in your attempt to follow Jesus. He provides instruction on how to respond to suffering and disappointment, how to pray when you are sick, how to handle your tongue, how to relate to the world around you. Most of us have more struggle with the control of our tongues than we do with understanding the doctrine of election.

- The brief salutation to the letter gives us insight into this basic relationship that launches us into the Christian life. Before we weigh the counsel of the book with its many imperatives, we need to make sure that we have the right relationship with Jesus to make it possible.

#### I. IT BEGINS WITH A CONFESSION OF FAITH.

“James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” These words embody a bold confession of faith for anyone, but are really bold when you consider that they come from a man who grew up in the same family as Jesus. If their family was like most families, he probably slept in the same bed with this older Brother during his childhood and into his teen years. A bedroom for each child was not even a dream in a typical Galilean family of the first century. They ate at the same table, looked to the same mother for counsel and comfort, worked along side the same man—the father of James, Joseph.

Actually James has very little to say about Jesus in this letter, but what He does say is powerful and essential. We must be prepared to make the same confession if we are to be true disciples of Jesus.

##### 1. A confession concerning His relationship to God.

The confession may not be so obvious at first—it is hidden in the structure of the sentence. The salutation actually indicates that James was confessing

his older Brother as the equal of God. Whenever the Greeks wrote a sentence like this connected with the simple “and”, it put the two on the same basis. So James identifies himself as the servant of God “and” the servant of the “Lord Jesus Christ”. He is declaring the Lord Jesus and God the Father as equals. He is confessing his older Brother to be divine, even God. This was unthinkable for a Hebrew son of Jacob!

Can you handle that? Until you are able to confess that Jesus is God come in the flesh, you are not ready for the practical side of Christianity. The Christian life grows out of a personal relation with God through the Lord Jesus, and then it becomes practical.

There is another reference to the identity of Jesus as God in this letter. It comes in the first verse of the second chapter, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism.” The older King James is more faithful to the original text at this point. The newer version makes an adjective out of the noun “glory”. They render it “glorious”. “Glory” is actually a synonym for “God” in the Old Testament—and James is the one of the more Old Testament books of the New Testament. Here

James is declaring that his older Brother after the flesh is actually the “glory”, the very manifestation of the presence of God among His people. What is your personal confession of faith concerning Jesus? Who is He? What is His relationship to the Eternal? True disciples are prepared to bow and confess with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

2. A confession concerning His relationship to us.

James goes a step further in his confession. He confesses that Jesus has a special relationship to us. This relationship is summed up in the word “Lord”. This is not part of the personal name of Jesus, but is rather a confession of how James saw Him. While “Lord” is a precious name for God in the Old Testament, it is also an acknowledgment of the role James saw Jesus filling. He relates to us as Lord. This means that He has all authority and power over us. It means that we belong to Him.

Have you ever worked for a close relative, or a brother? Have you noticed how hard it is to call him “boss”? How could they be better than you, or have more authority than you—you have the same mother, for heaven’s sake! In understanding James you must recognize that he remained a skeptic about Jesus and His claims until He came out of the grave. He knew that his brother died on Friday, and he also knew that this same Jesus was alive on

Sunday. When he became convinced of the resurrection, he was ready to confess that Jesus is Lord—He is Lord over our lives and over the whole world.

Are you familiar with the promise that the Lord made through the Apostle Paul, “That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord”, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This was what James discovered—He personally believed in his heart that Jesus was raised from the dead, and began to publicly confess with his mouth that He is Lord, and when he did, he had more than a Brother—He had a Savior! Have you made this confession?

## II. IT BEGINS WITH THE COMMITMENT OF LIFE.

This salutation is more than a confession of faith; it reflects the true commitment of life. When you consider the physical relationship between James and Jesus, it is nothing short of remarkable. They were both conceived in the same womb, one by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and the other by the seed of Joseph, yet James makes this commitment of life to Jesus. It is summed up in two words—“Lord” and “servant”. When you take these two words in their first century context, you begin to understand a meaningful life commitment.

## 1. The commitment is made through SURRENDER.

Many of us mistakenly content ourselves with a commitment that does not include surrender. Someone has wisely written, “Commitment and surrender are two different things. Commitment is what I am promising to do for God. Surrender is placing myself and my life in His hands to do with as He pleases.”

Consider the word “Lord”. When Jesus is Lord in your life, you have personally surrendered to His lordship. None of us naturally live under His lordship. We came into the world with a natural inclination to make ourselves the lord and master of our lives. We are inclined to seek our own will and pleasure. Yet God the Father has established His Son Jesus as the only Lord. He did this when He raised Jesus from the dead, and exalted Him to His right hand in the heavens. James uses this title of his older Brother because he has surrendered his life to this eternal reality.

Have you surrendered to your life to His lordship? It involves giving up control of your life, and submitting to His rule over everything in your life. He is either Lord over all in your life or He is not lord at all.

Then focus on the word “servant” for a moment. Actually the Greek word could be translated slave, or bondsman. Our word servant does not quite

convey the significance of this word in this salutation. You can be a servant in our society and not be a slave. I can be your servant without giving up the rights of my life. I may serve you for eight hours a day, but then have control over the other sixteen hours of the day. Not so with a slave! When you are a slave, you have no rights. You belong to another and serve at his pleasure. You even live or die as it pleases him. You own nothing; control nothing; rather you live for the pleasure of your master. Does this describe your commitment to the Lord Jesus?

In the culture of the Roman world men became slaves unwillingly. The person may have been taken captive in warfare, and then made a slave of his conqueror. A family might sell a child into slavery because of economic conditions. A person might become a slave because of an inability to pay their debts. But no one becomes the slave of the Lord Jesus unwillingly! James had become the slave of his older Brother Jesus through a willing surrender of his life. When he became convinced that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead, he readily surrendered his life to the control and ownership of Jesus, and make it his goal in life to bring pleasure to his Lord.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones, the famous Methodist missionary to India, shared about a lady whose name was Mary. It had become her responsibility to care for a sister-in-law who was bedridden because of a severe accident. The sister-in-law was completely dependent on Mary—for everything. This included even helping her use the bedpan and matters of personal hygiene. After some months it really began to be repulsive. Her sense of duty had worn thin. She began to feel anger about having to fill this role for this sister in law. In anger she said to the Lord, “O Jesus, I am sick of this.” And Jesus replied: “Mary, I want to attend your sister-in-law, but I have no one to do it for me except you. Couldn’t you do this for my sake?” Mary responded gladly, “Oh, yes, I can do it for your sake. That transforms everything.” And it did!

This is where the Practical life begins. It begins with a commitment that involves the surrender of life to His lordship, a surrender to be His bonds slave.

## 2. The commitment is expressed in SERVICE.

Service is what slaves do! They do whatever they are assigned by their master, and they do it for the pleasure and profit of their master. This is how James identifies himself—his whole life is devoted to serving his older Brother, to do whatever will please or profit him.

This works itself out into the flow of our daily lives.

Dr. Howard Hendricks, the popular professor and preacher, provides us with a helpful illustration of this. He was caught in one of those memorable Dallas-Fort Worth Airport experiences. His plane set out on the tarmac for three hours awaiting clearance to take off because of bad weather. Having been in such a situation more than once, I can identify with him. To put it mildly the natives will become restless when trapped in a warm plane for an extended time. Many of them are missing important business appointments, speaking engagements, and connecting flights and such things. Even though the airline does not control the weather, the natives will hold them responsible for their inconveniences.

Dr. Hendricks was impressed with the manner in which one flight attendant handled the situation. She stayed cool, calm, and graceful through the whole ordeal. She responded to each angry question with a kind answer. She responded to angry looks with a smile. Hendricks was amazed at her behavior under such stress.

As he deplaned, the professor made it a point to speak to this attendant. He introduced himself and said, "May I have your name? I want to write a note to your boss at American Airlines, commending your service and attitude."

Her response impressed him even more: “That’s kind of you. I appreciate it. But I don’t work for American Airlines. I am serving the Lord.” She was like James—the slave of Jesus Christ. She expressed this relationship in the daily responsibilities of her life. What she did for the angry traveling public was actually done as service to the Lord.

Is that the way you see your life? Do you see yourself as the slave of Jesus Christ? Do you see yourself serving Him as Lord through your job at the bank? Is that classroom the place where you serve the Lord? Is your home your place of service to the Lord?

When you have such a relationship with the Lord Jesus, then the other counsel of this letter will begin to make sense. He numerous imperatives will not seem like too much. If you can give the confession of faith that this younger brother of Jesus gave, and you have joined him in his commitment to the Lord Jesus, then you will be ready to see the practical parts of your life transformed.