

## James the Just

### VERSE

James is my favorite book in the Bible. Most people think it was written by Jesus's disciple James - one of the sons of Zebedee. It was actually an altogether different James who is responsible for the epistle - James, Jesus's brother. Jesus of course had four brothers the Gospels tell us - James, Judas, Joseph, and Simon. He also had numerous sisters, though unfortunately they are not named in the Gospels.

When I say James wrote this epistle, I don't mean he himself wrote it but that it was written for him. James, like his brother, indeed like nearly every Jewish peasant of the time, could likely neither read nor write. Scholars estimate that only about 10% of Jews in first century Palestine were literate. Education and literacy were simply not priorities for kids like Jesus and James, children of day laborers barely eking out a living in the backwoods of Galilee.

But the overwhelming consensus is that this epistle, though written after his death in 62 AD, can be traced back to James the brother of Jesus. In fact it was very likely adapted from a sermon that James gave late in his life. That makes this an extremely important text, perhaps the most important in the entire New Testament.

Because, James was more than just Jesus's brother. He was the undisputed leader of the movement Jesus had left behind. As the head of the Assembly in Jerusalem - the Mother Assembly as it was called - James maintained an overarching authority over all the other assemblies - or churches - in the holy land and the diaspora. The first community of Christians addressed James as "The Bishop of Bishops."

In Jerusalem, the city he had made his home after his brother's crucifixion, James was known to all as James the Just. He was celebrated even by his enemies for his unsurpassed piety and his tireless defense of the poor. He himself owned nothing, not even the clothes he wore—simple garments made of linen, not wool. He drank no wine and ate no meat. He took no baths. No razor ever touched his head, nor did he smear himself with scented oils. Tradition says he spent so much time bent in worship, beseeching God's forgiveness for the people, that his knees grew hard as a camel's.

Even the Jewish authorities praised James for his faith and piety. They may not have accepted James's beliefs about his brother being the messiah, but they respected James and viewed him as a righteous and honorable man. So much so that when he was murdered by the High Priest Ananus in the year 62 AD, the reaction of the city's Jews – not its Christians but its Jews – bordered on rebellion.

Even the New Testament confirms James's preeminent role in the Christian community. It is James who is usually mentioned first among the pillars of the church James Peter and John. It is James who personally sends his emissaries to the different assemblies scattered across the diaspora. It is James to whom Peter reports his activities before leaving Jerusalem for Rome. It is James who is the presiding authority over the Apostolic Councils we read about in the Book of Acts, James who speaks last during its deliberations, and James whose judgment over the matters being discussed is final.

To understand the importance that James played in the early Church consider this: Jesus led the Jesus movement for barely three years. James led it for more than thirty years.

Yet despite all this, James the Just has been all but lost to us. Most people - most Christians - have no idea who he is. They've never heard of him.

Why? Well partly it has to do with the whole brother of Jesus thing. The truth is that lots of Jesus' family members played significant roles in the early church. Jesus's cousin Simeon, son of Clopas, succeeded James as head of the Jerusalem assembly, while other members of his family, including two grandsons of Jesus's other brother, Judas, maintained an active leadership role throughout the first and second centuries of Christianity.

But by the third and fourth centuries, as Christianity gradually transformed from a heterogeneous Jewish movement with an array of sects and schisms into the imperial religion of Rome, James's identity as Jesus's brother became an obstacle for those who advocated the perpetual virginity of his mother Mary. A few overly clever solutions were developed to reconcile the immutable facts of Jesus's family with the inflexible dogma of the church. There was, for example, the well-worn argument that Jesus's brothers and sisters were Joseph's children from a previous marriage, or that "brother" in the New Testament actually meant "cousin." It doesn't. Regardless, the end result was that James's role in early Christianity was gradually diminished.

But I think the real reason we have pretty much forgotten about James the Just has less to do with his status as Jesus' brother than it does with the radical ideas we read in his much maligned and, let's face it, rarely read epistle.

At its heart, the epistle represents a very public argument that James was having with Paul about salvation and grace. See Paul thought that all you needed for salvation was faith.

"One is not justified by works but only through belief in Jesus Christ, Paul says in Galatians." (Galatians 2:16).

James emphatically rejects Paul's notion that faith alone engenders salvation. "Can belief save you?" he retorts in his epistle. "Even the demons believe—and shudder!" ( James 2:14,19).

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that "a man is justified by faith apart from works" (Romans 3:28).

James calls this the opinion of a "senseless person," countering that "faith without works is dead" ( James 2:26).

"Show me your faith without your works," James says, "and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

Now this argument between faith and works has been going on for about 2000 years now and there's no way I'm getting myself in the middle of it. Except to say this: that in any argument over what Jesus may or may not have intended I would probably side with the guy who bunked with him for most of his life.

What I am more interested in is what exactly James means when he says "works." On this point the epistle is crystal clear: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no works?" James argues. "Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by works, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

James's entire epistle is brimming with passionate concern for the plight of the poor and oppressed. This, in itself, is not surprising. The traditions all paint James as the champion of the destitute and

dispossessed; it is how he earned his nickname, "James the Just." The Jerusalem Assembly was founded by James upon the principle of service to the poor. Anyone who wanted to join the community had to sell all their possessions and give the money to the poor. In fact, the first followers of Jesus who gathered under James's leadership in Jerusalem did not call themselves Christians – a derogatory term that seems to have first arose in Antioch in the mid 50s. Rather James' community referred to itself collectively as "the poor." That's right, the very first term to designate the followers of Christ was not "Christian" but rather "the poor."

It was James's radical defense of the poor and powerless that led to his murder in the first place. It all began when the High Priest Ananus concocted a scheme to seize for himself the tithes that were the sole source of income for the lower-class village priests. That did not sit well with James the Just who condemned the avarice of the priestly class as strongly as his brother did when he was alive. And, as with his brother, that condemnation led to his death.

So we shouldn't be surprised by the epistle's overwhelming focus on the poor. What is perhaps more surprising about James's epistle is its bitter condemnation of the rich and powerful. "Come now, you wealthy ones, weep and howl for the miseries that are about to come upon you," James says. "Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and the venom within them shall be a witness against you; it shall eat your flesh as though it were fire" (James 5:1–3).

Now this condemnation of wealth and power may sound extreme but the truth is James is merely echoing the words of his brother who said "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you laughing now, for soon you will mourn" (Luke 6:24-25).

That part of Jesus' message has never been all that popular with the rich and the powerful no matter how much they otherwise loooooove Jesus. And it still isn't.

How else to explain the popularity of millionaire megachurch pastors like Joel Olsteen or TD Jakes and their promotion of what has been dubbed the "prosperity Gospel" the chief message of which seems to be that that what Jesus *really* wants for you is a really nice car.

How else to explain politicians like Congressman Roger Marshall whose rationale for repealing A.C.A., and thus denying health care to millions who could not otherwise afford it is to shrug and claim that "Just like Jesus said, 'The poor will always be with us.'"

How to explain the defense of Roy Moore from folks like the state's auditor Jim Ziegler, who excused Moore's pedophilia and serial child molestation by arguing that, "Mary was a teenager and Joseph was an adult when they became parents of Jesus."

How else to explain Religious Right leaders like Franklin Graham who justify the government's draconian restrictions on immigration to the US by arguing that "God also does extreme vetting regarding who He allows to spend eternity with him" so then why can't the US do the same to refugees?

How else to explain that more than ¾ of White Evangelicals in this country support a ban on refugees – three-quarters of those who say they follow Jesus also want to close our shores to starving orphans and widows fleeing genocide.

On this point, Pope Francis is correct when he said that "It's hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone

seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of help.”

In fact he put it succinctly: “it is better to be an atheist than a hypocritical Christian.”

All of which brings us back to James and his problematic epistle. For if James is right that we must show our faith through our works - that indeed faith without works is dead - how are we as people of faith to respond

When a child is forced to grow up in poverty and pain.

When an immigrant is told he or she does not belong here.

When a gay lesbian bisexual or transgendered person is denied their basic human rights.

When an abused woman is told that to keep her mouth shut because we just don't believe her.

When a self-ascribed gatekeeper of salvation claims to speak for God while spewing hatred and violence against the weak and the powerless.

How shall we respond? We shall respond with the words of James the Just, brother of the Lord.

“Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”