

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

During my 20+ years of pastoral ministry, there has been a dramatic shift that has taken place in the culture at large along with the attitude towards Christianity. Where Christianity used to be a respected religion, it slowly became irrelevant. It was one more choice among the many. People could believe what they wanted to and no longer could people determine if Christianity was true. Being a pastor was a respectable occupation.

Today, there is increased hostility. People don't perceive churches and Christians to be good for the world. Instead, Christians are seen as a threat to the social good. Christian beliefs are perceived to be intolerant, even hateful towards those who disagree.

During the 1980s, many Christians saw a change taking place in the broader culture. Attitudes and beliefs were increasingly secular, and Christians responded with political movements like the Moral Majority led by leaders such as Baptist minister Jerry Falwell Sr.

But today, Christians are struggling with all sorts of issues. No longer the majority, Christians radically disagree with one another on how to engage the culture, how to do Christian ministry, and how the church should function. People don't argue about theology but about methodology. They leave churches over programs and style rather than substance. What many Christians today don't realize is that they are acting a lot like the people in the book of James.

The letter of James was written for precisely this reason: people who had been part of the dominant cultural religion – Judaism – had come to see that Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life. But with this change came a loss of social standing. As a result, the early Christian movement faced a threat both from outside and within: would they conform to the patterns of the world or would they fight against it?

Today, Christians are struggling with these exact questions. Should we be more accommodating to the culture or should we be cultural warriors? And into this situation, James comes to speak to us with some profound insights. For these reasons we are going to journey through James.

Who should we listen to?

Today, there are two dominant voices that are seeking to influence Christianity. First is the culture. The broader culture is telling Christians to get on the right side of history. Embrace the changes or else be swept away into irrelevance. But what these voices fail to appreciate is that the same thing was being told to the early Christian movement, and we are still here today. Accommodate, they say. But accommodation has never resulted in a stronger Christian movement, but a weaker one.

The other voice comes from the culture warriors. It says that we need to conserve what was lost. Be more political. Be more aggressive and fight against the cultural voices. Don't succumb to the culture. Fight it.

But between these voices stands the voice of James. James doesn't come to assert his prominence or power or position in the Church. He just comes and says, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Most today believe that this is James, the half brother of Jesus. And for good reason. While he was a leader in the church and we hear him in Acts 15 make strong statements about how to include non-Jews into the Christian movement, he had come to faith after Jesus' death. The language of James's speech in Acts 15 has many similarities to this book. This James knew his half-brother's teachings well and was a strong force in early Christianity.

The other James could be the apostle James, who was a strong witness for Christ and was killed for his faith in the early 40s. He had been with Jesus from the earliest of days and heard his teachings when Jesus had given his Sermon on the Mount as we have it in Matt. 5-7.

I don't think it makes a difference to know which James wrote this book. What is important is that this James was close to Jesus, heard the teachings of Jesus, and had embraced them fully after the resurrection.

James calls himself a servant – literally a slave. He embraces his identity as one who is under the Lordship of the living Christ. He has fully embraced the teachings of Jesus and has incorporated them so deeply into what he teaches that you can't help but notice that James is a reiteration of the words of Jesus. Just consider how James says almost the exact same thing as Jesus:

The greatest command is to love your neighbour (Jas. 2:8; Matt. 22:39)

Exalt yourself and you'll be humbled (Jas. 4:6-10; Matt. 23:12)

Don't take oaths (Jas. 5:12; Matt. 5:33-37)

Don't judge (Jas. 4:11-12; Matt. 7:1-5)

Moth & rust destroy riches (Jas. 5:2; Matt. 6:19)

The Lord's coming is near (Jas. 5:8-9; Matt. 24:33)

Or consider the examples of James that parallel Jesus's teachings:

Rejoice in trials (Jas. 1:2; Matt. 5:11-12)

Maturity is the goal of trials (Jas. 1:4; Matt. 5:48)

Ask a good God for good gifts (Jas. 1:5; Matt. 7:7)

Be doers, not just hearers of the word (Jas. 1:22; Matt. 7:24-27)

Keep the whole law (Jas. 2:10; Matt. 5:19)

Act on your faith (Jas. 2:14-26; 7:21-23)

Peacemakers are blessed (Jas. 3:17-18; Matt. 5:9)

You can't serve two masters (Jas. 4:4; Matt 6:24)

James, you see, has become obedient to faith. He sees himself as a servant. He cares nothing about position or status in terms of how close he was to Jesus. Instead, he sees himself as a servant, a slave to the living Christ and conforms his whole life to him.

So when we think about who we should listen to, the voices around us will call for our attention. But James says, "Listen to me as I have listened to Christ." The voice that we need to listen to today aren't the voices of media, pundits, cultural engineers, or elites. We need to listen to the voices that have listened to Christ, embraced his teachings, and lived them out.

Who are we?