

James: The Practical Christian

Old Camel Knees

James 1:1

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Old Camel Knees

Scripture

For most of this past year we have studied Paul's letter to the Galatians on Sunday mornings. Galatians is a book that emphasizes Christian *doctrine*. As we studied Galatians we learned what we are to believe about the gospel. Hopefully, we grew in our understanding of the gospel.

So, now it seems appropriate to me for us to spend the next few months studying a book of the Bible that emphasizes Christian *practice*. I plan to study the letter of James, which will help us put into practice what we believe. I am hoping that as a result of studying the letter of James we will learn how to live in light of what we believe.

So, with that in mind, let's read James 1:1:

**¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.**
(James 1:1)

Introduction

In his book *The Mind of Watergate* psychiatrist Leo Rangell attempts to analyze the psyche of Richard Nixon and several of his closest men. The book contains a transcript of the verbal investigation between Senator Baker and young Herbert L. Porter. Here is a brief segment of that account exactly as it transpired:

Baker: Did you ever have any qualms about what you were doing? . . . I am probing into your state of mind, Mr. Porter.

Porter: (Uncomfortably) I was not the one to stand up in a meeting and say that this should be stopped. . . I mean. . . I kind of drifted along.

Baker: At any time did you ever think of saying, “I do not think this is quite right, this is not quite the way it ought to be.” Did you ever think of that?

Porter: Yes I did.

Baker: What did you do about it?

Porter: I did not do anything.

Baker: Why didn't you?

Porter: (After evidence of much inner thought on his face) In all honesty, probably because of the fear of group pressure that would ensue, of not being a team player.¹

Porter's answer continues to haunt us to this very day. How much of that whole ugly nightmare between the break-in in June 1972 to the resignation of President Nixon over two years later would never have happened if there had been one person with the integrity and courage to stand alone? What if the refusal to compromise one's personal integrity had been stronger than the desire to be loyal to the man at the top?

What was missing at Watergate? One word: Integrity! It was an all-out integrity crisis. People of true integrity are an endangered species not only in the leadership of this nation, but also among ordinary people like you and me. And the issues at stake are not always classified. Sometimes personal integrity is sacrificed for the most trivial of reasons.

Many years ago I read about a lawyer in his brand new office on the first day of his new practice. He saw a prospective client walk in the door. He decided he'd better look busy. So he picked up the phone and started talking, “Look, Harry, about that amalgamation deal. I think I better run down to the factory and handle it personally. Yes, I'm sure. No, I don't think \$3 million will swing it. We better have Rogers from Seattle meet us there. OK. I'll call you back later. Bye!”

He put the phone back in its cradle, looked up at the visitor, and said, “Oh! Good morning! How can I help you?”

¹ Leo Rangell, *The Mind of Watergate* (New York, NY: Norton Publishers, c1980).

The visitor said, “You can’t help me at all. I’m from the phone company, and I’m just here to hook up your phone!”

Although stories like this are funny, the increasing loss of integrity today is no laughing matter. Where is the man or woman of integrity today? Our world needs persons with integrity. Not persons who are perfect. But persons willing to stand alone—to pay a price and even to suffer loss for what he or she believes.

A person of integrity is hard to find. And so today I want to introduce you to such a person. His name is James. James lived in the first century. In his generation some called him *James the Just* because of his steadfast Christian character.

But James’ integrity was an exception in his day as well. In fact, he found himself surrounded by many whose Christian profession did not match their practice. And his heart was broken by the integrity crisis he saw in his day.

So in order to help his fellow Christians know how to have a faith that really works, how to live with integrity, how to live the practical Christian life, he wrote what was probably the first book of our New Testament, this little book we call “James.”

This book is not one of the more popular New Testament books. It’s been called the “neglected” epistle. And the “persecuted” epistle. Even such a giant of the faith like Martin Luther called it “a right strawy epistle”!

One of the reasons James has suffered so many hard blows is because he is so intensely practical. He speaks to us where we live. James is a man who insists on integrity and authenticity in our lives. He is against sham and show and pretense.

He is saying in this book that we must learn how to translate our precious creeds into practical conduct. He wants a professing Christian to be a practical Christian.

Lesson

One of the reasons James insists that real faith should change our lives is because James’ faith transformed his own life. And so

before we begin to study his message together, I want to take you on a journey back in time to observe the development of James' own faith. I want to acquaint you with the man who signs his name in verse 1: **“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .”**

There are four different men with the name of **James** listed in the New Testament. And it is the studied opinion of most New Testament scholars that the **James** who wrote this letter was literally the half-brother of Jesus Christ. He was born and raised in the same family as Jesus of Nazareth. His parents were Joseph and Mary. Perhaps he even bore a physical resemblance to Jesus.

Let us learn more about **James** as we look at the different stages of his life. I would like to look at:

1. James, the doubting skeptic,
2. James, the humble believer, and
3. James, the righteous leader.

I. James, the Doubting Skeptic

First, let's begin by looking at James, the doubting skeptic.

Think for a moment about the early experience of James with Jesus. As young boys I'm sure they played together in the streets. They worked side by side in Joseph's carpenter shop. They may have even shared a room together. If you take the list of Mary and Joseph's children in Matthew 13 to be chronological, that would mean that James was the first child born after Jesus. The people of Nazareth said of Jesus, “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?” (Matthew 13:55).

Those of you raised in families with older brothers don't have to have a whole lot of input on what it's like to have an older brother. Some of you were older brothers. Younger brothers have been known to give very affectionate names to their older brothers. Names like “Adolph Hitler”! Big brothers don't baby-sit; they guard you. Big brothers don't take you to the movie; they march

you. Big brothers don't play with you; they let you play with them. That's what it's like at times to live under the rule of a big brother.

And James' big brother was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ! Jesus never sinned. He always came when his mother called him the first time. He always washed his hands before dinner. He always picked up his socks off the floor. He always washed the ring out of the tub. He always went to bed right away when Mary or Joseph said it was time to go to bed.

Now, if you're James, that doesn't endear you to your older brother, does it? Not only are you the little brother but you have a big brother who never—and I mean never!—does anything wrong!

And then that big brother goes away for a while, and when he comes back, he announces that he is the Son of God! He is the Messiah sent from heaven to save sinners and restore men and women into a living relationship with God. How do you think James felt toward his big brother?

For whatever reason, James as a youngster did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior sent from God. In John 7:5 we are told that “even his own brothers did not believe in him.”

Even though James grew up with Jesus, somehow James just could not believe Jesus was that different than he was. He denied Jesus' deity. He did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah of God.

For James there was an extended period in his life, as there may have been in yours, of spiritual confusion regarding the person of Jesus. He knew what it was like to think that Jesus was not for real. He knew what it was like to be a doubting skeptic.

In his book titled *The Case for Christ*, former *Chicago Tribune* journalist Lee Strobel, who is now a pastor, writes:

For much of my life I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist. To me, there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, of ancient mythology, or primitive superstition. How could there be a loving God if he consigned people to hell just for not believing in him? How could miracles contravene the basic laws of nature?

Didn't evolution satisfactorily explain how life originated? Doesn't scientific reasoning dispel belief in the supernatural?

As for Jesus, didn't you know that he never claimed to be God? He was a revolutionary, a sage, an iconoclastic Jew—but God? No, that thought never occurred to him! I could point you to plenty of university professors who said so—and certainly they could be trusted, couldn't they? Let's face it: even a cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates convincingly that Jesus had only been a human being just like you and me, although with unusual gifts of kindness and wisdom.

But that's all I had ever really given the evidence: a cursory look. I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism—a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I had a strong motivation to ignore them: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to abandon if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus.

As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people.

Or so I thought.²

Are you like Lee Strobel, a doubting skeptic? Are you like James, a doubting skeptic? Maybe you are. If you are, I would like you to consider what happened next.

Because something happened! Something happened to Lee Strobel that changed his view of Jesus. Something also happened to James that changed his view of Jesus.

For when you turn from the Gospels to the book of Acts you find that James became a humble believer!

II. James, the Humble Believer

So, now, let's look at James, the humble believer.

² Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1998), 15.

In Acts 1, we find James, the other brothers of Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and other believers assembled in a prayer meeting in an upper room. The question is, “What changed him?” What happened to cause this man who, during the life of Jesus, denied his deity and would not believe him to be the Messiah sent from God, to now number himself among Jesus’ disciples?

The answer is found in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7. There, Paul gives us a list of those people to whom Jesus appeared after his Resurrection. Paul tells us that after Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, he paid a very special visit to James, his brother. He writes that Jesus “appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.” Then Paul singles out a special appearance of Jesus: “Then he appeared to James.”

What a scene that must have been! We don’t know where or how Jesus appeared to him. We don’t know what Jesus said to his younger half-brother at that time. But I’m sure it was a very emotional scene. A time when Jesus shared words of love and understanding. It is quite clear that in that encounter with his resurrected half-brother, James became a Christian. The brother became a believer. The skeptic became a saint.

With this background in mind, notice now the deep significance of James’ words in verse 1. He does not mention that he grew up in the same home with Jesus. No claim to fame based on the fact that he had an intimate association with Jesus during his boyhood. In fact his only claim to recognition is that he be seen as **a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**—his brother!

Why doesn’t he say that he is Jesus’ brother? One reason is because he knows now that his real relationship with Jesus is not physical. It is spiritual. It wasn’t made possible by Mary, the same mother, but only by the grace of God—the same heavenly Father.

And dear brothers and sisters, that is the same grace that God showed toward you and me in our unbelief and skepticism. There was a day when, by the grace of God, we encountered the resur-

rected Jesus Christ. The reason you and I were changed from doubting skeptics into humble believers is because of an encounter with the resurrected Jesus by the grace of God the Father.

James could have said he was Jesus' brother. But he didn't. If you know James, that doesn't surprise you. That would be the ultimate in name dropping. And that's one of the things we will see later that James addresses in this book. He exposes that kind of phoniness for what it really is.

The final account of James that we find in the Scripture shows him to be a righteous leader.

III. James, the Righteous Leader

Finally, let's observe James, the righteous leader.

As you read through the book of Acts, you find that this man James became one of the most significant leaders in the early church.

In Acts 12 when Peter was released from prison, one of the men he sought out was James.

In Acts 15, which was the first great church council, this man James chaired that meeting.

In Galatians 1 Paul says that when he came to Jerusalem he saw only the apostle Peter and James—the Lord's brother.

As I said earlier, he was sometimes called *James the Just*. Why? Because he was known as a man of great integrity. A righteous man, honest and fair.

The church historian, Eusebius, tells us that one of the other nicknames of James was that of *Old Camel Knees*. Believe it or not, that was a term of affection. Evidently James was known for being on his knees in prayer so often and so long that the people said his knees became worn like the knees of a camel. So they called him *Old Camel Knees*.

The reality of James' faith was proven not only by his life but also by his death. Josephus, the Jewish historian of that generation, tells us that in the year 62 AD James was cruelly put to death for

his faith in Jesus. He died by stoning. The details of his death are vivid and extremely sad. James was willing not only to live for Jesus but even to die for him—this one who had been his brother.

Conclusion

But before he was martyred, God directed him by the Holy Spirit to write this small book we are going to study called James. Its theme can be summarized in one simple but life-changing truth: *It is not enough for you to profess a belief in Jesus unless that belief does not show itself in your life.*

When we come to James chapter 2 we will find that James writes that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (2:17). James is saying that your faith is not real if it does not work itself out practically in your life, that an orthodoxy that confesses is worthless if it is not matched with a conduct that works. Real faith always produces genuine works. The person who has truly found the way will genuinely walk in it.

James has in mind those who have become blind to or unconcerned about the contradiction between their profession and their practice. Those people who come to church Sunday after Sunday professing the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet deny by their activities throughout the week that belief which they so staunchly profess. Those who find it very easy to turn their backs on the needs of the poor or less fortunate or less educated or less physically or culturally attractive. Those who profess the name of Christ with their tongue on one day and then use that same tongue to destroy someone the next. James’ purpose is to challenge us to live in ethical conformity with our doctrinal confession.

Our world needs men and women of integrity. Men and women willing to pay the price! Willing to go the distance! Willing to stand alone! For the impact of a life of integrity can overcome the impact of hypocrisy.

Almost 200 years ago in Germany, there was a young Jewish boy who had a profound sense of admiration for his father. The life

of the family centered on the acts of piety and devotion prescribed by their religion. The father was zealous in attending worship and required the same from his children.

While the boy was a teenager the family was forced to move to another town in Germany. In the new location there was no synagogue and the pillars of the community all belonged to the Lutheran church. Suddenly the father announced to the family that they were all going to abandon their Jewish traditions and join the Lutheran church.

When the stunned family asked “why?” the father explained that it was necessary to help his business. The young boy was bewildered and confused. His deep disappointment soon gave way to anger and an intense bitterness that plagued him throughout his life. He left Germany and went to study in England.

There he sat daily in the British Museum formulating his ideas and writing a book. In that book he introduced a new world and life view. He conceived of a movement that was designed to change the world. In that book he described religion as an “opiate for the masses” that could be explained totally in terms of economics.

Today there are millions of people in the world who still live under that system invented by this embittered man. His name, of course, is Karl Marx. And the influence of his father’s hypocrisy is still being keenly felt around the world.

The book of James has something to say to all of us. For this side of heaven all of us, me included, have a tendency to experience that discrepancy between what we profess to believe and what we practice.

May God use this book of James by his Holy Spirit to change our lives so that we might develop a living faith and become practical Christians. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

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PRAYER:

Our Father we are so grateful that in your divine wisdom you have provided for us the book of James in which we can find guidance and direction for the practical decisions of daily life. Lord, I pray that as we embark upon this journey together through the book of James that we will see it not as a rose garden but as an obstacle course. One that firms up our faith. One that stretches our spiritual muscles.

And, Father, I pray for those here today who sense their need for Jesus Christ. Those who see the depth of their moral inconsistency and their need for a Savior. Cause them at this very moment to confess in prayer, “Lord, I admit to you all my hypocrisy and sin. I thank you, Jesus, for dying for my sins. Please forgive me for all of my sins. I now acknowledge you as my Savior. I believe that you died and rose from the dead for me. Grant me the gift of faith and repentance today.”

For all of us, Lord Jesus Christ, I pray that as a result of our study that our faith will be clothed in genuine works to the glory of God. Amen.

CHARGE:

John Wesley once said that the problem of problems is getting Christianity into the life of a person. It’s very easy to talk the talk. But it’s not so easy to walk the walk. The pressure for us to compromise is constant. And yet it is because the stakes are so high and the consequences are so far-reaching that I challenge you to join with me on this journey through James as we seek to develop a faith that really works.

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.