

GROWING

SLOWLY

WISE

Growing Slowly Wise
Building a Faith that Works

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JAMES—A SERVANT OF THE LORD

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

—James 1:1

If I were James I would have introduced myself as “James, the brother of Jesus,” for that’s exactly who he was. The Gospel writers affirm it (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), and Eusebius, the fourth-century “Father of Church History,” confirms their witness: “Then there was James, who was known as the brother of the Lord; for he too was called Joseph’s son.”

Furthermore, I would have presented my credentials, for James was a distinguished and celebrated leader in the early church. According to Eusebius, the apostles, shortly before they were scattered by Saul’s persecution, “chose James the

Righteous as Bishop of Jerusalem.” Luke, in the book of Acts, describes James in that role, guiding the church in Jerusalem through her formative stages with profound wisdom and practical insight. On one occasion, at the first gathering of church leaders with certain apostles present, James’ opinion, rather than the apostles’, had the greater weight (Acts 15:1–29).

Yet James, resisting the impulse to pull rank and drop The Name, in the “humility that comes from wisdom,” describes himself merely as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” James was a simple, modest man.

Humility is hard to come by these days. More than we care to admit it, many of us in leadership are in it for the recognition, the accolades, the personal honors, and prestige the positions bestow on us. Indeed, how many occupations offer so many opportunities to look good, to gain glory, to be deferred to, to be admired, to show how wise and knowledgeable we are? We casually mention our education, our degrees, our academic accomplishments, our publications, hoping to impress others with our knowledge and relevance and thus have greater influence. Yet, ironically, it’s that posturing

that strips us of real influence—our ability to influence others toward God.

Humble, simple people have always been the best mentors. They don't seek to be great. They don't grandstand, nor do they draw attention to themselves. They don't "lord it over those entrusted to them, but serve as examples." They look honestly at their own weaknesses and their own need for forgiveness, and therefore they're gentle, patient, and forgiving when others fall short and fail. They're tractable, teachable, and thus more knowledgeable. We learn from them because, like Jesus, they're "meek and lowly in heart."

Charles de Foucauld's words from long ago remain apropos: "Never think that in lowering yourself you have less power for good. On the contrary, in thus humbling yourself you are imitating and using the same means that I [Jesus] used. You are walking in my way and therefore in the truth, and you are in the right state to receive life and impart it to others. The best means for this is my way. I came down to the level of men by my Incarnation and to that of sinners by my Circumcision and Baptism. Be lowly, lowly, lowly, humble, humble. Let those that are in high places put themselves last in a spirit of lowliness and service,

love for men, humility, taking the lowest place so long as the divine will does not call you to another, for in that case you must obey If you are placed high, then keep yourself in humility of soul as though you were last; occupy your high position as though you were there only to serve others and to lead them to salvation" (*Meditations of a Hermit*).

There's another thing about James: he rang true. Eusebius again, quoting another early historian, Hegesippus, described James as one whom "everyone from the Lord's time till our own has called 'The Righteous One,'" using a word for righteous that means, "as one *ought* to be." Like Chaucer's parson, James was an "example for to give, by his purity, how that his sheep should live." He taught:

*Christes' lore, and his Apostles twelve,
He taught, but first he followed it himself.*

Obedience is essential for teachers because it is the basis of spiritual insight and understanding. George MacDonald wrote: "What [the biblical writers] care about is plain enough to the true heart, however it is far from plain to the man whose desire

to understand goes ahead of his obedience He who does that which he sees, shall understand; he who is set upon understanding rather than doing, shall go on stumbling and mistaking and speaking foolishness. It is he that runneth that shall read, and no other."

Furthermore, obedience is necessary because it is the foundation of all spiritual power. Authority is not won by education, personality, intellect, experience, or promotion, but by a will to obey. Even Jesus said, "If I do not do my Father's deeds don't believe me" (John 10:37).

It's foolish to be heedless of our own inner life while instructing and giving counsel to others. "Take heed to yourself," said Paul, "and [then] to your teaching."

There's a third factor that invites me to learn from James: he was willing to suffer for what he believed. He understood there is no ministry without misery, no proclamation without pain, no renewal without the possibility of retaliation. He had what ancient Christians called *habitus practicus*.

Habitus practicus, as you might guess, is an old Latin phrase that suggests the habit of proclaiming the truth without fear or favoritism and a willingness to suffer the consequences of that proclamation.

It's something of a lost art these days, yet it lies at the heart of every call to ministry.

Habitus practicus is seen in Moses' putting up with a grumbling, ungrateful people for forty years; in Jeremiah's emotional pain as he confronted the malicious, lying prophets of Israel; in Stephen's ministry and martyrdom; in Paul's oft-repeated description of the sufferings he bore for the sake of the gospel; in Jesus' exhortation to all disciples to live as "sheep among wolves"; in His invitation to discipleship: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." It's seen in James' readiness to die for what he believed.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that shortly after the death of Festus, the governor of Judea, the high priest, Ananias, who hated and opposed James, convened a kangaroo court, charged James with violations of the Law, and stirred up the citizens of Jerusalem to kill him. Eusebius gives this account of James' final days:

When Paul appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome by Festus, the Jews were disappointed of the hope in which they had devised their plot against him and turned

their attention to James the Lord's brother This is the crime they committed against him. They brought him into their midst and in the presence of the whole populace demanded a denial of his belief in Christ. But when, contrary to all expectation, he showed undreamed of fearlessness in the face of the enormous throng . . . they could not endure his testimony any longer, since he was universally regarded as the most righteous of men. So they killed him.

Eusebius then quotes Hegesippus, who may have interviewed eyewitnesses to the event:

When many even of the ruling class believed, there was an uproar among the Jews and Scribes and Pharisees, who said there was a danger that the entire people would accept Jesus as the Christ. So they collected and said to James: "Be good enough to restrain the people, for they have gone astray after Jesus in the belief that he is the Christ. Be good enough to make the facts about Jesus clear to all who come for the Passover Day. We all accept what you say: we can vouch for it, and so can all the people, that you are a righteous man and

take no one at his face value. So make it clear to the crowd that they must not go astray as regards Jesus: the whole people and all of us accept what you say. So take your stand on the Temple parapet, so that from that height you may be easily seen, and your words audible to the whole people." For because of the Passover all the tribes have forgathered, and the Gentiles too.

So the Scribes and Pharisees made James stand on the Sanctuary parapet and shouted to him: "Righteous one . . . tell us what is meant by 'the door of Jesus.'" He replied as loudly as he could: "I tell you, the Son of Man is sitting in heaven at the right hand of the Great Power, and He will come on the clouds of heaven."

Many were convinced, and gloried in James' testimony, crying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Then again the Scribes and Pharisees said to each other: "We made a bad mistake in affording such testimony to Jesus. We had better go up and throw him down, so that they will be frightened and not believe him."

So they went up and threw down the righteous one. Then they said to each other, "Let us stone James the Righteous," and began to stone him, for in spite of his fall he was still alive. But he turned and knelt, uttering the words: "I beseech Thee, Lord God and Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

While they pelted him with stones, one of the descendants of Rechab, the son of Rachabim, the priestly family to which Jeremiah the prophet bore witness, called out: "Stop! What are you doing? The righteous one is praying for you."

Then one of them, a fuller, took the club which he used to beat out the clothes, and brought it down on the head of the Righteous one. Such was his martyrdom. He was buried on the spot, by the Sanctuary, and his headstone is still there by the Sanctuary.

One mark of integrity is a willingness to go to the wall for what one believes. James went all the way.

Finally, I'm drawn to James because he makes sense: he speaks to those instinctive and

essential truths that enable us as human beings to associate with one another in kindness, courtesy, faithfulness, love, and delight. Coleridge called it “common sense to an uncommon degree.” James calls it “wisdom.”

James’ method is not so much to inform as to restate the obvious, for no one has to tell us what we ought to be. We know. We cannot in fact rid ourselves of these intuitions and our desire to conform ourselves to them. The problem, as it has always been, is compliance.

So James calls to mind those behaviors that are good, true, and beautiful, and then, in the simplest way possible, tells us how to do them. He writes in a homely fashion, appealing to the heart of the average man or woman, boy or girl. He talks sense and makes it accessible to all.

There’s an old Yiddish word, *mensch*, that like so many Yiddish words says it all. A *mensch*, according to my Yiddish dictionary, is “someone who is true, sensible, wise enough to be no longer naïve, but not cynical; a person who gives advice for our benefit rather than his or her own. A *mensch* acts not out of fear, or out of a desire to make a good impression, but out of strong inner conviction of who he or she is and what he or she stands for. A

mensch is whole," or, as the biblical writers would say, "complete."

James is my *mensch*.

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