

**OUT
OF THE
HOT
TUB,**



**INTO
THE
WORLD**

*The cure for
comfort-zone Christianity*

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1

James 1:1

Blueprint for a Better Life

“Pssssssssst! Hey, mon, wanna buy some hashish?”

The drug dealer waded through the emerald waters of Jamaica like a shark tracking unsuspecting tourists.

Clueless about his question, I floated in ignorance. It sounded to me more like a sneeze punctuated with a question mark: “Wanna buy some haaaaaaacccchhhooooo?” This did not interest me. But my brother, Randy, knew immediately what was going down. A drug deal. An illegal transaction. An international crime.

So he reacted in a way that any normal guy who plays in the sun too long would—he busted up laughing.

“Hey, mon, what’s so funny?” the dealer demanded.

“I usually don’t see someone trying to peddle dope to a minister,” Randy said.

“You’re a minister?”

“I’m not; he is.” Randy pointed at me.

“Really, you’re a minister?”

My blush instantly doubled my sunburn. “Well, um, yeah, I guess I am.”

“What church?”

“I’m a Seventh-day Adventist minister.”

“Really? I’m a Seventh-day Adventist too!” he exclaimed.

Now I was intrigued.

“Yeah, mon! I have been a Seventh-day Adventist all my life—twenty-four years! I never miss a Sabbath in church. One time I even met our General Conference president, Elder Folkenberg.”

It’s not often that I’m speechless. But this was one such moment.

He grinned, “Hey, since you’re a Seventh-day Adventist minister, I’ll give you the same discount I give my pastor—10 percent. Come with me.”

“No thanks. I don’t smoke dope.”

“But have you tried *this* stuff? It’s a spiritual experience.”

“Maybe for you, but I’m not interested.”

“Come on, mon, you got to at least try it.”

Back and forth we volleyed. He never could understand why I refused to buy. And I couldn’t fathom how a faithful Seventh-day Adventist could make a living selling drugs.

Call me old-fashioned, but I think there ought to be some connection between what we believe and how we behave. Sadly, though, this isn’t always the case. A. W. Tozer, the leathery saint of years past, once reflected on this great divide between the profession and practice of Christians. Years ago I copied this quote from a sermon by Chuck Swindoll.

There is an evil which in its effect upon the Christian religion may be more destructive than communism, Romanism, and liberalism combined. It is the glaring disparity between theology and practice among professing Christians. So wide is this gulf that separates theory from practice in the church that an inquiring stranger who chances upon both would scarcely dream that there was any relation be-

tween the two of them. . . . It appears to me that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconvenience of being right.¹

Recent statistics suggest that Christians today are faring no better. According to several recent national surveys conducted by the Barna Research Group, this chasm between theology and practice is wider than ever. Consider a slice of their findings:

- Born-again Christians spend seven times as much time on entertainment as they do on spiritual activities.
- Born-again adults are more likely to experience a divorce than are nonborn-again adults (27 percent vs. 24 percent).
- Among born-again Christian adults, only 8 percent tithe their income to the church.
- Although most believers say that serving the needy is important to do, just 34 percent gave any time and money to serve the poor in the past year.
- In a representative nationwide survey among born-again adults, none of the individuals interviewed said that the single most important goal in their life is to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

It seems that many of us as Christians say the right things but don't live accordingly. Whenever religion eats into the way we want to do life, it's often the spiritual stuff that gets swallowed. Too many of us camp in the world and worship our own gods.

I visited a temple in Kyoto, Japan, called The Temple of the Thousand Buddhas. It is a unique place of worship where people can literally create their own Creator. The temple is filled with more than a thousand replicas of Buddha—each one a little different from the rest. Worshipers can choose whichever god suits their fancy. It's a convenient way to mold God into the shape of their world. As the French philosopher Voltaire once wrote, "If God has created us in His

image, we have more than returned the compliment.” We crave a designer deity, custom-made to accommodate a faith of convenience.

Of this flavor of faith, James—the author of the epistle bearing his name—would holler, “Heresy!” Listen to his plea: “Dear brothers and sisters, what’s the use of saying you have faith if you don’t prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can’t save anyone . . . it isn’t enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn’t show itself by good deeds is no faith at all—it is dead and useless” (James 2:14, 17, NLT).

It’s not that works *save* the Christian, but that works *mark* the Christian. According to James, it is not enough to profess Christian values; we must live them if our faith is to be deemed authentic. To put it another way, living under the influence of God must influence the way we live.

As a driver who has been pulled over five times for driving under the influence, I know about influence. In the case of each DUI, however, I wasn’t drinking. I was drowsy, or I wasn’t paying attention, or I was playing the swerving game (*Let’s see, how many white lines can I squeeze my tires between without touching them?*). But to an observer, it appeared as if I was driving while under the influence of alcohol.

When people watch you, what influence do they conclude that you are under? For me, I pray for a God-intoxicated heart. I want to be constantly under His influence so that my life reflects my deepest values. My study through the book of James has deepened this resolve. I strive for the day when my thoughts might be the same as God’s thoughts, my appetite His appetite, my goals His goals. I long to echo the words of Jesus and say, “If you want to know what God is like, then watch Me! Watch the way I spend My money. Watch the way I listen to people. Watch the way I react in heated situations. If you have seen Me then you have seen the Father” (see John 14:9).

While I often fall short of perfectly translating God’s character through my actions, it’s still the goal that James had in mind for his

readers. Granted, it is an ambitious goal because translating it into life can be tricky.

As a student missionary in Swaziland, Africa, I was often asked to preach. Because I didn't speak Swahili (still don't), I preached through an interpreter. One Sabbath I shared from my heart that I believed Jesus would be coming soon. As people shuffled out of the service, though, nobody mentioned anything about the Second Coming. Instead, I received the strangest comments.

"That was an excellent sermon," someone said. "About time we hear a good old-fashioned sermon on the evils of wearing jewelry!"

Jewelry? I thought. *I never said anything about the evils of jewelry.*

Still another church member said, "Pastor, thanks for hammering on the sin of eating meat. That was a bold sermon!"

But the sermon had nothing to do with eating meat, I protested in my mind.

It wasn't until that afternoon that a close friend told me what had happened. Because my friend was fluent in both languages, he could explain the confusion. "Your interpreter was preaching his own sermon" he told me with a smile. "What he was saying had nothing to do with what you were preaching." Something was lost in the translation.

In Jesus' case, nothing was lost in the translation. His heart was intoxicated with God. He was *always* under the influence of God; consequently, His conduct mirrored his convictions. This is the challenge James gives us—to live under the Holy Spirit's influence so that we might perfectly reflect God in our lives.

That's why I beg you to sign on for this spiritual adventure through James's letter. In my opinion, it is the most practical book ever written on the topic of Christian living. The guidance is painstakingly plain for anyone who wants to serve God and lead a holy life. While many of us want that, we often stumble when it comes to pulling it off in real life.

Don't despair! James can help. He answers the fundamental question that Christians must ask: How on earth should we live? "How to manage your money"; "how to tame your tongue"; "how to overcome temptation"; and "how to pray" are just a few of the topics that James tackles. Craft your life around his counsel and you will experience an adventure with God that is out of this world. It really is a blueprint for a better life.

Before we examine the details, let's catch a quick overview of this blueprint. We'll start with the basic ABCs of the book.

It is the studied opinion of most conservative New Testament scholars that James, the brother of Christ, was the author of the epistle. In fact, in 1546, the Council of Trent acknowledged James, the brother of Jesus, as the writer. He was probably the firstborn after Jesus, making Jesus his older Brother.

Just imagine! If you have an older brother then you know how older brothers can be. Perhaps you are an older brother—shame on you! But now picture *Jesus* as your older Brother. He never sinned. He always came the first time when Mom called for supper. He always picked up His socks. He never crossed your imaginary line in the back seat of the chariot on family vacations. He always washed the ring out of the tub. He never cracked a smile when Dad did his laugh-snort thing that all dads are prone to do and everyone pretends they don't hear it.

Perfection is always a tough pill to swallow, but if your older brother is so inclined, well, that's as bad as eating Aunt Ruby's Velveeta-Wham-Tofu-Fruitcake casserole. It's no wonder that it was not until later that James became a follower of Jesus. Early on, James was hostile toward Him (see Mark 3:21, 31-35; Matthew 12:46-50; John 7:3-9). In fact, John states clearly that the brothers did not believe in Jesus (see John 7:5).

However, we see a radical change in the life of James throughout the book of Acts. He is a prominent leader in the church at Jerusalem. For example, it was to James that Peter relayed the mes-

sage of his escape from prison (see Acts 12:17). James presided over the Council of Jerusalem when the Gentiles were allowed into the church. It is noteworthy that the language used in his speech at the Council is very similar to that used in the epistle of James (see Acts 15). Also, Paul came to James with his offering from the Gentile Christians to be used for the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:18-25).

Assuming the author is the brother of Jesus, then his opening statement is particularly significant: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). Notice that James does not identify himself as a brother of Christ, rather as a servant. How remarkable! The brother who had once opposed Jesus was transformed into a loyal servant, shamelessly recruiting others to the cause of Christ.

The letter is written to Christians residing in Gentile communities outside Palestine. James expresses his concern for those persecuted Christians who were once part of the Jerusalem church. Many of the believers were young in their faith. Thus they needed practical instruction on how to live their personal faith in a public way. They also struggled to make sense of their persecution and pain. They were in need of counsel and encouragement, so James responded with practical help.

The book of James has been labeled the “Proverbs of the New Testament.” It contains many practical, straightforward exhortations with an emphasis on the importance of balancing belief with behavior. It’s about giving feet to your faith. James is very straightforward and easy to understand. In fact, at times we’ll probably wish he wasn’t so easy to understand!

As you read this book I anticipate significant spiritual growth. By God’s grace we will not only read the words—we will do them. Listen to the final appeal that James might offer in his no-nonsense way as he invites you and me into this adventure with God.

“Pssssssssst! Hey, mon, wanna live under the influence?”

OUT OF THE HOT TUB, INTO THE WORLD

“Huh?”

“You wanna *really* live under the influence of God and experience the supernatural?”

“Well, sure, although I am already a Christian. I believe—”

“Fair enough. Then come with me and I’ll show you what your life should look like. You’ll want to talk, shop, listen, pray, serve, study, dress, teach, watch TV, breathe, eat, and live in ways that are consistent with your belief.”

“But—”

“No ‘but’s.’ If you claim that you are a disciple of Christ but you do your own thing then you’re deceiving yourself. If you think faith is believing one way and living another, well, then you must be smoking something funny.”