

In the Parable of the Soils Jesus describes how a farmer sows seed on four different soils. The sun withers the plants in one and thorns and weeds choke the plants in another. Only the fourth soil was good and produced a great crop. Jesus explained that two soils represent people who have heard the Word of God and even received it with joy and believed for a while. They have shown “green” but later either withered or remained fruitless. It is possible for people to give an appearance of believing, but not be born again, because the word “has no root in them.”

Although we should be cautious in judging the presence or absence of fruit, we are called to judge ourselves. Fruit is the basis for evaluating: “a tree is known by its fruit” (Mt 12:33). In the process of maturing that exists between sowing and bearing fruit, there is some uncertainty. Is the person who accepted the Word with joy, truly born again? Will they show fruit in the right season?

Paul challenges the Corinthians to examine themselves, to see if they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). James teaches in his letter that true faith takes action. It shows itself in fruit. Difficulties in life lead to maturity in those who are truly children of God. Those who are not truly God’s children will be proven as false. The context for the letter of James will help in understanding its content.

1. The author of the letter:

- a. The author identifies himself as James, the servant of God and Jesus Christ.
  - 1) Two men with the very common name of James are prominent in the NT and are the most likely candidates for authorship. James the Apostle and James, the brother of Jesus and elder of the Jerusalem church, who traditionally has been considered the author.
  - 2) The “servant” is literally a slave, not a hired worker, but one who has been bought and is owned by his master. James was fully aware that he had been bought with a price, the very blood of Jesus (1 Co 6:20; 7:23; 1 Pe 1:18-19).
  - 3) Whereas Paul and Peter both mention their apostleship in their writings, James does not. Although it is an argument from silence, it supports the proposal that the author is James the brother of Jesus and not James, the apostle. If this is the case, then it is noteworthy that he perceived his relationship to Jesus not primarily as a filial relationship, i.e., that of a half-brother, but that of a slave to his master.
- Those who were close to Jesus such as John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and James, his own half-brother, did not lose sight of the authority and majesty which resides in Jesus. John fell at the feet of Jesus when he saw Him as reported in Revelation 1. James almost disregards his filial relationship and regards Jesus as his owner and master. We would do well not to lose sight of this perspective, even as we appreciate the fact that Jesus now calls us friends.
- b. Although there is no definitive way to date this letter, there are hints of an early date which supports either the Apostle or the half-brother of Jesus as the author. James, the Apostle, was martyred very early (Acts 12). James the half-brother of Jesus could have written later, but features in the letter support the traditional view of an earlier date.
  - 1) The letter is very Jewish. It is written to the “twelve tribes” which is most easily understood as referring to Jews. “Your meeting” (2:2, NIV; “assembly”, KJV, NKJV) is literally a “synagogue” (cf. ASV). This Jewish character fits best the early phase of the church, prior to the major outreach among Gentiles.
  - 2) There is an absence of any reference to the problem of the Judaizers. This attack on the church and the Gospel developed as the outreach to Gentiles increased.

2. The recipients of the letter:

- a. The first readers were probably Jews. The simplest interpretation of “the twelve tribes” is a reference to Israel, a consistent use of the term in the OT and NT. It is unnecessary and inappropriate to see in this phrase any allegorical meaning.
- b. The first readers were also followers of Jesus Christ. [See 1:2 (my brothers), similarly 1:9, 16, 19; 2:1 (my brothers, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ); and so forth in 2:5, 14; 3:1, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19.]

The early church was primarily Jewish and resident in Jerusalem and Judea. The church at Jerusalem was scattered because of persecution (Acts 8:1; cf. Acts 11:19ff). The important spread of the Gospel to Samaria (cf. Acts 8) only happened after persecution began to thrust Christians out of Jerusalem. Although the persecution spearheaded by Saul subsided after his conversion (Acts 9:31), the early Jewish believers would not have been totally free of persecution. Their association with Judaism left them with some special allowances from Rome but also left them as the recipients of Satanic anti-semitic attitudes and actions. (Cf Acts 18:2.12-17; 19:33-34.)

People who are scattered by persecution do not arrange for orderly moving. They do not take time to sell their houses, pack suitcases or look first for new jobs. They were refugees, often poor and unwanted in their new host countries.

James, as a good shepherd and following the example of the Good Shepherd, exercised concern for his Jewish brothers in Christ – not only in Jerusalem, but also in the dispersion (diaspora). They were all valuable in God’s sight and James mirrored the care of his Master.

3. The purpose of the letter:

James had an appropriate pastoral concern both for Jewish believers in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 21:15ff where he requests Paul to consider his actions in light of Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were zealous for the law) as well as for those scattered by persecution.

The letter itself shows us why James had reason for this concern. There were at least eleven problems: “trials of many kinds” (1:2); temptations (1:13-14); failure to live out one’s faith (1:19-27), blindness caused by wealth (2:1ff.), insufficient brotherly love (2:14-26), uncontrolled speech, being critical and judgmental (3:2-12 and 4:11-12), lack of wisdom (3:13-18), quarrelsomeness (4:1-6), pride before God (4:7-10; 13-17), danger of losing hope, patience and eternal perspective (5:1-12), failure to correctly handle sin (5:13-20).

The letter of James was written by a pastor-shepherd who cared for the sheep. He wanted to assure that they had a living, genuine faith. According to the picture given by the parable of the soils he wished to make certain that each one was bearing fruit.

This letter should also help us to mature in Christ. It deals with problems which we also face. We do not wish to find ourselves identified with that second or third soil in the parable, receiving the Word and yet remaining fruitless. There is very little that is more dangerous than a false security. We do not wish to be merely hearers (or readers) of the Word but also doers (James 1:22).

May we through this letter be encouraged and strengthened in our faith, so that we may “be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:4).