

An Epistle of Straw: What Martin Luther Said about James

“Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God’s law. But to state my own opinion about it . . . I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works. . . . Second, its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. . . . James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles’ disciples and threw them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else from his preaching. . . . In a word, he wants to guard against those who relied on faith without works, and is unequal to the task. . . and would accomplish by insisting on the Law what the apostles accomplish by inciting men to love. Therefore, I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him.”¹

“In a word, St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”²

Footnotes

1. See *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 362.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 395–97.