

James

Literature:

- James is an epistle, or a letter. It is written “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations,” or “the twelve tribes of the Dispersion,” meaning the Jews living in various places throughout the world. This is one of the things that distinguishes it from, say, the letters of Paul; although the audience is clearly identified, it is not one specific community.
 - This tells us that James’ focus, much like Jesus’ own focus in His earthly life, is on the Jews themselves. James is the head of the church in Jerusalem, so of course his focus will be on the Jews!

Authorship:

- written by James, the brother of Jesus, who led the Church in Jerusalem in its earliest days. It is believed that James is to be identified as the same James who spoke and composed the letter of Acts 15.
- We have reason to believe that this was the same James who was martyred around 66 AD, just before the Jewish rebellion in Jerusalem. It is reported that many, even among the Jews, believed that the loss of life from the war with Rome was due in large part to their martyrdom of James, who was known as James the Just for his impartiality and fairness toward all.

Purpose:

- James seems to have something of a dual purpose to his letter, both to rebuke and to encourage. James seeks to rid the church of doubt, as this has no place in the life of the Christ follower. He also seeks to encourage believers to walk in faithfulness to the ways of Christ, for only in so doing can they truly find the essence of the Christian life.
- The book begins with a profound statement, to “count it all joy” when we encounter trials. This is telling, as it lends to the idea that the purpose of the book is encouragement in the midst of the trials and temptations of this life. James will explore the reasons for our joy in greater depth and detail throughout the text itself.
- James is written in such a way that it echoes many of the teachings of Jesus found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the pattern of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6 is actually the basis for James’ pattern in his letter. Most likely conclusion here is that this is not drawn from the Gospels themselves, as nothing lends to the idea that James is quoting directly from any of them. Rather, the conclusion we reach is that James is written by one intimately familiar with the teachings of Jesus.
 - We have noted in a previous sermon, in fact, that a disciple’s work was to memorize and imitate the teachings of their master. This lends credence to the idea that James is a composition of one of Jesus’ disciples simply because of the fact that Jesus’ own teachings are so intricately interwoven into the fabric of the book itself.

History:

- Can time its writing between 30-66 AD, but not much more specific than that.

- We know of its acceptance as Holy Scripture at least as early as the Church Father Origen (184-253). As such, by the 2nd-3rd generation of Christianity, there is no doubt that James was recognized as an official part of the biblical canon.
- Martin Luther HATED the Epistle of James, but why? Because he disagreed with its insistence that faith was incomplete without actions to back it up. Luther's insistence on salvation being on the basis of "faith alone" led to conflict with James' doctrine, so rather than revise his own understanding, he tried to revise the Bible. Helpful note: not a good idea.

Text notes: Chapter 1

1:1 Already noted, this book is addressed to the Jews dispersed throughout the nations. James uses the phrase "doulos Christou" here to express his relationship to Christ Jesus – a slave or servant of God. The fact that he specifies "...and of the Lord Jesus Christ" demonstrates his acceptance of the equality of Father and Son, but also emphasizes their distinctness.

Also noteworthy is the word translated "greetings." Some translations: "salutations." Not very accurate. More accurate to say that this is translated as "grace" or "joy."

1:2-4 Perseverance/steadfastness is the result of the trials we face in this life. It is as a result of this knowledge that trials are actually cause for joy – why would we not rejoice, knowing that the end result of our trials is that we come closer to that ideal which God has for us? James says perseverance/steadfastness, once it has come full circle, will produce perfection – indeed, this is the same word Jesus Himself uses in Matthew 5 to tell us to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." If ever we wondered how to pull off what Jesus encourages us to do in this moment, it is apparently through trials and persevering through them.

We again see that God is in the business of the big picture – we think on a small scale, but He looks at how the sufferings of today will create in us the perseverance we need for tomorrow.

1:5-8 It is important to note the context here is dealing specifically with matters of prayer. James begins by addressing those who "lack wisdom," saying that the solution is to "ask God... and it will be given him," meaning, of course, pray for it. Wisdom in this context is often identified with an understanding of God's Law. In this case, then, James seems to be saying, "If you don't understand God's Word, ask Him to make it plain to you – and He will!" There will always be certain mysteries about it, but I have found this to be true in my own experience – encounter a difficult verse and ask God for clarification, and somehow He always seems to do so.

It is in this mindset of prayer that James says we must ask "in faith, with no doubting." Doubt, then, does not refer here to the general struggle that we sometimes have with our understanding of the faith. All will experience this at one time or another, and for believers, this is often a fleeting moment which will be brushed off nearly as quickly as it came on. Rather, this is a basic trust that God will do what He says He will do. This doubt James describes is doubt in God's faithfulness rather than doubt in God's existence or characteristics. Especially useful here: Jesus' words to the apostles in Matthew 21:22, "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." Also, the words of the man who asked Jesus for his son to be healed in Mark 9:24 – "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" When we pray, we do so with full

understanding that God will do what He says He will do. He is faithful in all things. We also pray in such a way that we recognize our own doubts; not denying them, but acknowledging before God that we know He is faithful and yet our hearts remain unfocused on Him. Prayers like this, knowing that God is good and will do what He promises, yet also acknowledging our own faults, are actually righteous and honorable prayers. They indicate that we know the promises of God and can reason that He is good. This is the very same thing Abraham was credited as being righteous for – reasoning through the uncertainties of life to find God faithful.

James is specifically rebuking those who pray yet have no inkling of faith whatsoever. Doubting what we speak in prayer does no good. We can speak words without there being anything genuine in them. This is the double-minded man of whom he speaks. Who would expect to receive anything when they didn't actually believe they would in the first place?

1:9-11 This refers to both lowly and rich as “brothers.” It may not explicitly say “rich brother” in v.10, but grammatically, this is clearly intended – let the lowly brother... and the rich [one] in his humiliation.” This is specifically because both have reason to rejoice – in Christ, the lowly is given equal status with the rich. The rich, while they would not normally want to rejoice about being humbled, can now see that their position may give them worldly benefits, but no privilege in heaven. As such, they are to rejoice in being humbled because they will not suffer the same fate as the worldly rich – these are the ones who will pass like the flower of the grass.

1:12-15 Careful to distinguish between trial and temptation. Trial is something to which God may subject us as a way of testing our faith or giving us cause to grow. This is why James says that we should “remain steadfast under trial,” because trials lead us to growth, and growth leads us closer to godliness. This is all part of getting closer to perfection, as James has exhorted us to do in 1:4.

Temptation, on the other hand, is a work of the devil. This is not done for the sake of seeing whether or not we will be faithful to God so much as its purpose is to deliberately draw us away from the Creator. Very fine line, but must be noted. God tempts no one; satan tempts. The works of the devil aim to draw us away from God, whereas trials are simply for the purpose of giving us opportunity to prove faithful. We may prove faithful to God in the face of temptation, as Jesus Himself did in the wilderness, but the purpose of it (from satan's point of view) is not to give us opportunity to prove faithful to God. It is to draw us away from Him.

What's interesting about James' theology here, however, is that he puts zero emphasis whatsoever on the work of the devil. For James, temptation is borne of our own desires. This is in line with the OT portrayal of the heart of men, as God Himself will say in Genesis 6 that “every inclination of his heart is evil all the time.” According to James, humanity doesn't have to be tempted by the devil; we follow evil on our own without any real interference from the outside. When the devil comes along to tempt us, pretty much all he usually has to do is lightly push and we jump the rest of the way into the pits of sin.

James' understanding of sin also goes a step farther here. It sounds a lot like the words of Yoda in Star Wars: “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Each of these is entirely dependent on what comes before it. Without sin, death would not have entered the world. Without desire for sin, sin would not have been an issue. Sin is only tempting to us when

we have the desire for it in the first place. Our sin, regardless of what it is, will eventually lead to spiritual (if not physical) death.

1:16-18 I understand this to be predicated on what has come before it. It serves as a transition between what came before and what will follow. In this world we will hear numerous understandings of the human condition: “people are basically good” and so on. The implication is that human beings have some sort of innate goodness that is later tainted by the world. However, it would seem, from a biblical perspective, that any innate good within us is simply the remnant of the image of God imprinted upon us. The fact remains that the inclinations of our hearts are naturally evil. This is not to say that we have a strong desire to rape or murder or anything like that, but that most likely, if we were tempted to do something little, we’d probably give into it. In the same way that James talks about the process of sin’s birth in the human heart, we need to talk about sin in general. People don’t start out robbing banks. It requires a slippery slope of sin before we get to the point where bigger sins are justified. Think of Eden: all it takes is one little desire to stray from the will of God before we fall into that initial sin.

This, I believe, is why James begins with “do not be deceived.” Don’t get caught up in what the world says. The fact is that human beings are still inclined toward evil acts. Good does not originate with humanity; rather, good originates with God. He is the source of good. Think of it this way: when Paul writes his letters to the churches, he doesn’t thank them for the good they’re doing. He gives thanks to God for the good work that is being displayed in them. Good in humanity seems to be an act of faithfulness to our Creator. Likewise, when David has committed adultery with Bathsheba, he can say to God, “Against You and You only have I sinned.” Why? Because we’re all evil here. It’s against God, the One who is good, that evil acts are committed. Murder, at its core, is robbing someone of the gift of life. Adultery at its core is robbing another of sacred purity which God intends for us. Theft is truly taking the good gifts which God has given to one and, in envy, taking it for ourselves. We can see at their cores that all sins are actually violations against God. Every good and perfect gift is actually from Him, and is not ours to take or do with as we see fit.

Verse 18 refers specifically to the Church, reminding us that we are new creations in Christ Jesus, created in Him as the firstfruits of a redeemed Creation. In Christ, we are made new as the first ones who have experienced the full redemptive power of God. The rest of Creation will one day follow. We are given the honor and privilege of experiencing this redemption first.

1:19-21 James has walked us through what it looks like to fall into sin in 1:16-18. Now he leads us through ways to walk in purity in the verses to come. This starts off with being “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...” I’ve been told that many people spend the vast majority of their time in conversation half-listening to the individual with whom they’re speaking, while their real focus is on what they’re about to say in response. This cannot be true for the Christ follower. We have to listen, focusing more on what others are saying to us than on what we want to say to them. We also have to learn how to gain control of our emotional responses. Outbursts don’t work to bring people to God! As he says, “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” In other words, having a flaring temper doesn’t get us closer to Christlikeness.

Christ followers must be above reproach. Sometimes we fail in this (as we naturally will, given our humanity), but we constantly strive for perfection as Wesley reminded us to do. This is

described specifically by James as “filthiness and rampant wickedness.” Although we do not know exactly what is on James’ mind here, we do know that James himself is the one who warns the Church against four particular practices in Acts 15:13-21, namely: 1) polluting ourselves with things offered to idols, 2) sexual immorality, 3) strangled meat, and 4) the drinking of blood. We know these things at a minimum would constitute filthiness/wickedness in the mind of the apostle. Consequently, from a modern perspective, to abstain from filthiness/wickedness would involve abstaining from idolatrous behavior (doing anything which honors a false god over the true God) and maintaining holiness within our own bodies, remaining free from sexually immoral practices.

By contrast, those who follow Christ faithfully are called to “receive with meekness the implanted word,” which James identifies as that “which is able to save your souls.” For James, this “word” is not merely accepting the good news of Jesus Christ and doing nothing more. Rather, it involves a total change of heart and mind – truly living into our call to be new creations in Christ Jesus. This is the fulfillment of the “firstfruits” language James used in 1:18 – that the new nature God has given us in Christ naturally leads to a change in character and behavior. Often is the question asked, “How do we tell if a person is truly a Christian? Perhaps they’ve accepted Jesus – what then? How do we tell the difference?” There should always – yes, always – be a noticeable difference between followers of Christ and the rest of the world. It may take time for this to develop in its fullness (indeed, a lifetime!), but this does not negate the fact that there must be a discernable difference between the Christian and the non-believer.

1:22-25 This difference between believers and non-believers is further elaborated upon in these verses. Where Luther asserted that salvation was by “faith alone,” he was correct only in part – faith, when it is genuine, leads to action. As James says, “...be doers of the word, and not hearers only, *deceiving yourselves.*” It is extraordinary self-deception to believe that we can be Christ followers without some discernable change having taken place within us. Will some of the old self remain? Of course. We are still in our corrupted flesh! Yet the change will also be evident. Far too often have people noted a change in someone due to their salvation experience. “___ is just not as angry as they used to be,” or “___ never says an unkind word about anybody anymore.” Why? Because the grace of God causes something different within us.

The example James uses is of one who sees themselves in a mirror and then immediately forgets the details of their own face. So it is with those who stare into God’s Word and change nothing – what good did it do to stare into the law without allowing it to change the heart? Rather, it is those who allow this Word to change them who see the true benefit of salvation in Jesus Christ. We must be changed.

1:26-27 We have to always be careful with our words. James speaks of taming our tongues in the same way that Jesus does, as in Matthew 12 Jesus will tell us that it is “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (12:34), and that “on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (12:36-37). Harsh words for us to hear, no doubt! Hence James’ command to us to “bridle” our tongues. James knows well that much is at stake here. Not recognizing that we fail to keep our words in check leads us to deceive our hearts, which in turn invalidates our religious practice. Faithful practice of God’s ways leads us into pure and undefiled religious

practice and away from self-deception. This is reflected also in Jesus' words to the disciples in Matthew 15:18, that "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person." The tongue is capable of a great many evils, and should avoid, for the Christ follower, all that which would bring uncleanness upon us. We often fall short in this regard, but must remain vigilant in keeping our language pure. What does Paul tell us but that God gave us a Spirit of "...self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). Our language must be chosen carefully, and our words kept subject to the Spirit of God.

James exalts one particular practice of religion in light of the false paths he has been speaking about in the previous verses. It is religion which demonstrates our love for others that causes us to truly be faithful in the eyes of God our Father. Religion that is "pure and undefiled" to James – and indeed, to God Himself – is to "visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (1:27). We know that James is undoubtedly not covering every single facet of the practice of faith, but here he brings up two important points: 1) love for others, and 2) guarding our hearts.

- 1) Concerning love for others, James again falls in line here with Christ's own command to His people that we "love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]" (Mt 22:39). Visiting orphans and widows – those most often overlooked by society – brings a depth to our faith. It is choosing to spend our time with the overlooked and forgotten which brings us closer to the heart of God Himself. We cannot forget that Jesus chose to spend His time with tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, and all those whom "respectable" society had marginalized. Love for the overlooked is demonstrating love for others in the way Jesus taught us to do.
- 2) Concerning "keep[ing] oneself unstained from the world," James echoes the words of Proverbs 4:23 – "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (NIV). This also echoes the words of Jesus previously referenced from Matthew 15. Our hearts can easily be defiled because we choose to pour all kinds of worthless things into ourselves. Jesus goes on in Matthew 15 to say, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander. These are what defile a person" (15:19-20a). These things flow from the heart because of what we put into our minds as well – it is the near-constant absorption of sexual images, foul words, and the otherwise impure that leads to our own acceptance of a less-than-ideal moral standard for ourselves. Paul will contrast this in Philippians by saying that "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (4:8). This is what we accept into our minds and hearts as Christ followers – nothing less. Guarding our hearts from the immorality of the world begins by determining to focus on the excellent and praiseworthy things of God. This is how we keep ourselves "unstained from the world."