

James: The Heart of God in the Life of His People

Introduction to The Letter of James

Jesus had siblings. It can be, at times, easy to skim over the early, formative years of Jesus' life and fast forward to the stories about a carpenter turned itinerant rabbi who, in his early thirties, began to gather followers and upend familiar notions about the Kingdom of God. But Jesus grew up in a home where he, presumably, learned Joseph's trade alongside his brothers, and we actually meet them in the Gospel accounts. In Mark's Gospel, in chapter 3, we are introduced to Jesus' family as they hear about their brother and son who had been gathering followers and upsetting the local pharisees by breaking Sabbath traditions and they, as Mark tells us, "went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'." Gathered with Mary and her other children was, in all likelihood, a young man named James who had grown up alongside Jesus and knew him as a brother before he knew him as the Messiah.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote what may be the earliest of the New Testament writings in this letter that we are about to study together. But he did not write as a skeptical sibling or a concerned man trying to poke holes in the stories about his now-departed brother. James wrote as a deeply committed follower of Christ, a convinced believer that his brother was in fact the Messiah, and he's addressing a group of scattered believers as their pastor abroad. He wants to encourage them as they suffer, to call them persevere in the face of challenges, to remind them of who they are as children of God, and to challenge them to live in such a way that their actions match their confessions of faith in Christ. As one who cares deeply for the men and women to whom he writes, James desires that the heart of God — God's will for their lives and the world around them — would flourish amongst his people, a people whose lives have been transformed by the death and resurrection of his brother, his Savior, Jesus.

How to Use The Reading Guide

James will serve as the primary text for our worship gatherings for several months, and it is our hope that you will join us in anchoring down in James in your own personal study. Each week this guide will offer a brief overview of the passage discussed during the sermon from the preceding Sunday. We will offer two to three supplementary texts which we would encourage you to utilize as you spend time in the Word each day. These texts are meant to be read in conjunction with the passage from James which will serve as the foundation of the reading guide each week. We'll also offer discussion questions for our life groups at the end of each guide, though we would encourage you to take time to reflect on those questions individually, as well. It is our prayer that the Lord, through our time in James, will continue to shape in us an understanding of what it means to live as faith filled, fully committed followers of Jesus.

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Week 6 Reading Guide

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. **23** For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. **24** For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. **25** But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 1:22-25

Knowledge should shape us. When we hear of construction taking place in a particular part of town, we take a detour to avoid a delay. If we learn that friends have had a child, we bring meals and diapers and well-wishes. The things that we come to understand over the course of years in a particular field configure the way that we do our jobs. Knowledge shapes us.

That being so, James challenges us to think about the need for congruence between what we claim to believe about God and the daily decisions which frame our lives. Lest we be tempted to think that James is advocating for some means of achieving God's grace or earning our way into the Kingdom, remember that just a few verses earlier James offered this statement of the grace of God in redeeming people: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (1:18). Instead, James is reminding us of the deep significance of spiritual integrity. Do the actions of our lives correspond to the truths we affirm about God?

Sometimes questions like the one just asked can be painful to consider, at least at first. But the Lord is not some disappointed parent shaking his head at the myriad ways that we've failed him, but a gracious Father whose desire is to embrace and whose discipline is born of love. Would we entrust ourselves to the Lord such that we are willing to ask him to show us our gaps, to reveal to us the ways in which we are hearers but not also doers of the word? May it be that the gospel of Jesus Christ would shape our understanding of who we are and the path we choose to walk each day.

- What does this text invite me to believe about God?
- What does this text invite me to understand about myself?
- What observations stand out?
- How might the Lord be asking me to respond?

Monday | Tuesday

Psalm 19

The Lord's desire to shape the affections and actions of his people is a message prevalent throughout Scripture. Psalm 19 offers us a view of the holy grandeur of God, the power and goodness of his Word, and a plea expressing the desire to be transformed by that Word. We would do well to make the final verse of this Psalm our own: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

Wednesday | Thursday

Ephesians 2:1-10

James is, in no way, arguing for a works-based salvation, but rather the reality of a transformed life in light of the truth of the gospel and our place in God's Kingdom. Yet it is good to be reminded of the origins of our faith. Let us reflect on the beauty of God's grace, freely given and wholly transforming.

Friday | Saturday

1 John 2:1-17

To proclaim faith in God and yet live aligned with a broken world is a diametric opposition. James is joined by John in speaking of the need for spiritual integrity, and John provides a picture of this foundational truth: to love the Lord is to obey him.

Life Group Questions | James 1:22-25

In order to be a doer of the word, as James encourages, we must first be hearers of the word. How might we hear, and hear well, the word that James is referring to in these verses?

One of the implicit warnings that James offers is that those who are merely hearers and not also doers *deceive themselves*. In short, James is speaking about the contrast between show and substance, between mere verbal articulation of belief versus a genuine belief that shapes the whole of our lives. How is this self-deception dangerous, especially in the cultural Christianity which serves as the norm for so many?

Read **1 John 2:1-6**. John, there, also speaks of the need to emulate Christ in the activity of our lives, not simply in the words that we speak. If someone were to ask the question, don't these passages (James 1:22-25 and 1 John 2:1-6) seem to be advocating for a works-based faith in which salvation is earned, how would you respond? Where else might you take them in Scripture to challenge that notion?

The image of the individual who looks in the mirror emphasizes the importance of remembering (and doing) the word. Read **Psalms 1** and consider how David's statement that the man who meditates on the law of the Lord will be blessed corresponds to James' commendation of one who looks into the perfect law and perseveres as a doer and not simply a hearer.

What are some specific ways the Lord is currently inviting you to become a doer, rather than only a hearer, of the word?