

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 7 Reading Guide

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. **27** Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

James 1:26-27

We expect flashlights to shine. It's embedded in the name. A flashlight is a flashlight insofar as it produces a beam of light when you push a button, otherwise it's a doorstop or a pretend lightsaber or one more thing taking up space in your junk drawer. Either way, when it stops producing light the nature of the thing changes. Form and function, as it were, are bound up with one another.

So it goes with the perspective offered by James in this brief passage. It's easy to see how someone might read these two verses and think of them as a punch list on the construction site of the Christian life, things simply needing to be accomplished before the project can be declared complete. But if we remember where we've been thus far in James, he isn't trying to convince his readers of a step by step process which leads to holiness or some earned righteousness. These two verses don't offer an exhaustive view of everything which comprises the Christian life. Instead, James is reminding us that what we say we believe must shape the way that we live. In particular, it must determine the way that we engage other people, in this case exemplified by the words that we speak and the care that we demonstrate for the destitute.

Flashlights shine. Christians guard their tongues and care for the broken. It is the function which follows the form of having an identity transformed by the gospel of Christ. This is no prescription detailing precisely how this must be demonstrated in our lives, but it is a clear exhortation to a life of generosity and holiness and a deep concern for all who bear the image of their Creator. There is no room for apathy in the Christian life. Would we, as we consider these passages this week, ask the Lord to continue to show us where there is discrepancy between the faith we proclaim and the actions of our lives, especially as it relates to our care for others.

- 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

Proverbs 10

When something is repeated in a particular verse or chapter or within the whole canon of Scripture, we would do well to take note and consider what the Lord might be saying. Proverbs 10 provides another example of Scripture speaking of the significance of our words and their relation to a life of wisdom versus a life of folly.

Wednesday | Thursday

Isaiah 1:10-17

The ideas expressed in James 1:26-27, especially those detailing the call to care for the poor, are found throughout the Scriptures. Consider these words from the first verses of Isaiah's prophecy as he speaks to the importance of caring for the destitute in such a way that matches the religious practices of the people.

Friday | Saturday

Luke 6

As you walk slowly through Luke 6, you notice the many similarities between these verses and Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. And you see what will be echoed in the words of James, specifically, the significance of a life of integrity wherein our actions match our words. As Jesus says in Luke 6:45, "...out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

Life Group Questions | James 1:26-27

1. This is the second time within a few verses that James has addressed the correlation between the faith we proclaim and the way in which we use our words (see 1:19-21). What is the significance of this repetition?
2. What might James mean when he states that a refusal to “bridle” one’s tongue reveals that their “religion is worthless?” What role does self-deception play in this discrepancy that James describes between the faith we proclaim versus the reality of our actions?
3. Read **Isaiah 1:10-17**. What does this text say about the Lord’s posture toward those who are destitute? In contrast, what is the Lord’s posture toward those who go through the motions of religiosity but neglect to care for those in need?
4. Consider James 1:27 in light of what you just read in Isaiah 1. How might James’s exhortation to care for the orphans and widows translate into your everyday life? Who has God placed in your circle of accountability so that you might offer them sacrificial, intentional care?
5. What might be a present application for James’s statement “to keep oneself unstained from the world?” Perhaps another way to consider this is to ask yourself the question, how does my life reflect a belief that God is the Giver of good gifts and that I am influenced primarily by *His Word* rather than the values and opinions of the world around me?
6. God has not left us to simply figure things out with regard to our growth in holiness and the further development of congruence between our professed faith and the actions of our lives. Bearing that in mind, and remembering the call of James 1:21 to “receive with meekness the implanted word,” how might the Lord be lovingly inviting you to repent, to trust him, and to live differently in light of this text?