

## **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 9 Reading Guide

**8** If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. **9** But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. **10** For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. **11** For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. **12** So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. **13** For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

*James 2:8-13*

*Mercy* is a messy word. Perhaps, at some point in time, you've heard the word mercy defined something like this, "it's when we don't get what we deserve." But that definition is a bit like describing a house by its front door color and the shade of its shingles, doing nothing to get into the interior structure and intangible feel of a place. James lets us know why mercy is messy in these verses — because it doesn't hide from what's actually going on under the surface. We are all, James reminds us, guilty as transgressors of the perfect law of God. It's true in the words that we speak in anger, in the judgmental whispers in our mind which serve only to inflate our own sense of self-righteousness, and in the half-truths we tell ourselves and others to try and cauterize the wounds to our pride which seem to arrive brand new each day.

But it's here in the mess of our own making that the Lord, in his great mercy, meets us not with a call to make ourselves presentable but an invitation to come, "all who are weary and heavy laden," with the promise of rest for our souls. The Lord meets us with mercy, not just once upon a time but every day. And James reminds us of this not so that we hang our heads in shame or meditate on the innumerable sins which stain the pages of our lives, but to elevate this truth: mercy must beget mercy. As Christians, those whose existence is daily defined by God's mercy, we must be a people whose lives, imperfect mirrors though we are, reflect the divine mercy that is ours in Christ. The mercy that James speaks of in these verses is not simply a willingness to offer forgiveness to the wounding words of a friend or after an argument with a spouse. This mercy recognizes that life is an undeserved gift, that every breath belongs to the Lord, that every item we possess has, in truth, been entrusted to us for the glory of the Mercy-Giver. And so we live as people of mercy. Mercy in our words. Mercy in our generosity. Mercy that reaches beyond the bounds of what is comfortable and invites the world to see the messy, beautiful, tenacious mercy of God in us.

Would you consider these questions as you prayerfully meditate on these passages this week:

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

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**Monday | Tuesday**

*Exodus 20*

James makes reference to two of the ten commandments in our passage this week. Because the ten commandments are so ubiquitous in Christian culture, it's easy to forget that they represent both God's clarion call on the lives of his people to be holy, and also a reminder that God is about the business of redemption in the lives of his children.

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**Wednesday | Thursday**

*Mark 12:28-34*

Mercy and love are integrally linked together. We see that in James 2:8-13 as our author makes reference to the command to love one's neighbor, a command that Jesus prioritizes in this passage in Mark 12. Christians are commanded to love God and love others, and mercy plays a prominent role in this action of loving God and loving others.

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**Friday | Saturday**

*Matthew 18:21-35*

Mercy must beget mercy. Jesus illustrates that concept powerfully in this parable. In an almost unimaginable show of mercy, a king pardons the insurmountable debt of one of his subjects. But this show of mercy does little to change the heart of this man who, in his turn, refuses to be merciful. We would do well to consider carefully this example of forgiveness (and a failure to forgive) that Jesus offers.

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## Life Group Questions | James 2:8-13

- 1) Read **James 2:1-13**. Take a moment and describe the primary idea(s) that you see in this passage? How does 2:8-13 build upon what we see in 2:1-7?
- 2) In 2:8, James quotes Leviticus 19:18 which says, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" He refers to this as the *royal law* or, as it might also be understood, the *law of the kingdom*. Why might James refer to this specific command as the royal law? Read **Mark 12:28-34** in consideration of how you respond.
- 3) In speaking of the law in verse 11, James quotes two of the ten commandments (*Do not commit adultery* and *Do not murder*). Why do you think he chose to quote these two commandments? More specifically, what do these two commandments address and how might that fit into the logical flow of James's letter?
- 4) There is a sobering reminder in these words from James to consider the fact that we are all, in some form or fashion, transgressors of the law. And yet James's desire isn't that believers hang their heads as they realize the depth of their own sin, but rather that this realization drive them to action in caring for others. How might an awareness of our own sin, our own need for grace, and the grace that is ours in Christ, help encourage us to show mercy toward others?
- 5) Consider **Matthew 18:21-35**. How does this passage in Matthew, in conjunction with our passage in James, challenge us to think of others in our lives? Are there parameters around who are to be the recipient of our grace-motivated mercy? Why do you think we are often compelled to be merciful toward some, and unmerciful toward others?
- 6) Toward whom might the Lord be challenging you to extend mercy? How might you practically extend that this week?