

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.

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

Week 11 Reading Guide

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

James 3:1-12

In September of this year, a couple in California unwittingly sparked a wildfire that burned more than 20,000 acres when they detonated a device meant to reveal the gender of their unborn child. A small spark. A world of devastation. Such is the power of the tongue as James describes it. As it turns out, while sticks and stones may break our bones, words can slice much deeper still.

Throughout his letter, James has put forth the case for a life which, in its obedience to God and His Word, evinces the integrity of its claims of faith. It is true of our care for the destitute, just as it is true of our demonstration of gospel-shaped love toward all, just as it is true of the words that we speak. And the argument that James makes in these verses is not advocating that we "watch what we say." Rather, James invites us to consider our words as the fruit that reveals the quality of our hearts' soil.

The ways we use our words should speak of the fundamental identity shift that is true of us in Christ. But in this we are swimming against the cultural current. In a world that assumes the worst, do our words reveal a willingness to *bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things*? In a world that diminishes the value of those who are on the “other side” of anything, do our words speak to the inherent worth of men and women, all of whom are created in God's image? In a world that seeks victory at all cost, do our words reveal humility and kindness which reflect the heart of One who came not to be served, but to serve others and give his life as a ransom for many?

Would we reflect on the grace and mercy shown to us in the gospel as we consider the profound impact of our words. Consider these questions as you spend time in God's Word 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?

Monday | Tuesday

Proverbs 16

Like many chapters in Proverbs, this one covers a host of topics, but there are thematic ties throughout. Specifically, the author highlights the connection between wisdom, humility, and how we employ our words. In these verses, we find the familiar, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” The destructive nature of pride is a deeply significant notion for James throughout his letter, especially in chapter 3.

Wednesday | Thursday

Matthew 15:1-20

Our words offer a glimpse of the hidden depths within our hearts. That is something that James, speaking time and again of the significance of aligning one’s external actions with their internal profession of faith, will remind us. This ultimately mirrors the teaching of Jesus. As he spoke of the poisonous doctrine of the Pharisees, he addressed the importance of the heart. We must “watch our words” *and* engage the corrupting influence of sin at the core of our persons.

Friday | Saturday

Ephesians 4:17-32

Our tongues are tremendously powerful, and they can serve as weapons of the Enemy or tools for the good of God’s Kingdom. In these verses, Paul exhorts believers to see that their words (as with the rest of life!) are subject to their new life in Christ. We cooperate with the Spirit within us as we speak life and hope and truth to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Life Group Questions | James 3:1-12

- 1) Can you note any repetition from previous sections in James in this passage? Be specific in noting the connections/verses.
- 2) Though the nature of his language will eventually skew negative when speaking of the power of the tongue, James doesn't necessarily begin there. The implication of the first four verses here is that the tongue is powerful, period. We will certainly get to the negative power of the tongue, but first, can you think of examples in your own life when you received powerful words of encouragement, affirmation, wisdom, etc? Why were these words so significant?
- 3) James specifically addresses the first portion of this passage to those who would aspire to become teachers or, more broadly, those who would seek influence. Though we may not be teachers, we all bear influence somewhere. How would those with whom you have influence (i.e. family members, co-workers, friends, life group members) describe the nature of your words? Would they primarily be described as constructive or destructive? Are your words primarily influenced by the wisdom of Scripture and a sensitivity to the Spirit or do they more frequently echo the language and tone of the world around us?
- 4) The word that James uses for "restless" in 3:8 is the same word that he used to describe the doubting person in 1:8 who is "unstable" and internally divided by their failure to believe God. There is, seemingly, a connection between the destructive power of our words and a deficiency in our belief in the Lord. How might destructive words represent a failure to believe either something about God or about those created in His image?
- 5) Read **Matthew 15:10-20**. How does the connection that Jesus makes between the content of our hearts and the words that we speak find resonance in the words of James? If shaping our speech isn't simply behavioral modification but a Spirit-led work of heart transformation, what are some practical ways that we can participate with the Spirit to conform our heart and our words to mimic those of God?
- 6) How can we practically encourage/challenge one another to grow in holiness in how we use our words? What activities or practices negatively impact the words you speak (and think)? Which activities or practices align your tongue more closely with the Lord? In light of your answers to those questions, what practical steps might you need to take to help cultivate increased holiness in your words?