

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 14 Reading Guide

11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

James 4:11-12

We talk a lot. Various studies have put forward estimates anywhere from 7,000 to 16,000 words that men and women speak each day. Wherever you fall within that possible spectrum, it's a staggering number. These thousands of syllables pouring out of our mouths each day reveal not simply the cognitive thoughts and logical connections that reside in the gray matter of our brains, but which also serve to pour forth the contents of our hearts.

It may seem like James is repeating himself, beating the same drum over and over and over again. "We get it, James, our words are important," you might say. And frankly, you'd be right. James does have this theme on repeat. But surely you can understand why. If our lives are filled with thousands of words and if those words are tremendously powerful, as James has already argued, then, of course, he's going to return again to this message. Our words always matter, in particular concerning how we speak to -- and speak about -- our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But understand, James isn't simply calling us to *be kind* in some generic sense. All of our lives as followers of Christ are bound up together and, ultimately, should be submitted before the Holy One, our God. There are not stray aspects that we, picking and choosing like a buffet, get to decide whether or not God has ultimate authority over. It's all his. We're all his. And to subvert his Word as it relates to how we speak to, and about, others is about more than just having a short fuse or telling it like it is. It's an elevation of self to the throne of our hearts and lives. This is not to say that we'll never judge folks, that we'll not have to consistently fight against the temptation to speak ill of those who wrong us, to harbor ugly thoughts toward those whose lives we deem "wrong" in some way. But that's why the promise of James 4:6 is so very good for us — the grace of God extends toward those who humble themselves before the Lord, not only as we confess our need for a Savior and admit that we cannot save ourselves, but in the regular act of repentance as we confess the ways that we have sought to usurp God's

authority in our lives. And, there, we rest in his grace. 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

Leviticus 19:9-18

The command to love our neighbors is a repeated command throughout Scripture. James likely has Leviticus 19 in mind as he connects the way that we use our words with our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ and, ultimately, our humble submission before the Lord. The way that we speak to, and about, others must absolutely be tied to our worship of the Lord.

Wednesday | Thursday

Proverbs 4

Not long ago in his letter, James spoke of the wisdom of the world as opposed to the wisdom from above. Those two divergent ways to live are still hanging in the background of James's call here to avoid speaking evil against brothers and sisters. The author of Proverbs, in chapter 4, helps to reiterate the strong connection between a life marked by godly wisdom and careful, God-exalting speech.

Friday | Saturday

1 John 4:7-21

A growing relationship with Christ and a deepening understanding of the gospel will result in a greater commitment to love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Such is the argument of John here. May we consider well these wonderful, challenging words, and be a people marked by selfless love for others that mirrors the love of God that is ours in Christ.

Life Group Questions | James 4:11-12

- 1) Read **James 4:11-12**. Look at this passage in relation to the previous one (4:1-10). How does this logically connect to James 4:1-10? Are there differences, or shifts, that you note in terms of language, tone, etc?
- 2) James spends a considerable amount of time in this short letter discussing the power of our words. He do so here again. As you consider your life, and the world around you, how might this emphasis on our words speak to the reality of our sin nature? Are there specific ways that these continued calls throughout James to consider your words have been particularly challenging for you?
- 3) Consider **Leviticus 19:9-18**. What is the correlation that we see here between worship of the Lord and our treatment of others?
- 4) James warns that to disregard the command to love our brothers and sisters is to thumb our noses at the law of the Lord because, in so doing, we seat ourselves as the supreme authority. That might sound likely overly strong language, but it's a depiction of idolatry. What are the greatest obstacles to loving others, especially with your words, that you experience?
- 5) James is, ultimately, addressing the posture of our hearts toward the Lord and others. How does a proper understanding of the gospel define the way that we think and speak about others? How might we further develop gospel-awareness as we think and speak of others?
- 6) It can be challenging to distinguish, on our own, the difference between being thoughtfully discerning and needlessly critical. How might biblical community play an important role in helping us differentiate between these two?
- 7) How are you praying for the good of those with whom you disagree most sharply?