

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 16 Reading Guide

1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. 4 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

James 5:1-6

We live in a world of extremes and labels...when we hear the words wealth, poverty, rich, and poor there are countless images, ideas, and beliefs that immediately enter into our minds. It's hard not to jump to conclusions as to why the rich man or woman is wealthy and why the poor man or woman is in poverty. We are prone to predispositions and that most often serves more to our detriment than our benefit. It would do us well to listen beyond the labels in this passage. We need to fight the urge to assume these words are very needed for "someone out there" or "so and so" in our circles. Let's take time to consider what is going on in the hearts of the believers at the end of chapter 4 and what is going on in the hearts of the unbelievers in view here at the beginning of chapter 5 that the Lord wants us to see.

The tone of the letter is at its harshest in these verses. A harsh tone, in and of itself, isn't reason to conclude that James must necessarily be addressing non-Christians, but there is another distinction: these verses offer no redemptive hope, only a warning of coming judgment. Whereas, in 4:13-17, there is presumption that though the folks he addresses there are in danger of the same double-mindedness that has served as a challenge throughout the letter, there is the exhortation in those verses to submit themselves to the Lord and his sovereign plans and purposes for their lives (something James presumes that they care about). That is gone in 5:1, and here James dons the mantle of an OT prophet speaking of the impending destruction of the enemies of the Lord.

As we work through this passage, we want to recognize James isn't warning the unbelieving wealthy purely because they are wealthy, but because of their harsh treatment of others in need and their self-gratifying rebellion of God that carries with it eternal consequences. The full weight of Scripture would lead us to believe that it is not inherently sinful to possess wealth AND the full weight of Scripture would lead us to

believe that there are very real dangers in accruing wealth, such that money is so easily a corruptor of human hearts. We have said all along that the teachings of Jesus are weighing heavily in the mind of James as he writes his letter, and here it is certainly apparent. We invite you to consider the parables of Luke 12:13-21 and Luke 16:19-31 as clear examples.

As you spend time with this passage, consider two important things. First, James is encouraging his readers to remember that God is just, He will not be mocked, and He will vindicate them. Second, it serves as a needed and helpful warning to us as believers to rightly understand and guard against the deceptive and enticing nature of wealth.

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

Psalm 16

The psalmist here speaks to the reader's heart in a way that compliments and addresses so much of what James is saying about the enticing nature of riches and wealth. He does so by drawing our attention to the sufficient and unfailing provision of God for His people. Memorizing this Psalm would be a nurturing and maturing practice for our hearts and minds in the days ahead.

Wednesday | Thursday

Luke 16:19-31

While we have good reason to believe that James's condemnation is not against the wealthy because they are wealthy (alone), but because of their oppression of the poor and unwillingness to submit themselves before the Lord, we don't want to blunt the edge of the implicit warning here against the siren song of wealth. Self-gratifying rebellion of God does have eternal consequences.

Friday | Saturday

Matthew 6:19-34

It may seem odd to read these words of Jesus in light of James' strong warning to the wealthy who live in rebellion to God, but one way to guard our hearts and minds is to saturate them with the rich truths that Jesus taught. One of the compelling ways to resist the tempting desires of wealth and riches is to be reminded of the sufficient and abundant provision we have in Christ and His Kingdom.

Life Group Questions | James 5:1-6

Read James 5:1-6 together.

- (1) How would the words in these verses, to those who don't know the Lord, encourage those who do know the Lord that James has been addressing throughout the letter?
- (2) How should we, as followers of Jesus, think about wealth?
- (3) *Read Luke 12:13-21 together.* How does the parable Jesus tells apply to our world today in regards to wealth and money?
- (4) How does the gospel motivate our generosity as followers of Jesus?
- (5) In what ways do you get defensive when people challenge you on how you spend your finances? Why is that?
- (6) How have you grown in generosity through the years?
- (7) What is a practical next step in living with your hands open?