

DISPLAYING A LIVING FAITH TO A DYING WORLD

A Journey through James

“Just James” Sermon 1

Texts: James 1:1-2, 26-27; 4:4-10; 5:19-20

James 1:1: ¹*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

James 1:26–27: 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 4:4–10: *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* ⁵ *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?* ⁶ *But he gives more grace.* Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷ *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* ⁸ *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you **double-minded.*** ⁹ *Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.* ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

James 5:19–20: ¹⁹*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

Introduction:

This morning we are starting a wonderful *journey* through an amazing section of our Bibles—the book of James. You will notice that I used the word “journey” to describe what we will be doing for the next several months as we explore the contours of the terrain contained in the five chapters (108 verses) that make up this powerful letter.

A journey is different from a trip. A trip generally describes the act of going from one place to another and returning; the focus is usually on the fact that we are going somewhere and returning. Usually, we don't tend to use the word "trip" to describe things that happened along the way. When we want to describe what happened along the way or what we anticipate will happen to us, we use the term "journey."

A journey implies more than just the act of going and coming. It speaks of what we anticipate will happen along the way, what we experienced or hope to experience, and what we learned or hope to learn.

And that is what we are commencing this morning. We are starting a journey through the book of James, and as I have been living in those five chapters for the last six months gathering information, studying the terrain, and preparing for our journey, I can assure you we are in for a wonderful, sometimes painful, deeply profitable experience that will help us come face to face with our faith.

James will help us face the things that affect the health and strength of our faith: what we really believe, how those beliefs shape our behavior, and what damages or strengthens that faith. If we are willing to listen to James, by the end of our journey he will point us to the abundant grace James describes in 4:6 that will help us cultivate a strong, vibrant, living faith that shines gospel light into the deepest, darkest, and most dangerous spiritual places around us!

So what do we know about James that will help start our journey well?

Perhaps the best way for us to prepare for the journey so we have all that we need in our spiritual backpacks is 1) to make sure we understand some important background information; and 2) to answer three simple but important questions about this short, powerful letter.

First, some important background information (similar to the placard or brochure at the start of a long hike).

- James is probably the ***earliest book in the New Testament (45-47 AD)***—just 10 to 15 years after the death and resurrection of Christ and the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). In other words, this epistle is not just

describing what we as individual Christians need at the start of our own personal journey—this letter actually describes what the Church itself needed at the very start of its journey in the years shortly after its birth and establishment.

- James was not written by someone living in theological isolation. He was not far removed from the daily pressures affecting believers who were called to carry the gospel to a world where it was not known and would not always be welcome. James was **written by a pastor** who himself had once been hostile to Jesus. He knew all too well how difficult it would be for most people to accept the amazing, shocking truth about Jesus of Nazareth. And as the very first pastor of the Church Jesus founded, he is writing this letter to help his congregation learn to live out their faith authentically and attractively (1:26-27) under extreme pressure (1:2).
- This letter is **deeply theological** as James roots the faith of his readers deeply in the soil of truth from Christ and about Him. For James, faith is more than just the right intellectual beliefs about Christ (though it is not less). It is about how those beliefs display themselves in ways that confirm the authenticity of a person's faith. It is one thing to claim to believe that Jesus is the Christ and to profess to be one of His followers. However, in a world where such a claim was totally foreign or worse, offensive...what would shape, protect, and strengthen one's beliefs? For James, the answer is truth from God about Christ. This is why he exhorts his readers to "*receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls*" (1:21) because that word of truth is what God used to rescue us from the kingdom of darkness. God has also used the word of truth to transform us so that we would be the first fruits displaying both the beauty and power of the gospel of Christ in order to rescue and change sinners (1:18).
- This letter is also **appropriately practical**. It describes what true religion and genuine faith actually looks like in the daily life of a believer and a church living in a pagan culture. James sums it up this way, "*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*" (1:27).
- James writes to help Christians under pressure come face to face with their faith by **exposing their true spiritual need**: wisdom from above. James declares wisdom as their true need as opposed to all the other things they believed they wanted, needed, or deserved (4:1-3). More than social status, civic recognition, political protection, or even material success (obtained by wisdom from below in

3:13-15) – they needed a particular kind of wisdom...wisdom that comes from God (wisdom from above 3:16-18).

- As their pastor, James exhorts and encourages them to ***embrace true friendship with God and reject friendship with the world*** because being aligned with the world is totally incompatible with loyal allegiance to God (4:4-5).
- James also wants ***to help them see what friendship with God looked like in daily life***. He reminds them of ***five biblical models*** of believers who cultivated and displayed a living faith in a dark, dangerous, and dying world...no matter what it cost them (Abraham, Rahab, Prophets, Job, and Elijah).

Second, three simple questions will help us get our bearings and understand the map at the start of our journey so that 1) we know where we are along the way, 2) we arrive at the right destination, and so 3) we don't miss the important lessons James intends for us to learn along the way!

I. Who is James and What Was He Like?

James 1:1: *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

There is much we could and should say about James. However, for our purposes in this series, there are four things we should recognize about the man who wrote the earliest letter to Christians in our New Testament:

A. His Personal Piety – “James the Just”

- James was the oldest of Jesus' earthly brothers (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3) and originally, he was skeptical of his half-brother and rejected his claim to be the Messiah (Mk 3:21; John 7:3-5).
- He became a genuine believer and committed, faithful follower of Jesus when Jesus appeared to him after His resurrection (1 Cor 15:7).
- He became the first pastor of the first Church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2; Acts 15).
- He was widely known for his personal holiness and piety. According to the tradition preserved in early church history he was called “James the Just.” Josephus reports that he would go to the temple in Jerusalem to pray so often that his knees developed thick callouses.

- Eventually (sometime in between AD 64-68), he was martyred by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem on account of his faith in Jesus and his commitment to the Christian way.

B. His Ministerial Credibility – Wise and Gracious Leadership

- His ministry was marked by wisdom from above as evidenced by how he handled difficult questions and relational conflict as the first pastor of the Church of Jerusalem.
- He had to navigate powerful personalities...Peter and Paul.
- He had to answer difficult questions between Jews and Gentiles.
- He had to keep relational harmony without compromising doctrinal fidelity...and had he not done so successfully, the early church could have easily been derailed.
- He had to speak lovingly and frankly to Christians he was called to shepherd who were starting to compromise their original faith!

C. His Genuine Humility – “Just James” the Servant of God and Christ.

- James could have called attention to his status as the earthly brother of Jesus Christ
- He could have announced his role as the well-known and respected pastor of the Church at Jerusalem - first and largest church in the first century or his status as the leading Christian statesman for the whole church seen in his gracious but authoritative letter to the Gentile churches in Acts 15.
- Instead, he describes himself as a “servant” of God and of Jesus Christ. The term “servant” is a polite term in our day for a despised term, “slave.” James is taking the lowest position on the social rung of his day—that of a person who belonged to another—a slave.
- However, the term also had spiritual significance for his Jewish readers. They would have seen this same term used to describe the humility and authority of other OT leaders: Moses, Joshua, and even Christ Himself.
- To believers whose lives were marked by behaviors rooted in pride, for their pastor to refer to himself as a slave was indeed a powerful statement and a convicting rebuke.

D. His Pastoral Authority – Gracious and Direct Instruction

- 50 imperatives/commands in 108 verses.
- James speaks graciously and affectionately to those he truly views as brothers and sisters (*my brothers* 1:1; 2:1,14; 3:1,10; 5:7, 12,19; *my beloved brothers* 1:16,19; 2:5)
- James speaks tenderly but authoritatively even when he must correct disobedient behavior (*hearing but not doing* 1:19-27; *speaking evil against each other* (4:11-12) or address difficult situations (*acting presumptuously with no regard for the providence or will of God* 5:13-17).
- James speaks directly and appropriately to address the real threat to their faith (*spiritual adultery* 4:4-5) and gives them true hope as he calls them to repentance (4:6-10)

II. Who is He Writing To?

James 1:1 To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings

A. Jewish Christians – “to the twelve tribes” (James 1:1)

- It had been a mere 15 years since Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the scene and announced Himself to the Jewish Nation as their long-awaited Messiah.
- Initially, His ministry created no small stir, and many of the Jews were attracted to his message, impressed by his miracles, and motivated by the benefits and blessings he bestowed on them. However, when the Romans started to notice and then took extreme action, most of those who had initially followed Christ soon turned away. This happened to the satisfaction of the Romans and to the delight of the Jewish religious leadership.
- However, after the resurrection, a significant number of Jewish people became convinced of the truth about Jesus and became his committed followers...so many that by Acts 7 the initial band of 120 followers had grown to more than 5,000 committed believers!
- Nor were these believers limited to Jerusalem. As word spread from city to city that Messiah had really come, there were Jews in those cities who also became genuine believers and committed followers of Jesus Christ.

B. Displaced/Dispersed due to Persecution – “in the Dispersion/Diaspora” ***(Acts 8:1-4)***

*Acts 8:1-4: And there arose on that day a **great persecution** against the church in Jerusalem, and **they were all scattered** throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. . .⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*

- By the time James wrote this epistle, there were Jewish Christians scattered in almost every city around Judea, Samaria, and throughout all of Asia Minor.
- Some churches were established when faithful Jews who had been converted at Pentecost returned home and testified about Jesus (Rome for example). Other churches were established when early Christian missionaries like Paul and Barnabas came to their cities and announced the truth about Jesus first to the Jews at their synagogues. However, many Jewish Christians ended up in cities far from their original homes due to the intense persecution that came upon the early church in Acts 8.
- Initially, that persecution came from the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. Eventually, it would rise up from the Jewish leaders in every city.
- So, these early Jewish Christians found themselves persecuted by their fellow Jews and rejected and despised by the Gentiles in the cities where they had fled.

C. Struggling to Maintain a Living and Vibrant Faith

- Economically they were impoverished and afflicted by the rich (5:1-6).
- Socially they were despised for their identification with Christ (2:6-7).
- Relationally they were at odds with each other (4:1-12).
- Spiritually they were under pressure to compromise their loyalty to Christ (4:4).
- They were tempted to accommodate and acclimate in ways that were dangerous to their spirituality, damaging to the gospel, and disloyal to Christ.

How would they survive? And more importantly, how would they maintain a vibrant, living faith under this kind of intense pressure and persecution?

They needed to cultivate a living faith in a dark and dying world. That kind of faith must be:

- **Wholehearted – genuine**
- **Single focused – committed**
- **Fully trusting – dependent**

III. Why is He Writing—what is James’ Main Concern?

James 1:26–27: 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 is concerned that the living, vibrant faith that once marked the lives of these believers had been damaged, diverted, or diluted to the point that their “religion” had lost its powerful impact and had become merely an empty profession of following Christ.

Instead of wholehearted, single focused, fully trusting devotion and allegiance to Christ and to each other, their lives and churches had become marked by:

- Lack of endurance under pressure (1:12)
- Sinfulness and spiritual deception (1:13-16)
- Hearing but not doing the Word of God (1:22-25)
- Faith not accompanied by works (2:14-26)
- The wrong use of the tongue to devour each other instead of giving credible and beautiful witness to the Gospel (3:1-4:3)
- Wisdom from below instead of wisdom from above (3:13-18)
- Partiality and preferential treatment by honoring those who did not honor Christ (2:1-13).
- Presumptuous behavior on the providence and will of God (4:13-17)
- Afflicting other believers (5:1-6).

But what was at the root of all of these symptoms? What was the real issue that James intended to address that was damaging their faith and destroying the credibility of the gospel’s power in their lives?

They embraced the wrong wisdom. They had adopted the wrong wisdom by which to shape and direct their lives. They were operating with wisdom from below instead of living by the wisdom God gave in His Word (James 3:13-17) which was the reason for their bad behavior.

And all of this bad living was rooted in a horrific reality—they had become double-minded in their love and commitment to Christ!

They had become worldly. They had embraced friendship with worldliness that was incompatible with their love and commitment to Christ! They had developed alignment with the world that was deeply disloyal to their relationship with Christ.

James makes this very clear to them when he says this: *“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God”* (4:4). ***Embracing the wrong wisdom led to worldliness of a double heart and this was deadly to a living, vibrant, credible faith!***

Conclusion:

So, as we wrap up our preparation for the journey we are about to embark on with James, there are two important issues that we need to address:

1. What does James want us to do about all of this? (4:5-10)

- Doublemindedness in this letter is actually more than indecisiveness or struggling to make decisions. For James, it is spiritual disloyalty. Friendship with the world betrays our friendship with Christ.
- And when we allow this to happen in our hearts, God does not just stand by and watch it happen. The Holy Spirit that indwells us strives earnestly to bring us back to a single-hearted devotion to God (4:6) One of the ways in which He wins us back to Christ is by opposing the evidences and actions in our lives that come from pride. God opposes the proud!

- James tells us directly that when we find ourselves wrapped up in a disloyal friendship with the world, we are to take immediate and decisive action:
 - a. We must humble ourselves and submit to God (4:7)
 - b. We must resist the Devil and his temptations (4:7)
 - c. We must return to God by drawing near to Him (4:8)
 - d. We must repent by cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts (4:8)
 - e. We must humble ourselves under the wonderful grace and enablement from God and wait for Him to fulfill His promise to restore and lift us up (4:10) by doing the next right thing (4:17).

2. Why does James want us to care about this?

James 5:19-20¹⁹My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

We should care about this because:

- a. The gospel calls us to love each other enough to seek to restore our brothers who have wandered from the truth.*
- b. Our love for Christ motivates us to call others to return to single-hearted devotion to Christ and to pray for them until it happens!*

Notice the prayer that James points us to: the effectual working of the prayer of a righteous man will avail even when a believer has wandered away from Christ and formed an alliance with the world.

The prayer of Elijah that James points to is found in 1 Kings 17-18 where Elijah appears before King Ahab and announces that the rain will not come until he commands it to rain again (1 Kings 17:1-7).

You will notice something interesting in that passage—there is no record of Elijah praying at all when he appeared before Ahab.

However, in that same chapter, there is an amazing example of the powerful effect of Elijah's prayer when he raises the widow's dead son (1 Kings

17:17-24). Why did James not use this as the example of what powerful praying could accomplish?

However, 3 years and 6 months later, Elijah gathers the whole nation at Mt. Carmel in a great contest between Jezebel's god Baal and the true God. ***And this time he confronts and then he prays.***

Note the confrontation: 1 Kings 18:21 And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "***How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.***" ***And the people did not answer him a word.***

Now listen to his prayer: 1 Kings 18:36–39 And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, ***let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.***³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, ***that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.***"³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.³⁹ ***And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."***

Pastor Sam, what is your point? The nation of Israel had a divided heart, and there was only one solution. ***Only God could turn their hearts back to Him!*** And He used a faithful prophet to preach to and pray for His people as the means by which He did this!

There is only one cure for a divided heart to be restored to its whole-hearted, single-focused, unified devotion to God...and it is ***for God's grace to turn that heart back*** from its attraction to and affection for what the world has offered that has drawn them away from Christ.

And only two things are powerful enough for the Spirit of God to use to accomplish what may seem impossible to us:

- **His Word:** Elijah said, I am your servant and I have done all these things at your word! (This is why James introduces himself as a servant of God in 1:1).
- **Fervent, faithful prayer:** Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back! (This is why James places such a stress on receiving the implanted word

which is able to save our souls and why he encourages the effectual fervent prayers of righteous saints of God 1:21; 5:13-18).

Does it work? *It did in Elijah's day.* The heart of an entire nation was turned back to God. And *it was what James did* when he saw this same problem in the people he pastored. He preached truth to them and prayed fervently for them...and the grace of God did the rest!