

James, A Servant of God

James 1:1

8/1/1999

The book of James, the first chapter. Last Sunday, we began our study in the book of James by considering together some introductory perspective on the book as a whole.

We considered together, first of all, the purpose of the book, which was to call upon professing Christians to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith by their actions. We saw that a Christianity without obedience to Christ's commands is no Christianity at all, and if our Christian profession is to be demonstrated to be genuine, that it must be accompanied by obedience to God's commands.

Then we considered together, secondly, the character of this book, and saw that it demands of the Christian a submission to the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ. It is full of commands and prohibitions. And it makes no apology for requiring Christians to conform their behavior and attitudes and speech to the will of Christ. The demands of discipleship are clearly laid out and very straightforward in unapologetic terms.

And then finally last Lords' Day, we considered together the author of the book, and saw that he was James, the half-brother of Christ—at first, an unbeliever, a mocker, a scoffer. But then, converted by Christ after Christ's resurrection, he became a leader in the Church at Jerusalem.

Now today, we want to begin to consider together the text itself in the first verse of chapter 1. Look with me, if you will, at James, chapter 1, and verse 1. Here we have James' introduction of himself and his greetings to his readers. And he says, in verse 1, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting." Now in this first verse, we have James' introduction of himself and his greetings to the recipients of the Letter. And this introduction that he gives to us in this first verse tells us three things.

First of all, this introduction tells us something about James himself. Secondly, this introduction tells us something about the God that he serves. And thirdly, it tells us something about the people to whom he is writing. And so we want to consider together each of these in turn this evening.

1A In the first place, then, let us consider together what James says about himself. Notice, if you will, what James says about himself.

Now he opens by saying with reference to himself, "James, a servant of God." That's how he introduces himself.

Now the way in which a person introduces himself tells you a great deal about him. You learn a lot about their self-identity and about their value system by what they consider to be important to tell you about themselves. If they identify themselves by their occupation, then that indicates they consider that to be the most important thing about themselves. If they identify themselves

by their nationality, then that indicates what they consider to be the most important thing about themselves.

But notice, when James wants to identify himself, how does he do so? What kind of labels does he put upon himself? Well, he identifies himself as a “servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He identifies himself in terms of his submission *to* God and in terms of his relationship *with* God.

And so the first thing James tells us about himself is not his occupation, it is not his nationality, because he did not perceive these things to be the most important thing about himself. James’ whole self-identify revolved around the fact that he was a servant of Christ, and that self-perception of *being* a servant of God formed the basis of his whole activity in life and his whole outlook upon life.

You see, for James, the fact that he was a servant of God was the central organizing principle of his life, around which everything else revolved, and with reference to which everything else was oriented. He was first and foremost, and above and beyond everything else, a servant of God. And everything else was subordinated to that and flowed out of it.

Now what this means is that he was a man who has self-consciously renounced all self-will and all self-determination. He lived in order to carry out the will of another, and therefore in every word, action, and thought, his central concern was, What is God’s desire for me in this situation? And once he had discovered the answer to that question from the Word of God, that became the sole determining factor of what course of action he would take. He was under the authority of another; he recognized it; he reveled in it; and it was the central organizing principle of his life.

Now in this matter, he was simply being a true imitator of Christ, of whom God the Father said, regarding His own Son in Isaiah 42 and verse 1, God says, regarding Christ, “Behold my servant, . . . in whom my soul delights.” And when God looked at His Son, the label that He put upon Him is “my servant.” Not only did the Father call Christ “His servant” and view Him as His servant, but Christ Himself gladly owned that title and role when He said in Mark, chapter 10 and verse 45, that the Son of Man came to serve, and when He said in Luke 22 and verse 27, “I am among you as he that serveth.”

And so Christ’s self-identity was that He was a servant. This is what His Father called Him, and this is what He saw Himself as. And James was a servant as well. Because this is what his Savior was and he desired to be like Him in that regard.

And so James had in his own life carried out the admonition of Philippians 2, verses 5 through 8, that tells us we are to let this mind be in us which was also in Christ, who took upon Himself the form of a servant and who as a result became obedient, even to the point of death.

Now I must ask you, when you think of yourself, how do you fundamentally view yourself and identify yourself? Do you fundamentally view yourself and identify yourself as a mother? As an electrician? A carpenter? An engineer? A mechanic? A programmer? Or do you fundamentally view yourself and identify yourself as a servant of God and of Jesus Christ—your vocation simply being one of the ways in which you carry out that servanthood to God and to

Christ? When someone comes up to you and asks you the question, Who are you? What is your occupation? How do you answer that question?

Well I submit to you that if you do not first of all and above all else think of yourself as a servant of Christ, and then as a servant of Christ, you happen to be a carpenter, or an engineer, or whatever, then the whole focus of your life needs to be completely reoriented.

When we become saved, we are supposed to turn from service to sin and self and Satan to become servants of God. In first Thessalonians 1 and verse 9, speaking of the *conversion* of the Thessalonians, it says of them that they “turned to God from idols in order to *serve* the living and true God.” Service to God was the characteristic of their lives, and it was their fundamental identity.

Now the concept that Christians are servants of God was the defining mark of the apostles’ lives. We can see that in their self-identification. For example, in Romans 1 and verse 1, we read, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.” In James 1:1 we read, “James, a servant of God.” In second Peter 1:1, we read, “Simon Peter, a servant of Jesus Christ.” In Jude 1 and verse 1, we read, “Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ.” And in Revelation 1 and verse 1, we read, “The revelation of Jesus Christ to his servant, John.”

So whether it was Paul or James or Peter or Jude or John, they all identified themselves first and foremost as servants. All of them were the highest of church officers, and yet without exception, they saw themselves as servants. And if this was the self-identity of Christ, and if this is the self-identity of the apostles, then certainly it ought to be our own self-identity as well.

If as Hebrews 9:14 says, “Our consciences have been purged by the blood for Christ from dead works to serve the living God,” then being a servant of God ought to be the central organizing principle of our lives, just as it was for the apostles.

We are to be a people who have self-consciously renounced *all* self-will and *all* self-determination, so that our first thought regarding all of our words and all of our actions is this: What would God have me to do here? I have no will of my own. There is only one will to consult, and that is the will of God. What does God want me to do? And the answer to that question will always be found in God’s Word. God’s will *is* God’s Word, and if we want to know what God’s will is for our life in *any* situation under any circumstance, we will always find an answer contained in the principles of that Word.

The primary responsibility of a servant is to know his master’s will and to carry it out. And the primary responsibility of a servant of God is to acquaint himself with the will of his master in order that he may do it.

And so we ask ourselves the question, How would God have me to act in this situation? How would God have me to speak to my wife or husband? How would God have me to work on my job? How would God have me employ my time on the Lord’s Day? How would God have me witness to people I have contact with? How would God have me react to adversity?

You see, in every situation we face, the question that should instantly leap into our minds is, What's God will in the matter? And then *that* becomes *my* will in the matter and charts my course of actions with reference to it.

Now the book of James is full of God's instructions to His servants. And it is precisely because James *was* a servant of God, and therefore knew His will and did His will that he was then competent to instruct others in what they should be doing to serve Christ. And you see, you can't go around telling other people how to serve Christ if you're not serving Him yourself. Until you have abandoned your own self-will and given over to Christ, you cannot call upon others to do that and expect them to follow.

And so it is a great privilege to be a servant of God, to have God own us as His servants. To permit us to serve in His kingdom is to receive a great honor. As the Scripture says, it is better, it is more honorable, to be doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the palaces of the wicked. It is far better to have the lowest place in God's service than the highest place in the Devil's.

So this then is what James says about himself. It is his self-identity. He is a servant. He has given over his will to God. Whatever God's will is becomes his will, and that is the central organizing principle of his life, around which everything revolves, and to which everything is subordinated.

And I ask you, once again, is that how you view yourself? And *is* that the central organizing principle of your life. Or is the central organizing principle of your life, entertainment? Or your career? Or your schedule?

Jesus said we are to go into all the nations and make disciples. And a disciple is simply a servant of another's will—the follower of another's direction. And so to be a Christian *is* to be a servant, and if we are no servants of Christ, then we are no Christians.

2A And that brings us then to my second point this evening. Having seen what James says about himself, notice in the second place what James says about the God he serves. Notice what James says about the God he serves.

He says, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now two truths are immediately brought to the forefront by this statement. First of all, James declares the equality of Christ with God the Father. First of all, James declares the equality of Christ with God the Father.

Now James makes an interesting statement here when he says that he is "a servant of God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, he is saying he serves them both equally. They are both his masters. He is a servant of both of them. Now this is a very significant point, in the light of Christ's own statement on the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:24, when He states, "No man can serve two masters." He says it simply can't be done. You're either going to hold to the one

and despise the other, or you're going to follow the one and ignore the other. And then He goes on to say, "You cannot serve God and mammon."

So ultimately, one can only have one master and be a servant to one lord. Therefore, if James says he is a servant to both God and Christ, and no man can serve two masters, what he is saying is that they are *One*. In essence and in will, they are a single entity, perfectly joined together—a perfectly single and unified Lord. If we were to express it mathematically, we would say that God the Father plus the Lord Jesus Christ equals One Lord. God the Father plus the Lord Jesus Christ equals one Master.

Now Jesus said in Luke 4, in verse 8, "Thou shall worship the Lord thy God and Him *only* shall thou serve." In other words, you are to only serve God and no one else as your ultimate master. So for James to have as his ultimate master both the Father *and* the Son is to show that they are both God, that they are a single unified being, in both essence and will, though they are distinct in their personal identities. James is truly serving only one master when he is serving both God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This, you see, is what Jesus meant in John chapter 10, in verse 30, when He said, "I and my Father are one." One Father plus one Son equals one God.

And so the first thing that James reveals here is the equality and unity between Christ and God the Father, in terms their wills and their essence, thus honoring the Lord Jesus as being equivalent to the Father.

Secondly, James reveals that the only service that is acceptable to God is that which is done through the person of Jesus Christ. He reveals that the only service that is acceptable to God is that which is done *through* the person of Jesus Christ. Now many, many people will tell you that they serve God, or that they *claim* to be serving God. The Muslims will tell you this. The Jews will tell you this. The Jehovah Witnesses will tell you this. "We're serving God."

But the grand distinction between those who truly serve God and those who do not is this: Do they serve the Lord Jesus Christ? Do they serve the *Lord* Jesus Christ?

In John chapter 5 and verse 23, Jesus said that "all men should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He that honors not the Son honors not the Father, who sent Him." And so anyone who rejects Christ as their Lord and Savior, who does not serve Christ but *claims* to be serving God is not serving God and is not honoring God, no matter how diligently they may work, and no matter how great of sacrifices they may make in their supposed service to God. As first Peter 2 and verse 5 says, our sacrifices to God are only acceptable to God *through* Jesus Christ.

So to try to be a servant of God without being a servant to Christ is to be no servant at all; it is rather to be a rebel. This is why the service that all unsaved people attempt to do for God is utterly rejected by God. You ask some famous person, and they do some great social work: they take in the downtrodden in India; take in the orphans; feed people; clothe people; bring massive amounts of comfort to those who are physically distressed. But they're not Christians. But they're not serving the Lord Jesus Christ. In God's mind, all of that not only counts for nothing, but is actually an act of sin. Why? Because it is not done in service to Christ, but it is done in an

effort to serve God apart from Christ. And God will have no service to Himself that does not come through Jesus Christ.

God wants us to serve Him *by* serving His Son. He wants us to honor Him *by* honoring His Son. And if we refuse to *serve* Him in this way, then how can we claim to be serving Him at all? Jesus said in John 12 and verse 26, “If any man serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honor.”

And so if you wish to be honored by God and have your service received by God, then the only way you will accomplish that is if you serve the Lord Jesus Christ. There can be, and there will be, no honor from the Father if there is no service to Jesus Christ as Lord. And so it is imperative that we be servants of Christ. And all of those who claim to be serving God and are not also serving our Lord Jesus Christ are doing no service at all—none.

Furthermore, no service to God ever could or would be acceptable without the mediation of Christ to make it acceptable. To serve God apart from Christ is to serve a God who is full of frowns and wrath and power and offended justice. If it’s just me and my service and God, and there’s no Jesus—brother, I’m in trouble! Because I am coming to a God whose justice has been offended, whose wrath has been provoked, and who is angry with the wicked every day, and who will by no means pardon the guilty.

But when I come to God with my service in the person of Christ and by the mediation of Christ and in the merit and worth of Christ, then this makes God’s countenance towards us and our service to be one of acceptance and one of approval and one of reward. And this is the reason why you cannot serve God if you are not serving Christ, because if Christ is not standing between your service and God, *mediating* it to God and making it acceptable to God, then what we are offering to God offends Him and increases His wrath against us. That’s why the Scripture says even the plowing of the wicked is sin—you know, they’re doing something if they’re plowing their field behind their horse—and every step they take is another sin, because they’re carrying out their life *independent* of Jesus Christ.

People say, Well, I never killed anybody. Well, did you ever plow your field? Did you ever go to work? Did you ever fix your car? It’s all sin when it’s done in rebellion against God’s will, and His will is that you believe on Him Whom He has sent. His will is that *whatever* you do in word or deed, you do it all to the glory of God. And how do you do it all to the glory of God? You do it through the mediation and person of Jesus Christ, and if you’re not, it’s not to the glory of God and it’s sin. You don’t have to kill people to go to hell. All you have to do is live a very good life independent of Jesus Christ and you’ll go there just fine, with plenty of wrath on your head.

Finally, when we serve God through Christ, we are able to do so through Christ who strengthens us. Which of us can really serve God without some help? Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens us,” and Jesus says, “Without me, you can do nothing.” And so those who attempt to serve God apart from Christ would never have the strength or the ability or the resources or the capacity to be able to do *anything*. Jesus says, “Without me, you can do

nothing.” And so to try to be a servant of God without being a servant of Christ means that whatever we do, it amounts to a big fat zero and nothing of any substance.

And so, when we have Christ’s help in our service, we not only have the ability to do above and beyond our natural capabilities, but our service goes from being one of drudgery to being one of delight, because it is not merely a dread or a duty that draws out our service, but it is the love of Christ that constrains us to live for Him and to serve Him who died for us and who rose again.

Why do we serve God? We serve God because we love our Lord Jesus and want to bless Him in some tiny way for the tremendous gift of grace—the unspeakable gift, the gift that can’t even be described in words—that He has given to us. We want to serve Him through Christ because it is only through Him that we can have help to do anything. We want to serve Him through Christ because it is only then that what we do is acceptable to God and gains God’s approval.

And so the very notion of trying to serve God apart from Christ is ludicrous and foolish in the extreme. It is stupid. And the reason why is because apart from Christ, all of our services are sin and only bring to us greater wrath. So when you look at all of those people who say, “Well I’m serving God,” but they ignore Christ as their Savior, they are self-deceived people, treasuring up unto themselves wrath against the day of wrath and righteous judgment of God. When do we serve God? We serve God *when* and *as* we serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and we serve Him in no other way than that.

3A And that brings me then to my third point. Having noticed what James says about himself, having noticed what James says about the God he serves, notice in the third place what James says of the people to whom he is writing. Notice what he says of the people to whom he is writing.

He says, “To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.” That’s who he’s writing to.

Now that seems like kind of a peculiar body of people to be writing to, the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad. But James has declared in Galatians 2 and verse 9 to be a “minister to the circumcision.” That is, his peculiar area of ministry was to the Jews. Paul, of course, was the great missionary to the Gentiles, though he did minister to a great many Jews. But primarily, his ministry was to the Gentiles. James, on the other hand, primarily ministered to the Jews. And he is therefore writing to the Christian Jews which are at large, who, in the early days of Christianity were still viewed as the twelve tribes.

Now you remember, in the early days of Christianity, who was it that God saved? Well, on the Day of Pentecost there were 3,000 Jews. And then a few days later, after the healing of the lame man, there was another 5,000 Jews. And we see that this idea of preaching the Gospel to Gentiles was entirely foreign, when we get to Acts chapter 10. And in fact, Peter was called on the carpet for *doing* it. And it wasn’t until a significant time after the Day of Pentecost that it began to be generally recognized that Gentiles could be brought in without becoming Jews. And you remember, this was the big controversy in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council. And the question was, Do Gentiles have to become Jews before they can become Christians?

So we have to understand, in the early church there was this Jewish emphasis, there was this Jewish perspective, and there was this Jewish bias that viewed God as still working in and through the twelve tribes. But notice the way he describes them: “The twelve tribes *scattered* abroad.”

Now why does James use this descriptive terminology? Why take note of this aspect of their existence that they are “scattered abroad”? Well, chiefly because the twelve tribes were not supposed to be scattered abroad. They were supposed to be all gathered in the land of Israel, and there serving God within its borders. And the fact that they were scattered abroad was the result of their rebellion and disobedience to God. In short, because they *did not* serve God and were not servants *to* God as they should’ve been, they were driven out—driven out of the land, scattered across the face of the earth. And the fact that James takes note of their scattering is bringing to their attention the fact of their disobedience and failure to serve God, which was the cause of it.

Sin always drives people out from God’s place of blessing. The angels were driven out of heaven because of sin. Adam was driven out of the Garden of Eden because of sin. And Israel was driven out of the land because of sin. And I believe that James mentions this reproach of being scattered for the sake of reminding them of what happens when they do not serve God. And that is, that they come under the judgment of God. You see, the problem with the Jews is that they *were*’t servants of God, were they?

In other words, failure to serve God faithfully brings His judgment upon His covenant people, and they were in a condition of being scattered abroad, which was a vivid reminder of that truth and a reproach to these people.

Now James is just about to give five chapters of instructions on how to serve God. And the reminder to them of what happens when they *do* not would certainly grab their attention and motivate them to listen to and follow the instructions that he is about to give them on what it means to serve God.

And so, the question I asked you earlier, how do you fundamentally view yourself and what is the central organizing principle of your life, comes before us again. Are you a servant of God? Well, if you are *not* a servant of God, as the fundamental organizing principle of your life, then what do you have reason to believe may occur? That God’s judgment will come upon His people who will not serve Him. For the Jews, it was scattering. For the Christian, it’s chastisement, because the Bible says that we have been bought with a price, we are *not* therefore to be servants of men.

Christ has purchased us for Himself to be His servants, and when we wind up serving someone else, or serving ourselves, or serving the world, God will bring His servants back to the position that He has called them to and redeemed them for. And it is not because God is some cruel taskmaster. But what He knows is that service to *Him* is far superior than service to Satan. It’s far superior than service to self. It’s far superior than service to sin. And so He brings us back into His service because therein lies the path of blessing and goodness to us.

The encouraging thing about this statement is that among these twelve scattered tribes, God has chosen and saved some of them. Even though they're under God's judgment, or being scattered, shows that He has compassion even upon those who are under that judgment, and that He redeems and restores a remnant from them by His unmerited grace. You would think God would finally be done with the twelve tribes and say, "Lo, I go to the Gentiles." But even among those people that had so radically and consistently rebelled against Him, He chooses out a remnant by His grace and mercy. And among those twelve tribes there were Christians who God had elected and who Christ had saved.

The other encouraging thing about this statement is that it conveys to us the comfort that whenever and wherever God's people are, He has a care for them and sends ministry *to* them to preserve and mature them in their faith. Our location never separates us from the shepherding care of God.

You see, the Jews were scattered abroad. Where was God? Well, His covenant place of dwelling was the land and the temple. And yet even though His people were scattered across the face of the earth, God was faithful to send a message and a messenger to them, not only to bring them the Gospel, but also bring them the means of growth and edification. God is a God that is near. He is a God that is at hand. He is not a God that is afar off for His people.

And so wherever you are, be you scattered ever so far and under ever so much difficult circumstances, you are near to God. Though it is Providence, you may be a stranger in a strange land, yet you are never far from God.

So the encouragement and the exhortation and the example to us of this first verse is simply this: We must be a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And if we follow that service diligently and faithfully, we will have the blessings of God. And if we do not, then we will be a people who will be scattered. God is good to His people and He's faithful to His people. And yet, He's very clear and plain with His people. Jesus gave parable after parable about a man who left his business in the hands of stewards, of servants, and then he went away, and then he came back, and he took account. And those who were faithful were rewarded, and those who were not were cast out into outer darkness. They were, if you will, scattered from God.

And so may the Lord help us, then, as we approach the book of James, to do so with the central organizing principle of our life being this: What would God have me to do? And then *listen* to His voice as He *tells* us what He would have us to do in various circumstances. What would God have me to do in times of difficulty and trial? Verse 2, and 3 and 4 tell us. What would God have me to do when I lack wisdom? Verse 5 tells us. How should I pray? Verses 6 through 8 tell us. How should I view myself in relationship to rich people? Verses 9 and 10 and 11 tell us. How should I deal in the face of temptation? Verses 12 through 16 tell us. And we can go on.

What do we have here? We have the directions of the master for his servant in every kind of situation.

And so may the Lord help us to purpose this evening to renew our commitment to being servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might be those who are gathered in that great day by that gracious word, “Come ye blessed into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Because it is *by our service* that the genuineness of our saving faith is going to be demonstrated.

And have you ever noticed that in all of the descriptions of the Day of Judgment, the judgment is always based on works? That is, God looks at our behavior to determine whether we have been genuinely converted or not. Now our works do not save us, but they do declare whether we have genuine faith, or whether we have spurious, dead, false, and delusive faith. And this is why James calls upon us to be a servant and to carry out God’s will. Because by there doing, we will demonstrate that our faith in Christ is indeed genuine. And if it’s not, we won’t be able to do it. Unsaved people cannot obey and carry out the book of James. They just can’t do it because they do not have the nature of God dwelling within them, and they do not have the help of Christ assisting them. And so it’s the great revelator of who has true faith or does not.

Well, let us pray together. Father, thank you for this blessed book and for the blessed man who wrote it. Father, thank you that James was a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, I pray that you would help us to follow his example. May the central organizing principle of our life be that we are servants of God, and the central thought in our mind regarding every circumstance is, What would God have me to do here? And then, Father, may we humbly and faithfully carry out that will.

Oh, Father, give us grace to do what we know your will is. You know how the flesh rises up and how we rebel and resist. Father, give us grace and strength to say, Yes, and to do your will. Father, we ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen