

The Letter of James  
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Sunday morning, March 30, 2008

Over a year ago I planned that I would preach through the short book of Jonah, and then Genesis, and then come to the New Testament letter of James. And so in February of last year we spent four weeks in Jonah, and then spent most of the rest of the year in the book of Genesis. And now we come to this powerful New Testament letter of James. I'm not sure what will be next—probably something in the Old Testament, because I want to preach the whole counsel of God and therefore it seems good to alternate between books of the New Testament and the Old Testament. So now, after spending much of last year in the Old Testament, we begin a sermon series on the letter of James in the New Testament.

The letter of James is intensely practical. It is “in-your-face” practical Christianity. James is no-nonsense when it comes to proclaiming how Christians ought to live. He gives command after command, giving clear and bold instructions on a variety of real-life issues. Trials, sin, favoritism, taming the tongue, quarrels and fights, wealth, prayer. These are all things that James addresses.

And James doesn't always present his instructions with the amount of gentleness we might like. I think he does “speak the truth *in love*” (Ephesians 4:15). He writes over and over, “my brothers,” “my beloved brothers.” He has a great love for those to whom he's writing. But he doesn't speak the truth in love in a way that makes the pill any easier to swallow. It's still piercing, convicting truth that is going to sting if we really listen to it.

This letter is going to step on all of our toes. It's going to get in our faces and rebuke us, challenge us, make us uncomfortable. It's going to test our genuineness. If there is hypocrisy in us, pride, selfishness, divisiveness, love of comfort, then James is going to point that out to us. If we are comfortable talking about theology and analyzing the meaning of biblical passages, but we are not willing to do the hard things that those passages call us to do, then James is going to bring that contradiction out into the light and let us see it.

So let's prepare ourselves, brothers and sisters, for how God is going to change us as we meditate on this letter together over the coming months. I'll tell you, frankly, that I'm a little bit scared as I embark on this sermon series, because I'm already convicted. And I know I'm going to be convicted all along. And I know that there's always the temptation to soften the offensive and uncomfortable commands of Scripture. If we really hear these words and let them pierce our hearts, then it's going to hurt. And our natural reaction will be to reinterpret the command or minimize it or ignore it.

My prayer for us as we study this letter (my prayer for myself and for all of us) is that we will truly listen to God's Word through His servant James, and that we will be radical enough to take it at face value and do what it says.

What I want to do now is read through this letter together. (page number in pew Bibles \_\_\_\_\_).

As a way of introducing the letter, I want us to hear it preached in its entirety. It's a short letter. It will take about ten minutes for me to read. And I want us to listen to James preach this message to us. As I read this letter, I don't want anyone to sit there and think,

“Yeah, I know someone who needs to hear that. I know someone who is a hearer and not a doer. I know someone who shows partiality. I know someone who says they have faith but does not have works. I know someone who can’t tame their tongue. I know someone who is a friend of the world.” That is not the way to listen to this letter. That is the way to avoid the conviction of this letter and protect your self-righteous ego. What we need to do, what we all need to do, is listen to what this letter has to say to ME. How do I need to respond to this? How do I need to react to trials in my life? How do I need to deal with temptation? How do I need to tame my tongue? How do I need to be humbled? How do I need to put my faith into practice? What should my prayer life be like? All of these questions need to have their impact on us personally. So listen to this letter, and apply it to your own soul.

This is an amazing letter, and I am so excited for us to live in this letter for the next few months. I’m excited for the ways in which this letter is bound to sanctify us. Through God’s Word we will be shaped more and more into the likeness of Jesus. We will be convicted of sins that we may have ignored in our lives. We will be spurred on to exercise our faith, and to do things that are outside our comfort zone.

I believe that a study of the letter of James right now is both timely and relevant for our congregation. It is timely because even this morning we are going to discuss and vote on whether we should begin having our Sunday morning gatherings downtown, which is part of our desire to put our faith into action in serving this city and reaching this city with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We want to authentically live out the Gospel in this city, to the glory of God. It’s also inevitable that we will face trials as we do this. And therefore it will be encouraging to study these passages about perseverance in the midst of trials. And so this letter is very timely right now in this season of transition.

A study of James’ letter is also very relevant to us, because we are a congregation with a lot of head knowledge. And I don’t say that proudly. I say it to our shame, if we are not putting into practice the things we know and understand in our heads. We are like James’ original audience in some ways, because they weren’t confused about any major theological issue. What they needed, and what James so clearly delivers to them in this letter, is a wake-up call to take their knowledge and put it into practice. This is so relevant for us, Grace Church. God has entrusted us with such a rich understanding of who He is, and what He has done through Jesus Christ, and we need to be challenged by this letter to be doers of the word and not hearers only. We need to look into our hearts and apply the truths we know in our heads. We need to take a painful look at ourselves and see that theological understanding and biblical knowledge does not equal holiness. James will force us beyond head knowledge to the heart issues of our faith. And as we humbly receive these rebukes and commands, the benefits will be immense. We will grow in our delight of God. We will grow in our love for one another. We will find more joy in serving others. We will be less hindered by the love of wealth and comfort. Brothers and sisters, God is going to sanctify us through this book. And greater holiness always brings greater happiness. The sanctification process will hurt along the way, but the ongoing result is greater and greater joy in God. So let’s immerse ourselves in this letter, anticipating that God will do great things.

Let me close with one observation from verse 1. I simply want to point out the way that James introduces himself, as a “slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Your translation might say “servant” or “bond-servant,” but the Greek word there is

*doulos*, and it means more specifically, “slave.” James here acknowledges his absolute dependence upon God and Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is his Lord, his Master, and James is the slave. A *doulos* is someone who is owned by his master. Someone who is completely dependent upon the master. Someone who owes everything to the master. Someone who has given up all personal rights and is utterly resigned to the will of the master. I talked about this in a recent sermon, as we looked at Romans 6 and saw that every person is either a slave of sin or a slave of God. Either you are owned and controlled by sin, or you are owned and controlled by God. And James begins his letter by identifying himself as a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And let me ask each of you, now: Are you, like James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ? Is He your master? Do you belong to Him? Have you renounced your own fleshly desires in order to do (and to want to do) *His* will? This is the slavery we enter as Christians. You might be thinking, “But I don’t want to be a slave. I want to be free.” Let me tell you, friend, that this is the only way to be free. EVERYONE is a slave, either to sin or to God. Those who think they are free because they have run away from God—they are enslaved to their own prideful rebellion. And they think it will bring them joy, but it will only bring misery and emptiness, and then eternal punishment. What we all so desperately need is to be set free from sin and enslaved to God. We need to be slaves of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is where true freedom is found. This is where there is lasting joy and satisfaction and pleasure.

And how does this happen? It happens when we are born again by the word of truth. James mentions this in 1:18, where he is speaking of the Father of lights and says, “Of his own will he brought us forth [that is, caused us to be born anew] by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” The word of truth, which is the Gospel message, is what God uses to give us a new birth. And when He causes us to be born again, we then become one of His. We are set free from our bondage to sin, and we now belong to Him. So I challenge you this morning, if you are running from God, ignoring God, wanting to be “free” from God, don’t think that you’re going to achieve true freedom. You are running in the wrong direction. You are on a suicide mission. Turn around! Repent! Acknowledge your slavery to sin, and plead with Christ to forgive you and to make you one of His own. Like James, become a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.