

OK, I have to admit something here. Before last week, I never read one line of the Book of James. I didn't know anything about what it says, and to be even more honest, I didn't really care. To me, the real meat and potatoes of the Bible came from the Four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - and to my extremely naïve and immature attitude - any other books in the New Testament were just extras to fill up space.

Well, I hope God's listening this morning, because I have to apologize for being so casual and lazy about hearing God's Word and accepting the many ways in which it comes to us, because after reading some commentaries and other resources which go into depth and take care to truly explain what is meant by these five short chapters, I see that James could easily be the basis for a year-long study on how to live a Christian life as God intended. Line by line, there are significant suggestions and directives which we who believe already probably are aware of, but which we as humans often find hard to follow. The Book of James is the Owner's Manual for living our faith, and it deserves a place of honor in our hearts for what it offers us.

Last week, we spent time looking at the person of James and considering how his life might have impacted early Christianity. We found that he was the primary leader of the Jews who came to believe in Jesus Christ, and he served in many ways as the administrator of the whole movement as it began in those early years.

Beginning today, we're going to consider and study the text of the book whose words are attributed to him – and hopefully, we'll not only step back into the time of our early church, but – after considering what James may have intended to say to those early Christians – we'll bring those words to usefulness today in our lives. It is likely that this book was the first actual book written after Christ's death – somewhere between 45 and 48 AD – but its truths resonate even today.

I'd like to start this study with an excerpt from the New Testament Edition of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, by John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck. It states...

***“The book of James is more of a lecture than a letter, and was obviously prepared for public reading as a sermon to the scattered congregations. The tone of the book is authoritative and includes 54 imperatives (volitional mood of command in the Greek, "do it now!") in 108 verses; this is on average one call for action in every other verse. James used more figures of speech, analogies, and imagery from nature than all of Paul's epistles together. James conveyed profound concepts with well-chosen words. His sentences are short, simple, and direct. The epistle of James has been called a literary masterpiece that is both picturesque and passionate, and combines the beauty of Greek with the stern intensity (earthiness) of Hebrew.”***

Interesting, isn't it? Then let's get started.

James begins by introducing himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” It's a pretty simple introduction – the audience he's writing to include the twelve tribes of Israel who, at this time, have spread out all over the land, “scattered among the nations.” They already know who he is – and so his introduction is more intimate, and sets the tone for the rest of this writing, emphasizing his servanthood and role as leader/believer.

James isn't just passing some time with friendly comments and suggestions – he's sending serious instruction to the Jews who accept Jesus – Jews who are at this time being persecuted for their beliefs (which is why they've taken to the highway). It's likely these folk are being hit hard with all kinds of doubts about their decision, and they're facing confusion, fear, sorrow, injustice, loneliness, poverty, sickness, loss of home and family members and livelihood - the "trials of many kinds," referred to in Chapter 1:2. So in this context, we already know that James has to pull from his own belief system words of comfort and support – and specific ideas as to what these people can do to keep the faith.

In earlier verses, James speaks of how, as God's Children, the people will have to go through trials to ultimately reach the joy of loving God. Let's hear some of it, so we can have a frame of reference to work from:

***Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind...Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.***

Now, if you were stuck in the middle of some desert, without all of your family and with little to do – this would be a little hard to take. But James intends to remind the new church that, as believers, it's their duty to be patient and to stay with God through their trials, because at the end of it all comes some serious peace and understanding. It's part of a process that some commentaries call the "Spiritual Dynamics of Trials" with a pattern that goes like this: trial – testing – perseverance – maturity. Bringing the text up to application for today, this makes sense!

Think back on some challenge or trial you've recently had in your life – and think about how, sometimes, you just felt that God had deserted you (that's the testing part). But, because you came back to trusting God's faith and love – you persevered in your belief – the trial resolved as it was meant to, and you grew in your faith – you matured. This is where the joy comes in, because you have grown to another level of understanding the power of what your faith in God can do in your heart and in your life. And the next time something appears to throw you off course, you're that much stronger to face it. James knew the 12 Tribes needed to understand why they were going through this difficult time, and this part of his message was designed to keep them focused on what good can come from their faith.

Coming into the verses from last week, then, we find that James realizes the people are probably having some difficulties getting along, and so he addresses concerns about hearing the word and living it honestly. From the interpretation, [The Message](#), listen to this section:

## **James 1:17-27 (The Message)**

**So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.**

**Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage...**

**Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.**

**But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.**

**Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.**

Here, James is telling the early Christians (and us!) it's not enough to hear the Word – we must also act on it. It's very possible they were jockeying for position of importance and stature in their groups. Few were notables and wealthy sorts, but many were likely used to a certain level of respect, and there was probably a fair amount of infighting (thus the reference to an angry tongue). Because James was so dedicated to the teaching of Jesus (and it is said this book reflects many of the specific teachings from the Sermon on the Mount), James found it necessary to remind the people that saying you "believe" and doing something else all together isn't going to work with God – in truth, it's not possible to say you believe in Jesus and do nothing – because Jesus could never have just sat and watched the world struggle on its own. We are called to serve, as Jesus did. Period.

Which brings us to today's scripture – the second chapter in the Book of James. This book reinforces the charge we heard in the first book – we're reminded that God loves everyone, and so should we. But we need to also keep a watchful eye on how we treat those who "have," and those who "have not;" and when it comes to how God accepts us, it doesn't matter how much of anything you have. God's love levels the field – and no matter how much a person has, no matter what level of education they have – none of what is important to us in this life matters to God.

So there are specific descriptions in Chapter 2 related to how each person who comes to the temple door should be treated. In one instance, James tells the newly-converted Jews out in the desert to refrain from their traditional, more negative habits of offering special attention and privilege to the wealthy and important in their community. While most of the early Christians were quite poor, at this time it's very possible that more affluent members of the community have heard the word and have joined the dispersed groups.

Affluent members of the City of Jerusalem were used to special treatment and recognition in return for favors. But, often they were the same people who took advantage of the regular folk, and James

reminds them that even though they're well-off and influential, they're also the ones who have mistrusted this new faith and taken part in the many forms of persecution of the new Christians.

The rub here is that they still deserve and will receive the Love of God...just like the lowliest member of the community...because God doesn't show favoritism. But, James says the dispersed should take care not to allow wealth to influence them and to hold a high place in what they do and who they choose to lead the new church; they are reminded that having wealth can tempt them from the true riches of the faith...from God's call to impartial, unconditional love. He warns them to remember what the focus of their faith is...

And there's a specific call to give those who aren't lovable enough a rightful place in a community as well. Remembering that Jesus chose the lowly, and that God loves everyone, James reiterates that faith that Jesus calls us to (according to one commentary), one of **"...consistent love, not just polite ushering. People of low income are to be fully welcomed into the life of the church. The passage calls us to be blind to economic differences in how we offer our ministries. The poor person is as worthy of our discipline and pastoral care and love as the person who has the means to rescue our church from its budget crisis...if wealth does hinder people's receptivity to the gospel, and if God does commonly choose poor people to inherit the kingdom, then the church should invest heavily in evangelism toward the poorer levels of society."**

In other words, in this section of the book, James is telling the Jews (and us) to truly live in faith as modeled by Jesus, and to focus on what that faith does in each of us. James says those who hear God's call and live as God intends will find it possible to accept anyone into the circle of their lives. Believers are called to act and to serve...

What does this mean for us today?

It means that living as Jesus lived frees us from separating ourselves from others because of wealth and power. It means that living as Jesus lived frees us from materialism and a focus on having more. It means that living as Jesus lived frees us from racism because we are one in God's eyes...we can love others as Jesus loves us, because we know how good it feels to be included in that amazing love and given that amazing gift of new life. And it means that if we follow the Royal Law of loving others as we are loved by God, all the weight of living becomes lighter and more manageable, because those daily pressures and challenges aren't the center of our lives. God is...

We aren't wandering around in the middle of a desert, trying to survive and escape persecution for what we believe and do – but, we could make a good argument for metaphorically saying we're a small band of new Christians in the wilderness of the year 2009, learning how to truly follow what Jesus taught. James spoke to those dispersed groups so long ago – but his words resonate with us today, because it seems that the challenges and struggles don't go away. Each generation acquires a different collection of issues that it must face; but if we listen carefully to the words and teachings of one who knew Jesus well and loved him even more – and if we act, as James did, from our hearts and from the love we receive from God – maybe we'll be writing some encouraging letters of our own someday.

God's Peace to us all as we continue this journey of discovery in faith...Amen.