

# **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 12 Reading Guide

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James 3:13-18

We buy oranges by the bag. While those bags are generally filled with healthy and delicious fruit, once in a while, that fragrant, pristine peel hides a nefarious secret — the orange is actually rotten. You're repulsed when you put the fruit in your mouth and realize that what you have is a soured and counterfeit version of what you were expecting. Eventually, the truth comes out. Eventually, it's seen for what it truly is. Eventually, we realize the rotten thing in our hands is fit only for the garbage (and perhaps the raccoons).

A great many masks bearing the name "wisdom" are paraded about in our society. But they are, in fact, nothing more than self-aggrandizing attempts to make sense of our disjointed concepts of self or to justify our most base desires. This "wisdom," for instance, sounds like the encouragement to allow feelings to dictate decisions. This "wisdom" sounds like a call to authenticity, which is often, really, just an unwillingness to adhere to objective truth so that "right" and "wrong" become nebulously shifting targets. At its core, this thing masquerading as wisdom is, in fact, an elevation of the self, and, eventually, this "wisdom" will be proven fraudulent by its fruits of disorder and wickedness.

James wrote into a cultural milieu rife with the same farcical "wisdom" as we experience today. And as a pastor writing to a group of believers from afar, James is warning them against the divisive dangers of any "wisdom" which elevates selfish desires above all else. Instead, James holds up true wisdom, wisdom from above, wisdom that is pure and peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. This wisdom is characterized by humility, and it seeks the good of others long before it seeks to prioritize self.

We need this wisdom today, but it doesn't magically appear in our lives. There is a biblical fluency, a gospel-awareness, by which this wisdom and peace come to characterize life. Wisdom is from the Lord. As we receive with meekness the implanted Word, as we grow in our understanding of who God is, how God loves us, and the kind of life that God desires for us, we realize increasingly that this life isn't about us. It can't be. And that's a freeing, joyful thing because of who we are in Christ and because of what the gospel says is true of us. It's only as we grow in our awareness of that reality that we can respond with kindness to those whose words wound us. It is only as we grow in that awareness that we're able to graciously consider and pray for those with whom we vehemently disagree. That is what it means, at least in part, to pray *your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. The wisdom of God, which results in peace, is not of this world. Still, the Lord graciously grants it so that His children might live with hope and unity and confident joy amidst the ever-turbulent waves of this life. 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**

*Jeremiah 9*

We are not the first people to feel the tugging appeal of a counterfeit wisdom. Jeremiah 9 provides a glimpse of the devastation wrought by lives built upon the elevation of selfish desires and inflated egos. Instead, we are called to boast in the Lord, in our attachment to the One who has made all things and knows all things and is, in His very nature, loving and just and righteous.

**Wednesday | Thursday**

*Matthew 21:1-11*

Matthew's Gospel has a special affinity for the *meekness* of Jesus. In the passage above, which recounts Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey and young colt, we are shown a glimpse of the magnificent power and holy beauty of the meekness of Jesus. Jesus was entering as a king, as *the King*, and yet he did so unassumingly, all of this a portent of the kind of life to which he would call his followers. This meekness of Jesus characterizes the wisdom from above which James extols, and we would do well to consider this example from Jesus this week.

**Friday | Saturday**

*Colossians 3:12-17*

We cannot hope to generate the wisdom from above according to our own strength of spirit or mental fortitude. It's a product of our new life in Christ. And in these verses, Paul reminds us of the correlation between the work of the Spirit, the growth of others-serving love, and the peace which results from a life defined by God-given wisdom.

## Life Group Questions | James 3:13-18

- 1) Consider this passage in light of the previous one on the nature and dangers of the tongue (3:1-12). How might this passage be considered a “response” to James’s warnings against the tongue? How does this passage reflect the way that James has described or alluded to wisdom elsewhere in his letter?
- 2) How would you, in your own words, describe the worldly wisdom which James here warns against? More to the point, how do you see the influence of this false wisdom around you (or in the world more generally) and why is it destructive?
- 3) At its core, false, worldly wisdom is inherently selfish. Why is the self such a dangerous foundation upon which to build our understanding of life and truth? How are you most prone to pursue this self-centered version of wisdom (be it with your free time, your finances, your view of those with whom you disagree, etc)?
- 4) The British monk Venerable Bede, commenting on this passage, once said, “For someone who lives in a humble and wise way will give more evidence of his standing before God than any number of words could ever do.” How would you apply Bede’s assessment of this passage in James to your own life?
- 5) Read **Matthew 21:1-11**. Jesus epitomized the humility and meekness which is characteristic of divine wisdom. How does the account of the Triumphal Entry portray the humility of Christ? Would those who know you best say that your life is characterized by the humble wisdom of God? Why or why not?
- 6) How might you participate with the Spirit in growing your understanding of what it means to live according to the wisdom of God? What might need to change in your life in order for that growth to happen?
- 7) Is your life primarily characterized by peace, both as it pertains to the inner machinations of your mind and your interpersonal relationships? If not, how might you be harboring the false wisdom of the world that you need to exchange for the humble wisdom of God?