

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 18 Reading Guide

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

James 5:12

At some point, you likely have been watching a movie and noticed that the audio is not synced with the video. The voices don't match the moving lips. The sound effects leave you feeling discombobulated because what you see is not reflective of what you hear. That incongruence between sight and sound makes it nearly impossible to continue watching the movie.

In some ways, that discrepancy between sight and sound provides a portrait of James's argument in 5:12. Throughout this letter, he has spoken of the significance of living a life of spiritual integrity, a life wherein our actions match our professions of faith, a life wherein our words match our claim of humble submission to a gracious and sovereign God. Just as it only takes a half-second discrepancy between audio and video to make a movie unwatchable, the words and actions of our lives will reveal whether or not we are living in alignment with our profession of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This verse may sound funny because few of us offer oaths with any regularity. But the thrust of it is, simply put, that as Christians we must be a people of integrity, whose words are matched by the actions of our lives. And while our immediate reflex may be to protest against the idea that we have any proclivity toward dishonesty because we compare our lives with the grandiose deceptions of those around us, we may find that we are more fluid with the truth than we'd care to admit.

Consider how easy it is to tell half-truths or carefully constructed “truths” that are really just sleight of hand preventing us from having to be totally honest with folks in our life groups or family circles. Consider how easy it is to offer partial truths to our children when they ask questions that we don't want to answer or when we don't know how to respond. Consider how simple and accepted it is to provide a slightly manipulated version of the truth to a boss or co-worker in order to win their approval. In some ways, it feels like deception as a means to an end is really just an accepted currency in our world. We expect it from politicians and celebrities and media outlets. But we're

shocked when conflict arises within the church because folks offer some broken or half-baked version of the truth.

So how do we push against the double-tongued vernacular of the world around us? We regularly ask the Spirit to reveal places of incongruence in our lives. We spend time in God's Word so that we see where that inconsistency might exist. We intentionally participate in a lovingly intrusive community that speaks gospel truth and listens with gospel-informed minds and loves with gospel-transformed hearts in such a way that reminds us that we don't always have to be okay, but that the gospel frees us to be honest about it.

Is there congruence between what we say and how we live? Do we live as if our words, our promises, carry the name of Jesus because we carry the name of Jesus? 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
Matthew 5:33-37; 23:16-22

Once again we see an example of the words of Jesus echoing in the words of James. In these two passages in Matthew's Gospel Jesus offers prescriptive detail for life in his Kingdom as compared to the deceitful practices of those who follow the way of the world.

Wednesday | Thursday
Leviticus 19:1-12

Just as we have seen the ways that Jesus's teachings influenced James, so too have we witnessed the influence of Leviticus (especially Leviticus 19) on this letter. As you read through these verses, consider what is at stake in the issued commands. It is not simply a matter of telling the truth that is at stake, but of representing the name and glory of the Lord.

Friday | Saturday
Psalm 101

The psalmist is offering an exhortation over his own life, desiring to live with integrity and to surround himself with those who model integrity. Would this be the aim of our lives and may we see the fruit of sanctification continue to produce this integrity in what we say and how we live.

Life Group Questions | James 5:12

- 1) What is the surrounding context for this verse? How might James 5:12 relate to the verses that came immediately before it, as well as those that follow?
- 2) Read **Matthew 5:33-37**. How is James's commendation in 5:12 similar to that of Jesus in Matthew 5?
- 3) A prominent theme throughout James has been a call for spiritual integrity. In various ways, James is challenging his readers to recognize the importance of meshing how we live with what we confess to believe. How does this verse contribute to the idea of spiritual integrity?
- 4) In what ways are you most acutely tempted to allow dishonesty to find purchase in your life? For instance, is it in the white lies you tell your spouse or children, a temptation to bend the truth in order to impress your boss, etc? Why are even these "small" examples of dishonesty erosive to your integrity?
- 5) Would the folks with whom you do life most closely say that you are someone who is true to their word? Why or why not?
- 6) Transparency can be an uncomfortable thing, to be sure. Why is transparency in the context of community such an important component of our continued growth in integrity? How might you, individually and as a group, grow in your transparency with one another?