**The Book of James**

Theme: Living the Christian Life.

Our life must agree with our faith.

Subthemes:

Patience (especially in suffering)

Wisdom

Faith

Humility

Author: Probably James, the brother of Jesus who led the church in Jerusalem from about AD 35 to AD 62 when he was martyred (Josephus) by stoning.

This is the same James who appears to have presided over the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

We do not know a lot about James, but what we know about him makes him a good candidate for being the author. Church fathers are unanimous in identifying James the brother of Jesus as the author.

James asks us what is important? His answer is that what will last and what is unchanging is what is important. This is God and God’s Word. The things of the world are fleeting. They are ephemeral. The things the world chases after are of no value. The Word of God and faith in God are of great value.

The closest to “Wisdom literature” in the New Testament. There are affinities with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Outline:

James does not have an obvious or solid outline, which is consistent with its being a kind of wisdom literature—it is a list of things to bear in mind in living the Christian life.

It is not like Paul’s books, which begin with theology and then apply that theology in the practical matters addressed by the letter.

To the extent that James has theology, it is found indirectly in what is taught.

Hebrews is a clearly outlined sermon.

Matthew – Acts are historical accounts.

Revelation has a very clear theme.

James is not like these. It is hard to teach, but easy to preach.

How to read James:

1. Read it for practical application more than for inspiration.

2. Read it to be challenged and to be made uncomfortable in your too-comfortable life.

Nevertheless…. Here is an outline

1:1-27 Real religion

2:1-3:12 Real faith

3:13-5:11 Real wisdom

5:12-20 The need for prayer.

OK, let’s get started.

**Part I. Real religion**

James 1:1

From: James, a servant (doulos, slave) James, the most influential elder in the Christian movement, begins by emphasizing his role as a humble servant.

To: The twelve tribes. Here James is referring to Christians in general. He is not talking about the Jews but of us, as the children of Abraham (Romans 4:16 we are Abraham’s descendants Gal 4:22-31 we are now the true Isaac), and therefore, as the new Jerusalem, the new “twelve tribes.”

The technical term is that James is a “general epistle” ie that it is addressed to all the church and not to any particular part of it.

James 1:2-8 Facing trials. James wastes no time here!!! The Christian life begins with suffering and trials, and it ends with suffering and trials.

[aside: James says “my brothers” so as to let us know he is not above us, even though he is the chief elder of the chief church in Christianity]

We should consider it pure joy (Greek: *pasan* utter, complete)

Is he serious? Yes, he is dead serious. He is not telling us that we have to say yippy skippy when we suffer. He is talking about our attitude about suffering.

What kind of trials? Answer: all different kinds. Trials from persecution, from sickness, from problems within the church, etc…

James, why should we have this attitude?

Because they test our faith, and if we endure them as a Christian, they produce perseverance and maturity. They make us “complete (v. 4). In other words, they produce a fully formed Christian character. They make us what we want to be.

Q: Do you want to be a strong, mature, fulfilled disciple of Jesus? It will only come with trials.

In the US we have a culture of comfort. We avoid discomfort at all costs.

We have comfort food. We have drive-through coffee. If we have to wait for 10 seconds to get service, we get annoyed. We have 70+ varieties of cereal in the grocery store. We have ready-cooked meals. You don’t like advertisements. Well, there is a DVR for that.

Does this culture influence us?????? Do we look for the easy way to Christian maturity?

James wants to make you uncomfortable.

What is your attitude toward trials?

Are you willing to do things which will cause you to risk being uncomfortable?

Sharing your faith.

Taking a job which is a financial risk to serve the Kingdom.

Switch to a Bible talk where you are needed rather than the one you are comfortable with.

Taking the initiative to start a new ministry.

Confronting sin in the lives of non-Christians.

Getting open about that one sin you have never shared about with anyone.

Open yourself up to falling in love again (knowing that you might get hurt)

Getting serious about your health/weight so that you can do more for God.

1:5-8 James changes to the seemingly unrelated topic of wisdom. Wisdom is a principle theme of James. What is the connection between wisdom and trials?

Wisdom gives us the level head which allows us to see the end result of our trials, rather than the immediate trials themselves. It gives us perspective. Think of the wisest people you know. Without exception, they can endure trials without losing focus.

Biblically wisdom (*Sophia*) implies understanding of God’s will and a willingness to live according to this will. (Philippians 1:9-10)

So…. You want to be mature, complete, a “whole” Christian?

1. Ask for wisdom in prayer.

2. Then, wisely, make a decision to leave your comfort zone.

Do not seek suffering for suffering’s sake. Do not simply jump into the first challenging situation. Consider carefully, make a decision and stick with it.

[aside: If you still lack wisdom, then seek advice of a wise person]

Otherwise you will be “like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”

Q: Can you relate to this feeling?

Faith = constant action. Doubt = wavering, unstable. Q: What decision have you been wavering over for too long?

Q: Could you be described as unstable, spiritually? If so, pray for wisdom and take action which will take you out of your comfort zone.

The young among us are more likely to step out on faith and do something a bit “crazy” for God, but they may need to work on their wisdom.

The old among us are so “wise” that we have stopped taking chances and stepping out on faith.

If the shoe fits, wear it!!!

James 1:9-11 The rich and the poor (in the church). James will certainly return to this topic!

Q: Why does he bring this up, just briefly, now? Because those who rely on their riches for security, like those who lack faith God answers prayers, are double-minded and unstable in all they do. They will “pass away like a wild flower.” (v. 10). Why? Because you cannot love both God and money (Matthew 6:24)

Those who patiently endure relative poverty, will grow more and will be stronger in the long run.

Application: It is interesting that our church is growing faster in Viet Nam where it is illegal and in Indonesia, where it is strongly persecuted by Muslims, than it is here in America where we have all the freedom and all the prosperity. Is there a link here, and does it relate to James 1:9-11?

In recent studies, Denmark topped the happiness charts. Why? Researchers tell us it is because they have low expectations. In other words, they are satisfied with what they have. I do NOT suggest low spiritual expectations. But, being content with what we have is a spiritual quality (1 Tim 6:6 Godliness with contentment is great gain).

1:12 James gets back to his main theme in this section. Perseverance in trials. If we get this one down, our final salvation is assured.

1:13-18 But…. Beware of the temptations that arise from our own desires.

In a negative sense, your worldly desires if given undue attention, are the cause of your destruction. Neither God *not Satan* are your problem! The devil did not make you do it! And God is not to blame. The buck stops with you!

Proverbs 19:3 “A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord.”

Who did Adam blame? Eve. Who did Eve blame? Satan (and indirectly, God). Q: Who do you blame?

Do you fully accept blame for your sins, or do you blame it on those who “frustrated” you or those who “made you angry”. “I couldn’t help it” O, really?

God has not given me the spouse that I desire and that I have been praying for. God is not the problem. Your lack of sufficient godly desire is. (not that the desire for a spouse or for affection is worldly per se, but that it can be).

v. 16-18 What is the opposite of worldly desire? Is it lack of desire? NO!!!! It is godly desire. We need to desire the true gifts—the treasures that are in heaven—the gifts that are “from above.”

What are these gifts that are “from above”? Of course, one of them is wisdom! But every truly good thing is “from above.”

[from the father of the heavenly lights = the creator of the sun and the moon which shine their light on the good and the evil alike.]

James 1:19-27 This is a series of seemingly loosely connected sayings. The theme that connects here is that we need to join our faith and our practice together.

1. James 1:19-21 Watch your tongue and your anger.

Q: How are you doing? Are you a good listener? More on this in Ch 3.

Proverbs 17:28 Even the fool is thought wise if he remains silent. ☺.

James seems to allow for righteous anger, but says that it does not produce right behavior.

2. James 1:22-25 Do not simply read scripture.

a. Look into it intently (v. 25).

b. Do what it says. Let us live up to what we have already attained. (Phil 3:16)

Here is where the rubber meets the road. The world’s standards change all the time, but the Bible is perfect and unchanging. It is the thing against which our lives will be measured (John 12:47-48)

v. 25 The perfect law (the Bible? The Law of Christ? Gal 6:2, 1 Cor 9:21 The completed OT Matthew 5:17 Probably James leaves it ambiguous on purpose.) that gives freedom (if we obey it). This is consummate James!

It is an example of why Luther did not like James.

3. James 1:26-27 Do not think of yourself as religious unless you practice your faith by helping the needy and by actually stopping sinning (keep from being polluted by the world). Micah 6:8, Deut 10:18. He (God) defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.

In other words, if we do these things we will be like God.

Psalm 113:7-9 “God’s social justice seeks an egalitarian society in regard to basic human rights.”

Real religion is loving action toward others, not lip service.

In this passage “widows and orphans” represents people in general who are in need and not in power (and will lead us into James 2)

Q: Who would this be today? Single moms, the elderly, foster children, illegal aliens…

Q: What have you done in this realm in the last two weeks?

Do you think of the world as polluted? It is! We will be in the world, but we need to find a way not to be polluted by it.

Summary of James 1:19-27. Real, pure religion is 1. Control of speech 2. Acts of mercy to the disadvantaged 3. Resisting temptation.

**II. James 2:1-3:12 Real Faith**

James 2:1-13 This section is a diatribe—a staged argument with a stereotypical opponent with whom you are arguing. (Like Malachi)

James 2:1-7 Do not show favoritism!!!

Q: Who do we show favoritism to? The “sharp” (good looking, nice job, smart, talented, well-connected)

Q: Who is in a position of power, and who is in a position of weakness?

Weakness: Women, children, aliens, African Americans, Latino Americans.

You can tell the health of a church, in part, from how they handle the week.

James: We need to be very different than the world in this area.

Application: 1 Cor 12:21-24. In the church, we treat those who in the world would be written off with special honor.

2:5 Part of James’ diatribe with the rich. Those who are poor are rich in faith.

Do not take this literally, as there are exceptions, but the principle is that those who endure relative poverty (as in James 1, as a trial) and endure it faithfully are more likely to grow in their faith than those who are comfortable in their wealth, and, therefore more likely to be saved. Spiritually it is not advantageous to possess wealth.

v. 6 They have insulted the poor. Q: How?

Q: How might we insult the poor? (by habitually going out to lunch at nice restaurants? By going on expensive vacations? By putting on really fancy and expensive retreats and conferences?)

v.7-8 You diatribe opponents really look silly. Here you are favoring the rich, but who are your enemies in the world? The rich! Have the poor ever put you in prison or slandered you?

[aside: Are these “rich” Christians or outsiders? Do not be to quick to assume that they are outsiders to the church]

2:8-13. God is really serious about this. The Bible agrees with what I am saying here. If you do not deal with these issues, your salvation is at issue, and none of the “good” you do will be of any value. Wow!

How serious is the issue of worldly favoritism? If we break this part of the royal law we might as well break the entire thing!

[What is the “royal law”? It is probably the OT Law as interpreted through a New Testament lens.]

How serious is it? He uses the analogy with murder and rape, which are also crimes against another.

Q: Do we have a problem with prejudice/favoritism in our churches?

Ask the women.

Ask the African Americans.

Ask the native Spanish speakers.

Have you seen disciples posting disrespectful things about Obama?

Have you seen disciples posting extremely disrespectful, even hateful things about Democrats and “liberal” policies? How do you think our black brothers and sisters feel about this?

James 2:13. Our salvation is at stake. Parallel to Matthew 18:23-25. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. 2:13b. Thankfully, James ends this section with a word of hope, because we needed it!

James 2:14-26 Faith and deeds. In many ways, this is the heart of James, not because it has a lot of “practicals” (it has none), but because it is the theology that underlies his argument about matching our faith and our life.

Again, we have the use of a diatribe, and we can assume that the invisible opponent is someone in the church!

2:14-17 A bridge from the former section.

He begins with a rhetorical question. What good is faith without deeds? (of course, his answer is that it is useless)

One application of what he is about to say is to believing in helping the poor but not actually helping them. “What good is it?”

He assumes that even his opponent will concede that this is ridiculous. Then he throws in his “kicker.”

Bridge: In the same way… unaccompanied faith is dead faith.

Question: Does faith alone save us, as Luther, Zwingli and Calvin taught?

(Note, in Luther’s translation he added the word alone to Romans 1:17)

Luther: James is a book of straw. “For it has nothing to do with the gospel.”

(note: in fairness, Luther removed this comment from later editions of his Bible)

Which is true? Ephesians 2:8-9 or James 2:24? Both of course.

Which is the more fundamental truth?

What kind of faith saves? Answer, the kind of faith which, among other things, includes works.

[Aside: Imagine, for the sake of argument (even though I do not agree with that argument), that we accept Luther’s contention that James and Paul do not agree. Why do Protestants assume that Paul is “right” and James is “wrong?” If we were to go by the words of Jesus, who are we more likely to say is “right”? James or Paul? The answer, clearly is James!!! Many examples could be used, but let us use Matthew 25:31-46 as an example]

2:20-24 James uses Abraham as a biblical “proof text” for his doctrine.

Abraham was considered righteous for what he did (v. 21) Genesis 15:26, Romans 4:3.

v. 23 His faith and deeds were working together…

Q: To do what? To bring him justification/righteousness.

The bottom line of this section: 2:26 The kind of faith which does not include deeds is dead. It has no effect.

[BTW: Paul agrees with this position, as proved by Galatians 5:6. The only thing that matters is the kind of faith which expresses itself in love]

**James 3:1-12 Real faith** (cont.) The tongue.

Note that in this section, on the surface James is talking about the tongue of the individual Christian, but behind the argument he is talking about the false teachers of James 3:1 and their effect on the “body,” ie. the Church.

James 3:1-2 As is the pattern for James, he appears to be radically and suddenly changing the subject. What is going on here? He is giving an example of how our deeds need to be in agreement with our faith. It is in the area of how we use our “tongues.”

v. 1. The false teacher James has in mind is probably one who has been teaching that deedless faith can save.

“We” who teach (which includes James)

Those who presume to take leadership positions—especially teachers—will be judged more strongly. With the tongue, leaders can have a massive negative effect on the body.

v. 2 If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

What is the point here? Our use of the tongue is a bellweather for our entire character. A similar example is our attitude toward money. Those who have the money/materialism issue “down” have such a strong character that most other obvious sins normally will also be well under control. It is similar with the tongue.

The point: If we will put sufficient attention to controlling how we communicate with others verbally, it will bear much fruit in other areas of our lives.

This seems to be the point of James 3:3-8. James illustrates that small things can have great power. The tongue has great power—both for good and for evil, and its use is a means of seeing to the very soul of a person.

My parents told me that “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” That is a big fat lie!!!

Jesus said that “out of the heart, the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34)

v. 5-8 James is using hyperbole to get our attention.

Verbal attack, like favoritism, has a massively corrosive effect on the family of God.

James 3:9-12. Those biting, sarcastic, unhelpfully critical, angry, disrespectful, gossiping words that come from our mouths make the other nice things we say into a lie. Do not deceive yourself in this area. We need to strictly control what we say and the tone with which we say it.

You cannot say “I take it back.”

Proverbs 16:27-28 The tongue is a fire…

**III. James 3:13-5:12 Real (godly) Wisdom.**

**James 3:13-18** Godly wisdom. This is one of the main themes of James. If we have godly wisdom everything else will take care of itself.

Again, it appears he is changing the subject dramatically (From the tongue to wisdom) but he is not, because there is a very strong connection between wisdom and proper use of the tongue. It takes great wisdom to use the tongue as we should. Those with worldly wisdom use the tongue as a weapon.

Theme of this section: The world’s wisdom vs. God’s wisdom.

Connecting theme: Our faith should produce in us godly wisdom, which, in turn, will produce good deeds (3:13) including the “work” of tongues that are used for the good of God’s people.

Note: The ones with worldly wisdom he is talking about is believers!

Godly wisdom produces humility.

Q: Why? (because we gain perspective that we are not a great and important as we thought)

v. 14-16 Q: What does worldly wisdom say?

(you have to create a good impression. Looks are important. Don’t let anyone push you around. You have to take care of yourself. If I don’t protect myself, no one will. Life is a zero sum game….)

In a word, it is selfish ambition. Which produces strife and “every evil practice” in the church. Are you a uniter? Would people say of you: “he/she always has good things to say about people.”

[the false teachers James is rebuking have been creating a following for themselves, claiming to have a deeper wisdom than James and undermining James’ authority]

Q: Is any of this part of your thinking?

James 3:17-18 James’ equivalent to the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22). They are the fruit of godly wisdom.

1. Pure. In this case, pure probably means unmixed motives. Are your motives pure? Q: How would you feel If people knew the thoughts behind what you said and did?

2. Submissive. In the context, it probably means willing to be convinced by another of their point of view. Open. Easily persuaded (except on matters of spiritual conviction). This is closely related to peace-loving. Gentle and reasonable.

Q: Are one who can be convinced of another’s view?

3. Impartial. Able to step back and see both sides of a disagreement.

Perspective.

4. Sincere. In the context: without hypocrisy. Not dissembling or creating false impressions.

**James 4:1-10 The result of worldly wisdom and the cure for worldly wisdom.**

4:1 The result of worldly wisdom is fights and quarrels.

I have seen way too many fights and quarrels in the singles group.

Godly people are passionate. Therefore, we will have conflict, but we should never have fights and quarrels. Ever!!!!

Jan tells me about these things all the time. This sister is mad at this sister.

Sister X had a problem with sister Y so she changed Bible talks.

I don’t like that Bible talk because they are too old, too young, too immature.

I have been having a personality conflict with brother Z.

v. 1 Such quarrels are the result of evil desires (James 1:13-15)

Some of us are in disagreements and conflict fairly often. The pattern points to us.

Q: Since when was it about you?

v. 2 You want things that God does not want you to have. Then you are surprised when you do not get it. How prideful. We assume in our prayer that we know best.

“kill” “covet” Hyperbole, again, to get our attention.

A better translation: You do not get what you desire, so you kill. You do not get what you want so you are jealous. So you have fights and quarrels.

You are like a child who demands his parents to give him candy and you throw a temper tantrum when he or she says no.

Jesus said that you will get what you ask for (John 14:13-14), but this is qualified by 1 John 5:14-15 which says that we will have it if it is God’s will for us to have it, and is further qualified by James 4:3 which tells us that if you ask out of selfishness or impure motives, do not expect God to answer such a prayer.

4:4 You adulterous (double-minded) people (Matthew 6:24 You cannot love God and money) The cause of such conflicts: Worldly thinking! You are looking to the world to meet your emotional and spiritual needs and desires. You are looking in the wrong place! Back in 4:3 You are asking God to fulfill your worldly desires!

Wake up! Look in the mirror (James 1:23-24)

1 John 2:15-17 The things of the world defined: “the cravings of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does.

v. 5-6 If you are seeking to have your desires and dreams met through the world, God will be envious of that. This is godly jealousy (as opposed to worldly jealousy above)

Q: Do you want to be in a war with God? You better plan on losing that war!

4:7-10 The solution to worldly wisdom.

a. Submit. Stop fighting God.

b. Resist Satan Recognize who the real enemy is. (it is not your bro/sis)

c. Draw near to God.

d. Grieve, mourn and wail over your sins.

e. Humble yourself before God.

Which do you grieve over more: people hurting your feelings or doing you wrong, or your own personal sins.

Which gets you more upset: you hurting someone else or someone else hurting you? Hmmmm….

4:11-12 Another example of worldly thinking that will destroy the Body of Chist: Judging you brother or sister.

Q: What, to you, is the definition of “judging you neighbor”?

(condemn, judge motives, pass judgement, writing off, notice the use of criticism in the context)

Brother X is… I do not mean to be critical, but sister Y is…. Brother Z has many good qualities, but….

I am just being realistic.

Ephesians 4:29. Q: Does that describe you? Would others say that you are that way?

James 4:13-17 Submitting our will to God’s will.

This passage is a specific example of godly wisdom vs. worldly wisdom (and of humility vs. arrogance)

v. 13 Now, listen. Trying to get our attention.

Note: It is not about saying “If the Lord wills.” So do not be legalistic about this.

Also note: James is not condemning planning our lives, but a certain attitude toward planning our lives.

v. 14 We in San Diego know a lot about the mist that vanishes. We call it early morning low clouds. (mist: Hos 6:4, 13:3)

v. 16 If we do not submit our plans to God’s will, we are boasting (although we would not call it that).

The biblical worldview is that "we receive another day neither by natural necessity, nor by mechanical law, nor by right, nor by courtesy of nature, but only by the covenanted mercies of God" (Motyer 1985:162).

v. 17 So, for the person who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it, it is sin.

We have traditionally referred to this as teaching about sins of omission.

This is true, but this is more like a sin of willfully choosing not to ask what God’s will likely is on a particular question or, knowing what that will is, willfully choosing a path which opposes that.

Like me making a big decision and not asking myself what Jan would think or feel about that.

"Do not merely say that you want to know God's will or that you recognize your dependence on his will; look carefully at what God has already said about his will, and do that."

James 5:1-6 A stirring appeal (tirade?) for social justice. Here he is continuing with the theme of humility and its opposite, which is arrogance. We are back in James 1:9-11 and James 2:5-7.

Unlike earlier in the book, here he is more clearly addressing people in the world rather than the church (5:1 “the misery that is coming upon you” v. 3 “Their corrosion will…. Eat your flesh like fire.”)

v. 3 …have hoarded wealth in the last days. The last days are now, as we wait for the return of Jesus. It is especially foolish to hoard wealth in these last days.

The intention of James in this section seems to be to remind us of the fate of wealthy outsiders so that

a. we will be encouraged about our faithfulness, but also

b. so that we will not in the least be tempted to act as they are acting.

Also in view is God’s abhorrence of a system which favors the rich and oppresses the poor. God may not be interested in politics, but there is one issue he cares a lot about—social justice.

5:7-8 Be patient, therefore. Therefore what? Who is he speaking to? Now he is speaking to us. Maybe he is speaking to those who have been disrespected—the poor, the downtrodden and the disrespected. Wait for the lord’s judgment. Be patient and wait for God to judge these people when Jesus comes back. Romans 12:19-21

5:9 Brothers (especially the ones who have been treated badly), do not complain about one another, or your will bring on yourself the judgment you are hoping God will bring on them.

He is warning us against becoming bitter about those in the world who treat us badly. Stress from the world can cause us to go after one another at times. Do not let that happen.

5:10-11 Examples of patience of those who have been unfairly criticized yet endured. The prophets and Job.

The pattern: suffering, perseverance, joy/reward.

**IV 5:12-20 The need for prayer.**

In this section we are reminded that the ultimate solution to our suffering and times of trouble is found in God, not in ourselves or others—and especially in prayer.

5:12. “Above all” If there is any verse which comes from out of nowhere in James it is this one, but it seems to be connected with v. 13-18 rather than with the preceeding section.

Q: Why “above all” about what seems to us to be a minor issue: saying “I swear” rather than letting your word count for itself. If you are in difficulty, do not turn to swearing—to manipulating God, but turn instead to God. Matt 5:33-37. This “swearing” represents a lack of faith in God to be in control.

5:13-18 Many kinds of and reasons for prayer are found in this passage.

v. 13 Instead of swearing, pray.

v. 13 Pray in times of trouble.

v. 13 Pray in times of joy.

v. 14 Pray in times of sickness.

v. 15 Pray when you have sinned.

1 Thess 5:16 Pray continually.

[aside: Oil was used for medicinal purposes in the first century. Whether this is a prayer for miraculous healing or not is unclear. In any case, the emphasis is on the church praying together in the most serious situations, led by the elders.]

v. 16 The intense prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. Very encouraging words.

v. 16. We confess and pray (that we are sinners, not necessarily specific sins, although that is good to do as well) to God through Jesus for forgiveness (1 John 1:8-10).

We confess and pray for each other, not for forgiveness, but so that we can be “healed”. This may mean emotionally healed or healed of our sinful desire or even physically healed.

If we are humble and people of faith, then instead of judging one another we will feel open to being vulnerable and to confessing our sins to one another. This is true religion!

5:17-18 Elijah: Powerful proof that earnest prayer is powerful.

[note: Elijah is a man just like us is stated so that we will not think that such powerful prayer is reserved for the super-spiritual.]

5:19-20 Final words. Take care of God’s people. In a sense, James is simply asking us to do what he just did.