

James - Lesson 1 - Humility

Read Acts 15:1-21

James is Jesus' half-brother (Mary and Joseph's son). He was a faithful follower of Judaism and after the proof of the resurrection, James became a faithful believer that Jesus was the Messiah. He was the first leader elected by the Jerusalem church after the believers were scattered by persecution. In Acts 15, we see James issuing the important decision that Gentiles did not have to follow all the Jewish traditions to become believers. Wisely, James and the others trusted that the Law - which was being read in every synagogue every week - would have an impact even on Gentile believers through the work of the Holy Spirit.

His letter to the Jewish Christians is not formal like some of the other letters in the New Testament. It tends to be more conversational, moving back and forth around a few topics, giving people practical life lessons about how to live out their faith. You can see echoes of the same ideas that he spoke about in Acts 15, that faith is more than saying the right things or checking the right boxes. To James, faith is something that you live out in your life, visibly, every single day. Faith (and your works that are a result of your faith) should continue to grow through your faithful following of Christ.

James remained a shepherd of the Jewish Christians until his death by stoning sometime in the 60's AD. This letter is written to "the twelve tribes" yet it applies to all Christians then and now. James frequently uses the Greek word adelphoi which refers to all believers (it's rendered as "brothers" or "brothers and sisters" depending on your translation). If you believe that Jesus is your Savior and Lord, James is talking to you.

Proverbs?

The book of James is sometimes called "the Proverbs of the New Testament", and we can see some of the reasons why in this lesson's readings:

- 1:2-4 - quoted by people facing persecution for almost 2000 years
- 4:4 - one of the verses focused on by Christians who seek to reduce the influence of the world on their lives
- 4:7-9 - often recommended as advice for people suffering because they have made decisions pulling them away from God
- 4:13-17 - classic advice for Christians making big plans in their business or otherwise

- 5:12 - quoted by Christians who will not swear on the Bible (as you are asked to do in court or when taking office, for example)

This style makes the book of James both a joy and a challenge to read.

Read James 1:1-18

Chapter 1 of James is often considered an overview, and James jumps right in talking about a number of topics. He mentions trials, wisdom, and prayer in the first paragraph! We're going to focus on humility for this lesson, and we'll come back to other topics later in the study.

As CS Lewis said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." To James, humility is central to living out your Christianity. Humility is not simply walking around looking at the ground. It's being humble in your circumstances (rich or poor) and in any situation. It's submitting yourself to God's way and God's will, rather than doing what you want. James lines up with Peter and Paul in this - that just because you're free to do something, does not mean that you should do it.

From the context, we can assume that wealthy people were helping drive the persecution of the early Jewish Christians, though we don't know who it was specifically. Whoever it was, James is led by the Spirit to fire off repeated condemnations of wealth and wealthy people. We'll look more at wealth and poverty in a future lesson. For now, we should note that James calls his readers to be humble in their circumstances - poor folks should be happy that their circumstances are humble, and rich people should look for ways to be more humble, because wealth can wither your spiritual growth.

Read James 4:1-17

James, led by the Spirit, comes back to one of his core teachings here in Chapter 4 - that a lack of humility causes all sorts of problems, and so believers should submit themselves to God. This sort of submission to God's authority over us is true humility.

Another central part of James' teaching on humility is urging Christians not to be "friends" with the world. This includes not making bold plans for ourselves, but rather submitting to God's will and God's plan for our future. We should be humbly seeking God continually, and allowing God to lift us up, rather than propping ourselves up as we work on our lofty goals and plans.

Read James 5:7-12

Just as in the opening of the book, James comes around again to call on Christians to be patient in their suffering. However this time he also calls out a specific reason to persevere - namely that Jesus is coming back. James seems to see patience and humility as linked, and while he does not explicitly say “be humble” in this passage, he cites the prophets as examples, and they were known for seeking God’s direction before acting, and persevering through hardships to follow God’s will. He also calls out the example of Job, who was vocal during his trials, and then famously humbled himself before God (Job 42:1-6).

Grumbling?

It’s worth noting that there is a parallel theme to humility that runs through the book of James - that of grumbling or arguing among believers. In chapters 4 and 5, we see this clearly. There is much to be said for unity among the people of God. David wrote about it (Psalm 133:1), Jesus prayed for it (John 17:23) and Paul wrote about it to the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. James calls for unity to replace grumbling and arguing too.

When we feel pain, frustration, discomfort, or suffering, grumbling and arguing seems to be the natural human response. People get irritable, and we take that out on the people we love - our friends, families, and fellow believers. However, as followers of Jesus we should be putting God first, over our own hurts or discomforts. This means not grumbling or arguing with each other out of frustration. This only happens when we develop a lifestyle of humility.

Key points

- James is a book that’s more like a conversation over coffee than a formal letter to a group of believers. This can make it both interesting and difficult to read.
- The book has been called “the Proverbs of the New Testament” and we’ll see more and more of this sort of verse through the course of our study.
- Looking at the theme of this lesson, James reminds us that humility is...
 - thinking of God and His ways first
 - thinking of other believers and their needs more often
 - thinking of yourself and your own needs and resources less
 - being aware that having wealth gets in the way of being humble

Memory Verse

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1:2-3)

Questions

In our lives, we don't face the sort of persecution we see in Acts 8, though our lives are pain free either. How can you apply James' wisdom about persecution to your own trials?

How can we help ourselves and others to apply the wise words about arguing?

What and who do you "grumble" about? What can you do today to change based on James' teaching? How can our group help you with this?

There are teachings about sins and temptations throughout the reading. What in our reading resonates with your life today? What are you going to do about that?

We live in a wealthy part of a wealthy country, and yet James speaks against wealth and in favor of "humble circumstances". What warnings about wealth do you take from the reading?

What should you be doing differently about your financial situation and your approach to it based on your reading in James? (Hint: we'll study wealth and poverty in a future lesson, so this is a good time to start thinking about it)

James - Lesson 2 - Prayer

Read Luke 11:1-13

The question of how to pray seems to come up from time to time. It seems people always want to know “are we doing it right?” John’s disciples asked him, and Jesus’ disciples do the same. Jesus roughly repeats the prayer he taught in what we call The Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-13). Jesus adds stories encouraging us to pray boldly and persistently, asking for what we need and expecting that God will give us good gifts. It’s no wonder that God has James send some commentary on prayer to the Jewish Christians as he writes this letter.

James writes with passion in a way that has connected with readers through the centuries. He pulls no punches. In three short passages, he tells us to pray with faith and confidence and ask for things in line with what God has told us he wants. James tells us in a way that Christians through the years have taken to heart - just as we should today.

Read James 1:2-8 and Mark 11:22-25

Later, we’ll talk about James and his writings about Wisdom, but in this lesson, we start by looking at the times when we’re lacking in wisdom. When you don’t have wisdom, James tells you bluntly, “ask God”. That’s a prayer we all need to say from time to time. Maybe it’s the first advice on prayer in James’ letter because it’s needed so often.

The teaching of James echoes the teaching of Jesus in Mark 11. When you pray, you should believe that you will receive what you pray for. Remember the example from the end of Luke 11 we just read? It makes perfect sense that when we pray, we would believe that God will come through for us, because God is a good Father!

It seems that first century believers had the same problems that twenty first century believers do. Sometimes when we pray, we don’t really believe anything will happen. It’s easy to doubt when we’re in a tough situation. Maybe we think we’re not good enough to receive what we ask for. Maybe we think we’re not important enough to God. Maybe we’re just not comfortable asking for things. Maybe we caused our own difficulty and feel that God won’t rescue us from our mistakes, or that God will decide that we get what we deserve. Whatever we’re thinking, we’re wrong when we doubt God. And James tells us so in some rough language.

We serve a God who forgives every sin and heals every disease (Psalm 103:2-3). God's compassion is new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23). Our God can do all things, and no plan of God's can be stopped (Job 42:2). Yet somehow we find a way to doubt that our prayers will be answered. The people that James loved and wrote to in the first century did the same.

Think for a moment about 1 John 5:13-15, *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him."* John and James line up on believing that we'll receive what we pray for, and John adds a bit that relates to our next two topics. He says that we should pray for things that line up with God's will.

Read James 4:1-4

In our last lesson we read this scripture and focused on humility. Now let's look at it through the lens of prayer.

Have you ever prayed to get that new job, that new customer, or that new assignment because it would mean more money in your pocket to go on vacation or buy some luxury item? The Bible tells us that there is a real problem with having luxury in our lives and that we will eventually suffer for it (for example Luke 16:19-31 and Rev 18:3-9). James tells us here that praying for luxury is a really bad idea.

When you put these first two sets of readings together, it's clear that God's intent is not to give us whatever we want whenever we want it - especially if we want it selfishly. It's equally clear that James is teaching that God will give us what we want when it's in line with His will (not just ours), useful for His glory (not just ours), and on His time table (not just ours).

False Teachers

Some false teachers (and even some well meaning teachers who are misled) use the passage from James 1 that we looked at earlier as part of "name it and claim it" or "prosperity gospel" teachings. If you hear a preacher say something like "if you want that new car, you just pray for it and believe you'll receive it and it will show up in your driveway", you can assume that they read James 1 but didn't get all the way to Chapter 4. This is a false teaching that's been seen through recent centuries. It has become more prevalent as preachers have gained wider exposure through TV broadcasts and the internet in recent decades.

Read James 5:13-20

Christians all over the world have anointed the sick with oil and prayed over them because of this passage. Accountability groups meet every day because of the words written here. Happy songs of praise fill sanctuaries, airwaves, and showers everywhere in part because of what we're reading today. This small set of verses speaks volumes.

In the verses just before this passage, James has written about patience in suffering. It makes sense that his first direction here on prayer is that when you're in trouble, you pray. His next command is equally simple, when you're not in trouble and you're happy, sing praises!

Then we get into the interesting teaching about curing diseases with prayer. It's easy to try to read this section like a recipe: first add church elders, then add oil, mix well, pray in Jesus' name, and you're healed. The problem here is the same one we mentioned before - it is easy to take a few verses and make a false teaching, so we need to consider the whole Bible.

There are people who will bear witness to seeing people healed by prayer (I'm one of them) and there are people who will tell you that healing by prayer is poppycock. There have been numerous scientific studies around the effect of prayer on healing, and the results, while more positive than negative, are mixed. However, James' core truth - that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective - holds true even if a specific instance of prayer seems to be a "failure". All through the Bible, and in our own lives, we see that people who get closer and closer to God tend to see more and more exceptional things happen as a result of their bold and persistent prayer.

But What About Sin?

One point that we may overlook here in chapter 5, are verses 15, 16, 19, and 20 which talk about sin. Too often, we want to know "how do I cure today's illness" and we ignore the real terminal disease of sin. God loves us and wants us to be in His presence for eternity. Ten thousand years of paradise will make a hundred years of painful suffering on earth utterly forgettable ... and at that point, we'll just be getting started on eternity! To get there, we need the cure to the ultimate disease of sin - a cure that is only found in Jesus.

James reminds us that both prayer and confession are integral parts of the journey toward the ultimate healing of living in God's presence for eternity.

Key points

- Confused? Pray. In Need? Pray. Suffering? Pray. Sick? Pray. Anything else? Pray. Prayer is a crucial part of leading a God-centered life.
- God answers our prayers and gives us things we want - and there are things that we can do to stop that from happening.
- Sin is our terminal disease and confession and prayer are part of the cure.
- False teachers latch on to a few verses and teach as if they represent the whole truth. Reading all of James reminds us of the importance of reading all of the Bible.

Memory Verse

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. (James 5:13)

Questions

For you, how is prayer a part of the journey of getting closer and closer to Jesus? Has your prayer become more or less effective recently? Why?

There are many ways in this lesson that we can “mess up” our prayers. Which ones are you most guilty of? How can this group help you to pray more effectively?

How do you explain the way James parallels physical illness with spiritual disease? And what does this tell you about the relationship of sin and prayer?

Do you have a story of a “miraculous” answer to prayer? Do you share it with non-believers?

What desire has God put in your heart that you’re hesitant to pray for?

James - Lesson 3 - Speech

Read Psalm 12

David's song is as applicable to today's society as it was to his when he wrote it around 1,000 B.C. There are things that are vile in God's eyes that we humans think are honorable. The poor get poorer while the rich get richer. It seems that there is unfaithfulness everywhere as marriages and families dissolve and people change loyalties as quickly as the wind changes directions. And our tongues are a huge part of all of that trouble.

James, writing a little over 1,000 years after David, is led by God to write about many of the same things. Then he goes on to offer some practical advice through a number of illustrations, examples, and metaphors to help us understand what he knows is possible - that we can control our tongues and use them for good and not for evil! I urge you to think about the language James uses and the images he paints. Let God's words apply themselves to your life as we study together (just like James says they will).

Read James 1:19-27

As James touches on managing our speech, the very first thing he says is that we should listen. If we respond, James writes, it should be slowly and deliberately. Such simple advice.

The old folks taught us when we were young that you can't take back a word spoken in anger. James points out the real reason that it's so dangerous ... human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Think about that gruff remark, that ungracious email, or that biting social media post that you made when you were angry or frustrated. James (and the Holy Spirit) remind us that our words did not bring that person closer to Jesus.

The solution to the problem is that we should humbly welcome God's word as it transforms us to be more and more like Jesus, saving us and reinventing our speech.

Read James 3:1-12

This is the place Christians have turned for centuries for advice on how to get control over their speech (or at least try). James tells us right from the start that he's one of us as he says, "We all stumble in many ways." He also points out that getting control of what you say is the key that

unlocks all other forms of self-control, and he goes on to draw colorful metaphors to help us envision this. Let's take a look at horses as an example. (Apologies in advance - if you're a horse person, please don't take offense.)

The bit is a piece that you put in a horse's mouth. You attach it to the bridle and the reins which allow you to control a horse's mouth and head and guide your horse where you want it to go. If you've seen horses, you've seen the bit and bridle. A bit weighs around 2 pounds. Many horses weigh around 1,000 pounds and sometimes much more. That's a pretty clear illustration of how having control of something little can give you control over something much bigger. Control your tongue and you can control your body - just like a rider uses the tiny bit to control their horse.

Read James 4:7-17

It seems that James knew what the internet would be like - or maybe it's just that humans throughout history have the same troubles. James warns against judging each other, saying false things about each other, and boasting about yourself. He's not calling us to "be kind" or "play nicely". It's much more than that - it's about putting God first. Submitting yourself to God and drawing closer to him should change the way you express yourself.

James makes the point that the change should be obvious - like going from laughing to mourning. It's not a matter of degrees or slight improvements. It's a paradigm shift. In other words, don't just be "nicer". Don't speak poorly about anyone at all, ever. Go out of your way to avoid condemning anyone for what they say or think or do - because that's God's job.

Judging someone is like playing God - and you would never do that if God was at the center of your life. Your speech is an indication of your heart. By the way, James says, make sure to think about your boasting about all of your plans the same way. Boasting is playing God too - about yourself rather than others.

Read James 5:9-12

Our final reading could fit right after the previous one. It continues the same set of thoughts. You could think of it as don't judge, don't slander, don't even grumble about them.

And as we get to verse 12, we read a phrase that has caused some to refuse to swear on the Bible, and some to avoid the pledge of allegiance, the Boy Scout oath, or oaths of any kind. There is an explicit command here, but if we read in context, we see that it fits with the other

things James says about our speech. It's not that swearing an oath and saying "so help me God" is inherently evil. It's that when God is in the center of our lives, our lives should be so different that nobody should need you to promise anything with flowery language. According to James, that's the sort of heart transformation that a Christian life can bring.

But What About Lying?

There's an interesting thing about James and his writings about speech. He barely mentions the most unpopular speech issue in the rest of the Bible ... lying. So does James think lying is less important? I don't think so. I think that God was leading him to build on to what others have written. James uses a lot of illustrative metaphors to explain how God's changing our hearts should be totally redefining our speech. He's reminding us that Jesus is calling us to be truly different from the world. In a way, he's saying that it's not enough just to tell the truth - rather, your whole pattern of speech needs to be transformed as you live out your faith.

We'll see in our next lesson just how passionate James is about actions speaking louder than words - a topic that he writes about in every page of his letter.

Key Points

- The first thing to do to control your speech ... let God's word transform your heart.
- The first practical tip for living out the transformation in your speech ... listen.
- Your tongue is small, but its impact is huge. (Bit, rudder, spark, lots of pictures)
- Failing to control your tongue means you'll also struggle with self-control. The good news - you can rein your tongue in!
- Christian speech should be very, very different from worldly speech around you. As different as laughing is from mourning.
- Ultimately, how you speak is about how you see God. If you're in the center of your life, then you'll speak angrily, speak poorly of others, grumble about other people, be judgemental, boast, and more. Speaking as James outlines is a result of putting God in control of your life.
- What other takeaways did you get from the readings?

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Memory Verse

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. (James 1:21- NIV)

Questions

People joke that God gave us two ears and one mouth as a hint as to how much we should listen versus talking. How do you remind yourself to be quick to listen, and slow to talk?

What do you make of the idea that failing to control your speech makes your religion worthless (1:26)? Can you point to examples in your life or others?

Which metaphor in James 3:1-12 stands out to you as memorable, or as applying to your life? How can this help you in controlling your speech?

In our culture, having goals and making plans are praised. Everyone has ideas for what they're doing next month and next year. James says that's evil boasting. What do you think?

In our study, it says that speaking critically of others (judging or grumbling) indicates the condition of your heart in relation to God. Do you think that's true? Why or why not?

Speaking more like Jesus happens as you become closer to Jesus, even though, as James says, all of us make mistakes. Are you allowing God's word to transform you? How?

James - Lesson 4 - Action

Read Isaiah 58:1-12

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

After years of rebellion, it seems that the people of Israel are finally obeying God. Finally! Or at least it looks like it on the surface. They are fasting, and praying, and asking God for guidance. They're saying all the right things. However, God sees that their actions tell a different story. So God tells Isaiah to shout God's judgement - that their fasting and praying and saying things that sound godly are a waste of time and energy.

Isaiah is instructed to tell them the truth. The "fasting" that God wants is not just to give up food, but to give up their comforts and priorities to help those who are suffering injustice, feed those who are hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked. The people of Israel (and of Crestwood UMC too) are not supposed to say the right things and then hide away from those around us who are in need.

God goes even further, saying that when we stop blaming each other and speaking badly about each other, and instead we reach out and take genuine action to help, our light will shine. God says that he'll guide us and satisfy our needs. He'll strengthen us, and more!

Too often, we don't take action because we think that we don't have enough time or money or skills or courage or whatever. We say that we're too old or too young or too inexperienced. Instead of taking action, we just say Christian-sounding things. We act humble and say a few prayers and figure that someone, somewhere will take action ... so that we don't have to. God says that we're rebelling against him when we do that.

Charles Stanley says that the book of James, "teaches that faith without works cannot be called faith. Faith must work, it must produce, and it must make itself visible. Verbal faith is not enough, and mental faith is insufficient. Genuine faith inspires and empowers godly action. Throughout his letter, James integrates true faith and every day, practical experience by stressing that true faith must manifest itself in works of faith. Otherwise, it is not real faith at all." Let's go and see for ourselves...

Read James 1:16-27

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

We read this section in the last lesson, but let's take another look at it. Plenty of people quote verse 22 and say that we should act on God's word, though that comes up short of looking at the whole picture.

God leads James to paint a very specific picture of how we're supposed to take action. He says that not acting when you hear the word is like looking in the mirror and immediately forgetting your own face. To put it another way, God says that when you hear the word, you should take action right away and then keep on taking action. He says that we should not hear the word and then walk away and forget it - but instead jump right in and then persevere in doing what the word says.

Remember the parable of the sower (found in Matthew 13 and Mark 4)? Three of the four types of people Jesus talks about hear the word but it does not take root due to the devil, or to the trials and wealth of the world. Those people don't take any action. In the fourth group, the word takes root, they take action, and the action produces massive results. James is saying the same thing here. He's encouraging us not to forget the word, but instead act on it quickly.

Read James 2:1 and 2:12-26

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

James 2:1 sets the tone for the whole chapter. We'll look at this more in the next lesson, but for now we should see that James put the highest priority on believing in Jesus. Next week we'll look at this in regard to how we treat the poor versus how we treat the rich. For now, we should take that same idea and think about how we act on our faith.

The second half of the chapter is good for a sermon a year for many preachers - and sometimes more than that. Some religious traditions take this to the extreme and say that "works" are more important than faith, and sometimes people fall into the trap of doing religious-looking things out

of habit rather than ever developing a real faith in God. But remember, James called out belief in Jesus as the basis for all other discussions about how we act.

God gives James some of the same examples of taking action that he had Isaiah give to the Israelites hundreds of years before. But maybe it's helpful to think about a slightly different example from the one James offers - because after all a person sitting naked on the street in town would probably be arrested before we could get close enough to say or do anything.

Let's think about a person who is having trouble paying their bills. Or maybe someone having marital difficulties. Perhaps it's trouble at school or work. Maybe they're having trouble finding a job. If the person is in your group of friends or classmates, they may trust you enough to tell you a bit of their problem. They've come to you just as James talks about in verse 15. So what are you going to do when this happens? Now think a little further - what if this person is not in your close circle of acquaintances? Maybe you don't know the person well, or maybe you don't know them at all. What then?

Far too often, we as Christians simply offer a prayer and go on about our day, or worse, we promise to pray and then don't. Aren't we doing just what James warned us of back in chapter 1? We're forgetting that God's word has called us to action. And that's just what we're *not* supposed to do.

Read James 3:13-18

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

In chapter 2, James tells us to act on our faith, and here in chapter 3, we see a potential side effect. We can get competitive in our actions - and envious when other people's lifestyle of doing good deeds receives more attention than ours.

These days, there seems to be no end of awards and commendations, and when we don't get our fair share, we may be tempted to boast about our good works, and maybe even embellish the truth a bit to make us look better. Sometimes we may argue with others over the way we should be working together to do good deeds.

God clearly tells us that living out our faith in action should not be this way. There should be no competition and no arguments - we should be working together peacefully and gently, yielding to one another. God makes another promise here - but this one is only partially for us. He promises that we'll see a harvest of righteousness sown in peace when we peacefully work out our faith.

Read James 4:17 and James 5:19-20

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

Two last thoughts about the actions we should be taking as followers of Jesus - and we'll look at them in reverse order.

James, in chapter 5, calls us to act to help those who wander away from God's truth and bring them back to the truth. In today's culture bringing someone back to faith is difficult, because there is no end of information and opinion on the internet that can validate whatever point of view you want to take. Confirmation bias is insidious - we tend to be more accepting of things that fit what we already believe, and so when we're already putting something ahead of God, we tend to believe things that we read and see that make that seem OK. In addition, the internet is an addiction machine, which uses our brains' own reward centers against us, and compels us to spend more and more time on our phones and computers. Combining these two things, the internet is a perfect storm for luring us away from living a God-centered faith. Whether the internet is making your world become entertainment-centered, politics-centered, money-centered, lust-centered, sports-centered, gossip-centered, or something-else-centered, it's making you less and less God-centered.

This was no different in James' day (minus the technology); there were false teachers who would tell people what they wanted to hear then, and there still are now. And so the need is the same today as it was then - we need to challenge believers when they are doing things that indicate that they are wandering from the faith.

We're told to take action, and one of the most important actions we can take is sharing Biblical truths with a lost and hurting world ... and this must include those who know those truths and are wandering away! We are called to meet peoples' physical needs, but we can't neglect their eternal spiritual needs while we're doing it.

If someone is focused on money, or sex, or fame, preach that there is One who deserves their focus. If they are obsessed with sports, or celebrity, or politics, remind them that there is only One who should be their obsession. If they are distracted by the culture, or entertainment, or technology, speak out about the One who makes all of those distractions pale in comparison. And don't just speak - take the time and effort to meet their physical needs as you lead them to only One who can meet their spiritual needs.

A final thought - this one from the end of chapter 4 which summarizes all of James' teaching on taking action. It puts an exclamation point on everything we've looked at in this lesson about actions flowing out of our faith. There is really nothing I can add to it, so here it is, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." (James 4:17 NIV)

Key Points

- Actions speak louder than words. We need to do both.
- James is not teaching us anything new. Isaiah said it, Jesus said it, Paul said it, John said it. We should be acting out of faith, and not just saying Christian-sounding things. After all, faith that does not result in good deeds is not true faith at all.
- If you're arguing over how you should be doing good deeds, you're doing them wrong.
- Good work is just one of the things that flows out of a life getting closer and closer to Jesus - you should also notice peace, gentleness, and other fruits.
- If you see something that needs to be done, and you don't do it, that in itself is a sin.
- You probably know somebody who is wandering from the faith - one of the actions God wants is to help bring them back to Jesus. If you're wandering, ask for help.
- What other takeaways did you get from the readings?
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Memory Verse

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."
(James 1:22 NIV)

Questions

Do you remember our first lesson on humility? Do you see any crossover between what we learned there and what we're learning here?

Next we talked about prayer. What did we learn there that relates to taking action (or failing to take action)? How does that apply to your life?

James seemed to encourage us to be careful with our speech by talking less and listening more. Can we apply anything from that lesson to this one? What are you doing about that?

James 1:21 says, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." Is this a precursor for you in taking action on your faith? Why or why not?

Some Christians believe that living a good life is enough - that people will hear the gospel by observing your good works. What do you think that James would say to that argument? What does that mean to you?

Challenging a brother or sister who is wandering away from the truth of God is never simple or easy, yet James says that the value of bringing them back is huge. Have you ever done this? How did it go? Is God pointing out someone in your life who needs this challenge today?

James - Lesson 5 - Wisdom

Read 2 Chronicles 1:7-12

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

The Bible talks about wisdom over 200 times from Genesis (one of the reasons Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit was because it was “desirable for gaining wisdom”) to Revelation (where wisdom is said to be necessary to understand some of the symbols). The words wisdom, knowledge, and understanding all seem to be somewhat interchangeable in the Bible, and they all seem to point to getting a clear, deep understanding of something. There is a clear differentiation between worldly wisdom and wisdom that comes from God.

Famously, Solomon asked for wisdom and knowledge to help him lead God’s people successfully, rather than power or wealth, or even long life. If it’s that valuable, perhaps we should listen to James’ remarks too! We’ll get there in a second, but first...

Read Proverbs 3:13-26 and Psalm 111:10

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

Proverbs 3 talks a lot about wisdom, and indicates that God created everything through it. Reading the rest of that chapter, we see more and more about how valuable wisdom is, and why we should seek it. Psalm 111:10 is recited by some Jewish people as part of their morning rituals, and again we see that God's wisdom is so important that some people make a point to remind themselves to seek it every day.

Strangely though, many people today disparage wisdom. People who have spent years understanding how something works and what we should do about it, are disregarded because of ideology. If their wisdom does not line up with our dogma, we ignore them (or worse). In many ways, we’ve become a culture that prefers sound bites over wisdom, and slogans over understanding. We trade hard won wisdom for worldly opinions.

However, Proverbs teaches us something different. It teaches that we should hold on to true wisdom once we find it. Certainly, we should test the so-called wisdom that we find. We read about how to tell that wisdom is from God in our last lesson, and we'll revisit that again this time. As the writer of Proverbs tells us, wisdom is the path to safety and to the Lord. We should not be quick to throw it away just because it does not match our prejudices.

Wisdom often brings challenge with it. When we finally grasp the deep truth about something and what we should do about it, this changes the way we look at things. Humans are not always happy about change. However, when we're faced with wisdom that changes us, the Bible points out over and over again, that we need to hold tight to it and act on it.

Read James 1:5-8

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

We read this passage in an earlier lesson, but now we come to it with an understanding of why it's important to seek wisdom. And we can see from this passage that God gives wisdom to those who ask. We also see that it's important that we believe that we can and will receive the understanding that we seek. Sometimes it takes years, but those who earnestly seek God's wisdom will eventually find it.

It's important to think a bit about how we get that wisdom. Scripture tells us that some people (like Solomon in our earlier reading) got wisdom through supernatural appearances, visions, voices, or dreams. There are many Christians who testify that this still happens today. And the Bible tells us that God sends teachers and preachers into your life, as well as other people, to pass on wisdom to you. You may hear God's voice directly or indirectly, but you'll know it because it delivers wisdom.

The Bible also tells us that the Bible itself delivers wisdom, as does the Holy Spirit's application of the Word in your life. In fact, Jesus said "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock." (Matt 7:24-25)

Read James 3:13-4:10

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

This reading links wisdom to our last lesson on Action - the first thing to do when you get wisdom is show it through the deeds of a good life. Then, he quickly contrasts God's wisdom with the false "wisdom" of the world. The not-really-wisdom that the world presents, causes you to feel smart and take pride in how you know things that others don't. It causes disagreements, envy, jealousy and more. Perhaps "experts" who start off by telling us how important they are as an expert are not really experts at all. On the other hand, we should probably place more trust in experts who are humble, and considerate, and exhibit other traits that James identifies with Godly wisdom, even when their wisdom is unpopular.

James continues to draw a stark contrast between the followers of God and people who are friends with the world. While this applies to all of our behaviors, let's focus here on how it applies to the things that we believe and pass on as wisdom. As I mentioned earlier, more and more often today, people are choosing worldly "wisdom" because it aligns with their preferred view of how things should be. We react to people based on their skin color, gender expression, political beliefs, or many other easy-to-see characteristics, rather than seeking wisdom from God about what he wants us to do. We decide how to spend our time and money based on the "wisdom" we get from TV and the internet, rather than seeking God's direction daily. We even make life-altering decisions based on "common sense" or "what everyone expects" instead of searching diligently for true wisdom. We take the path of least resistance instead of spending the time and effort to ask God for wisdom.

Proverbs says that when we choose the world's "wisdom", we're foolish. James says that we're committing adultery against God.

Key Points

- Wisdom is represented throughout scripture as something valuable that we should seek, and as usual, James gives us some practical applications.
- If we don't have wisdom about something, we should pray and believe that God will give us the wisdom we seek eventually.

- Worldly wisdom is dangerous, and leads to division. Godly wisdom is pure, gentle, peaceful, and considerate.
- What other takeaways did you get from the readings about wisdom?

Memory Verse

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise." Psalm 111:10

Questions

How do you think James' writing on wisdom was influenced by his life with Jesus?

Do you look at the value of Godly wisdom (knowledge, understanding, etc.) the way Solomon did when he asked God for it or when he wrote Proverbs about it? Why or why not?

Do you believe that God will give you wisdom about a specific topic if you ask? Why or why not?

What's most important to you - Godly wisdom, your beliefs, or being accepted by others? Why?

Think back on a time when you wanted to understand something or decide what to do, and then you were able to really understand it and be sure about it. What happened?

What are you going to do differently as a result of learning about wisdom?

James - Lesson 6 - Wealth

Read Proverbs 23:4-5

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

We live in a society that glorifies wealth. We're encouraged to save for retirement. We are exhorted to invest and build wealth. We receive special treatment when our bank accounts and investment accounts reach a certain size, and we can come to expect that special treatment. We like to live comfortably - and we can come to worship our comfort.

Read Luke 6:20-26

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

In America, almost everyone is wealthy. In fact, there is so much wealth that it's easy to feel poor (or at least "not rich"). But consider that more than 70% of the world's population earns less than \$10 per day. That means that if you work 10 hours per week at minimum wage in the US, you're in the top 30% of the wealthiest people on the planet. If your net worth is more than \$93,170 then you're in the top 10% in the world.

Our ideas of wealth and poverty are warped by our circumstances. And so Jesus speaks to us as wealthy people. Proverbs warns us about trusting in riches, but Jesus delivers an even more stern warning. Let's see what James has to say...

Read James 1:9-18

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

When James was writing, there was not a very large "middle class" as we have in America today, so many of his readers would have easily associated themselves as "rich" or "poor". This was important because people of different social classes were treated very differently by the society of the day.

Spoiler alert - James does not say kind things about rich people. If you're looking for scripture to justify accumulating wealth, or guarding it carefully, don't ask James. However, his teaching, while sometimes harsh in tone, is in line with other biblical teachings on wealth. Here we see that James starts his comments building on the teachings of Jesus. We'll see, as we go further, that God is directing James to deliver some tough love to God's people about wealth. And we should hear it with the same passion today.

James also says that poor people should be happy with their high position - which also echoes the teachings of Jesus. While it can be easy to feel bad about your wealth, it can be tougher for a poor person to feel good about their poverty.

However, if we read about wealth and poverty in eternal terms rather than ephemeral terms, we will see things differently. A poor person understands their need much more clearly, because they deal with it all the time, and so they may be able to focus more on trusting and hoping for God's provision in their lives. A rich person, on the other hand, can be more self-sufficient, and so may not feel the deep need for God to provide on a daily basis. Rich people may be distracted by their wealth, and spend time focusing on preserving it, while people in poverty are faced with many challenges, but don't have the problem of being over-protective of or distracted by their wealth. And each condition impacts your relationship with God.

Read James 2:1-13

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

One real problem with wealth is that we can come to expect to have our way because of our wealth. We expect to choose our seat on the airplane. We expect to have a good seat at the concert. We expect to have a comfortable car to drive. We expect to have a warm home in the wintertime. We expect special treatment and extra comforts in our lives because that's how the world works. When you have a bit of money, things are easier. That's just the way of the world and it seems like it's always been that way.

James is warning us that followers of Jesus should not be part of that worldly tradition. We should approach a person dressed in rags exactly the same as one in a tailored suit. We should treat the beggar on the corner the same way we would treat our pastor or fellow church member if we met them in the street. Failure to do so is not just a bad habit - James calls it evil.

In recent history, there have been a number of movements working toward racial equity. Sometimes they are focused on jobs, sometimes on housing, sometimes on policing, and sometimes on other wealth-related issues ... but the problem is always the same. Our society shows favoritism to some people over others. And sadly, many Christians today join in the favoritism, and cry out against the people who are trying to eliminate favoritism, accusing them of “socialism” or “communism” or some other imagined wrong, as if a political label was a reason to ignore God’s words. If James were speaking to our church today, he would demand to know why (probably using some pretty hard words).

Read James 4:6-5:6

Is there a word, phrase, or verse that stands out to you? Why?

James teaches several things in this passage, ending with his harshest criticism of wealthy people. It is interesting that he is not criticizing wealth itself, but rather he is speaking against wealthy people who hoard their wealth. James cites a specific case of not paying field workers, but we can assume that he has more in mind than that. He condemns a pattern of behavior where a person thinks that keeping their wealth is more important than meeting the needs of others. James speaks against those who think that their comfort is more important than the basic needs of someone living in poverty. He criticizes those who have multiple homes when they allow their neighbors to be homeless - who have multiple cars while their neighbors walk - who have more than enough to eat yet their neighbors go hungry.

These patterns were a problem 2,000 years ago, and they are still a problem today.

Key Points

- Wealth is not bad in and of itself, but it is very dangerous because it corrupts those who have it, distracts us from God, and can make us act wrongly toward others.
- Poverty is not good in and of itself, but we are told that we are blessed to be poor, and it makes it easier for us to rely on God to provide for our spiritual and physical needs.
- James uses harsh words to grab our attention, because how we handle wealth is a critically important issue in what our eternity will look like.
- Showing favoritism is a sin, and there are many kinds of favoritism in our church and in our society that we as followers of Jesus should actively fight against.
- What other takeaways did you get from the readings about wealth?

Memory Verse

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

James 1:12

Questions

Do you see yourself as "rich"? Why or why not? How does your view of yourself and your economic status impact your reading of James?

What do you make of the fact that James never mentions the idea of giving money to the poor?

Do you see "social" issues such as racial inequality or income inequality as issues of "favoritism"? Why or why not? How does that impact your actions?

How much money (in the bank, investments, retirement accounts, property, etc.) do you need to have in order to feel secure? How does your thinking on this issue impact your response to God's call through the book of James?