

# God's Message to Us in James

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## Introduction

Today we continue our sermon series in which I am preaching a sermon on each book of the Bible.

- Having finished Paul's epistles and Hebrews (which may have been written by Paul) we come now to the epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude.
- This afternoon, we will consider God's message to us in James.

From the text itself, we know that a man named James wrote this epistle.

- Although Jesus had a leading disciple by this name, it is the general consensus of the church that the James who wrote this was James the brother of the Lord.
  - Although he and his brothers were skeptical about Jesus for a time, he became a great leader in the early church after he witnessed Christ's resurrection.
    - He is the one who presided as moderator at the council of Jerusalem.
    - He was highly respected, even by many of the Jews who were not converted to Christ, because of his godliness.
    - He was known to have knees like a camel because of all the time that he spent in prayer.
    - As one ministering to the Jews, he carefully observed the law of God, but without giving in to the pressure of the legalism that insisted that the Gentiles must be circumcised (as can be seen by his leadership at the council of Jerusalem).
    - He sealed his testimony by martyrdom in 62 AD (we are told that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple—the temple being the place where he carried out so much of his ministry), after which many feared that without his prayers, judgment would fall upon Jerusalem.
- James writes to the “twelve tribes that are scattered abroad,” probably referring to the Jewish believers in Christ who had been scattered from Jerusalem by persecution and who had recently been persecuted again by Herod Agrippa in AD 44.
  - If so, James is probably the earliest book of the New Testament.
  - There are a number of things that point to an early date in the language and style.

But what does this epistle have to say to us?

- How could an epistle written to “the twelve tribes that are scattered abroad,” have relevance for us today?
  - Though we are neither Jews nor those who are scattered by persecution, the central message of this epistle is relevant to every believer in every generation.
- Through James, the Holy Spirit speaks to us of our Lord Jesus.
  - The central message is that believers are to take their proper place under our glorious God and under His Son Jesus Christ.
    - All the way through, James attacks our self-esteem and calls for us to esteem God instead.

- We live in a day where this message is needed more than ever, because ours is a day in which self-esteem is actually *promoted* by many church leaders—not indirectly, but held up as a virtue that we all need to cultivate!
- Many professing Christians are duped into supposing that their greatest problem is low self-esteem.
- In the history of the church, pride and self-esteem have been rightly regarded as deadly sins.
- The Holy Spirit calls us, in this epistle, to get off of our high horse and to fear God—a thing that is alien to all the fallen sons and daughters of Adam.

TRANS> You can see how James (or rather God’s Spirit) gets right to the point.

**I. Right off the bat, he addresses us as those who are in such desperate need of growth that we ought to welcome trials that help us grow.**

A. He says (1:2-3), “**Count it all joy when you fall into various trails, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience [or perseverance].**”

1. The word translated *trials* is also translated *temptation*.
  - There is one word used for both.
    - This makes sense because temptations test our devotion to God.
    - They are trials of our faith.
      - Think of Job whose trials tested his allegiance to God... whether he would continue to serve God when he was losing all in the things in world that he held dear—even his children and his reputation.
2. James is not telling us that we should enjoy trials in some twisted way, as people do that somehow enjoy suffering...
  - He is telling us that we should count it all joy because we learn patience or endurance through them.
    - Patience, in this context, means that you learn to put God first—
      - when you have to choose Him and suffering or compromise and ease...
      - when you are called to keep on serving Him even though things are not going the way you want...
    - You learn that your comfort and your desires—even your very life—is dispensable—it is all to be expended for God and for His glory.
3. James tells us in verse 4 that this patience makes us complete.
  - **But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.**
    - You become perfect, or complete—you reach the goal God has for you—by learning this patience.
      - You come to truly see that you are here for God and His glory.

TRANS> The point is, learning to give God that place that He ought to have should be so important to you—because it is so desperately needed—that you should count it all joy when you have trials that help you do this.

- We need to cultivate the kind of attitude that an athlete has toward his training.

- He knows that he needs more stamina, so he gladly lets his trainer push him.

B. Look at how James develops this idea.

1. First, he says that we should ask God for this completeness that comes through trials which he calls *wisdom*.

a. He says (1:5), **“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God...”**

- And of course, we *all* lack this wisdom...
  - so we should *all* be asking for it.
  - Indeed, you should be craving it so much that you count it all joy when trials come that will give it to you.
- Remember that in the Bible, wisdom is said to begin with the fear of the Lord.
  - The fear of the Lord is just what we have been talking about.
  - You fear the Lord when you realise that life is not about you and what pleases you—it is about God and what pleases Him.
    - We are here for His glory and in fact, we will never find true happiness until we come to live out that reality.
    - So if you lack wisdom, if God does not have the place He ought to have in your life, then ask God for it!

b. James assures you in verse 5 that God will surely give it to you if you ask Him.

- **If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.**
  - God is gracious—
  - Don’t be afraid that by asking for it, you are somehow exposing some weakness that God does not know about...
    - He knows all about it and He delights in the fact that you are finally admitting how much you need to change.
    - He will gladly answer your prayer.
- But a warning is given.
  - Be sure that you really want it.
  - James warns you in verses 6-8 not to be doubleminded about asking for wisdom when you are not ready to pay the price to attain it...
    - The reason we don’t have nearly as much wisdom as we should is not because God is unwilling to give it to us; it is that we are double-minded—we value our comfort more than we value wisdom.
    - We must learn to ask for it sincerely.

2. Second, as those seeking wisdom, James says we should be glad when we are brought down.

a. In verse 9 he says, **Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation.**

- Those who were following Christ among these Jews were brought to poverty. Their status was diminished in the world.

- But that is not a big deal because whatever we have in this world is only temporary anyway—it is only here for a moment and then it is gone, for we all die and return to dust.
  - More importantly, once you are emptied of all of that this world has to offer and made lowly, then you are exalted—
    - The lowly brother has reason to glory in his exaltation as a child of the King—a brother to Jesus—one of the meek who will inherit the earth.
- b. In verse 12, James speaks of this exaltation.
- Enduring the loss of all things for Christ leads to a crown which the Lord has promised to all who love Him!
  - What are we tempted by when we face losing all in this world for Christ?
    - James explains that it is not God who tempts us to love the things of the world more than we love Him!
      - James 1:13: **Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.**
    - The temptation arises from the sinful lusts and desires in us.
      - James 1:14: **“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.”**
      - These are the very desires that lead to sin and sin is the thing that brings forth death.
        - James 1:15: **“Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”**
        - Sin happens when we give way to our lusts instead of obeying God.
          - We choose to follow our desires because they are more important to us than the Lord is.
      - James explains that this is what destroys us—sin brings forth death—it is the thing that destroys our relationship with God.
        - Did Adam and Eve not eat the forbidden fruit because they desired the fruit more than God?
          - Their lust was more important to them than serving God.
- c. God never tempts us to put our lusts ahead of Him.
- He tempts us by putting us into situations where we must choose between Him and our lusts... but He never tempts us to follow our lusts!
  - What’s more, He takes things away from us only to give us better things!
    - Verses 17-18 explains that He brought us forth by His word—by the gospel—that gives us life—life in which He has His place in our lives.
      - **Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. 18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.**

- These Jews to whom James writes were the first to have this precious fruit for all to see... the fruit of a life restored to God.
3. Third, James says that we should be in a posture, or attitude, of learning.
- Our aim should be to receive the wisdom that God has for us.
  - a. He reminds us in verse 19 that anger (about losing stuff in this world) does not produce righteousness—it does not bring about the wisdom he has been talking about.
  - b. Instead, he tells us that we should be eager to listen—we should be teachable.
    - Verse 21 says that we should receive with meekness the implanted word that is able to save us.
      - Don't you see how much you need God's instruction?
      - Don't you see how much you need God's help?
        - how desperately you need to change—to learn to fear God?
        - to learn wisdom?
        - to learn to put Him in His proper place in your life?
    - It is the implanted word that saves you...
      - The word of God when it truly becomes a part of you and lives in you.
      - When you come to Christ for forgiveness that you might be reconciled to God as your God—as the God that He is.
  - c. Don't forget what the word shows you about yourself.
    - It shows you how much you need to change!
      - Don't look into it as in a mirror and then forget what you saw.
      - James 1:22-24: **But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.** <sup>23</sup> **For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;** <sup>24</sup> **for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.**
    - Actually put it into practice as verse 25-27 teach you...
      - Bridle your tongue—speak in ways compatible with the fear of God.
        - Really—change those nasty selfish words into edifying words.
      - Help the needy—truly visit widows and orphans to give them what they stand in need of—actually do this.
      - And keep yourself unspotted from the world—don't give way to the partying and the drunkenness and the immorality... be pure and holy.

TRANS> So you see from James chapter 1 that we are desperate people.

- We are in desperate need of change—and God is committed to doing this.

## II. James moves on in chapter 2 to speak of two things that are incompatible with those who are truly seeking wisdom through Christ.

A. First, showing partiality (James 2:1-13).

1. James speaks about playing up to the rich who come to your church (or synagogue) while disregarding those who have nothing.

- Such behaviour betrays in you something very different than loving your neighbour.
  - If you love your neighbour, you want to help those who are in need, but if you want to get something, you play up to those who have something to give you.
    - By showing partiality, you show that your real priority is not to please God, but to get something from the rich.
2. James calls us to think this through.
- Who is it that God has chosen to be heirs of eternal life?
    - Is it those who are rich in this world or those who are poor?
    - Those who are full of this world, or those who yearn for the world to come?
  - And who is it that persecutes you and blasphemes Christ?
    - Those who have nothing or those who have great riches and power in this world?
3. Realise that showing partiality is a violation of the royal law of God's kingdom to love your neighbour.
- You are not subject to God if you show partiality—just as a murderer even though he does not commit adultery or an adulterer even though he does not commit murder is not subject to God as his God.
  - God's law is not like a cafeteria where you choose the foods you like and ignore the others.
    - When you are reconciled to God as the true God, you have respect to all of His commandments.
    - Murder is forbidden, adultery is forbidden, and so is partiality.
      - Showing partiality is incompatible with seeking wisdom.
- B. Second, faith without works is incompatible with a life devoted to the pursuit of wisdom—one seeking salvation.
- This is the subject of James 2:14-26.
1. Faith is meant to bring you to God.
- That is its purpose as we have already seen—to restore you to a right relationship with God as your God.
    - Therefore, James 2:14 says: **“What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”**
  - If your faith does not bring about works, it does as much good as telling a hungry man out in the cold to be warmed and filled (see v. 15-16).
    - It is as worthless as that.
    - Faith is meant to bring you to God.
    - If it doesn't, you don't have it.
  - If it does not have works, James says that it is dead (v. 17: **Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**)
    - It is not doing what faith does.
2. So true saving faith is demonstrated by works.
- James explains that the only way to show that you have faith is by works.

- In 2:18, he says, **Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.**
- It only makes sense—if you have faith that reconciles you to God, you will live for God like Abraham and Rahab did.
  - If you simply believe the facts of the gospel, you are no different than the demons—they know that Christ is God—they know that He came and died on the cross for sinners—they know that He is coming to judge.
- But the faith that saves is the faith that embraces Christ for forgiveness and acceptance with God so that you can be restored to Him as your God.
  - The reason you come to Christ is not just to be forgiven, but to be reconciled forever that you might live in God’s house as His child.
- James explains that Abraham and Rahab were justified by their works...not, of course (!), that they were so good that they did not need Christ...
  - but rather that having truly come to Christ as He was then promised, they experienced reconciliation with God that brought about obedience... obedience that justified them in the sense of showing that they truly were restored to the Father by the Son.
    - They were now living for God as His people.

TRANS> But though we are transformed by true faith, we are certainly not yet perfect.

- We are still need to grow in wisdom—we need to fear God more than we do now...

### III. So starting in chapter 3, James zeros in on some areas that show us how much we still need to change—to grow.

- Remember where he started—our need to change is so great that we ought to actually rejoice in trials, because they help us grow.
  - But do you see how much you need to grow? Of course you do not.
- So let’s look at some areas in our lives that show that change is still needed.

#### A. First, consider your tongue!

1. James has such a vivid way of making his point—
  - He begins by saying (3:1): **“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”**
    - It becomes obvious as he continues that his main point is not so much about avoiding teaching as it is about showing us that our words are not at all what they ought to be.
  - In 3:2, he says: **“For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.”**
    - His point is clearly that none of us have attained perfection in our speech.
2. First, he describes how much trouble we cause with our tongues.
  - Just as you can steer a horse with a bridle or a ship with small rudder, so the tongue is able to set the world on fire with sin... v.3: **Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!**

- If you become a teacher, you only put yourself in a position where you can cause even more mischief by your errant words...
    - You have the potential to cause even more harm than you cause with your words spoken in private.
    - With your tongue, you can ruin lives, set people in the wrong direction, lead them into error.
      - Think about those who say of some sin, “Oh, that is not really such a bad thing.”
      - Think of those preachers who say that there is no hell—or that Christ is but one of many ways to salvation... what trouble, what ruin they bring into the world!
      - What you say is no small matter—and how often we go to teaching and advising in ways that bring destruction and ruin.
3. James tells us that no one can tame the tongue.
- **3:8: But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.**
  - It is easier to tame wild animals than to tame the tongue.
    - Consider how we bless God, and then turn around and curse our neighbour... as if what they do to displease us calls for them to be cursed!
      - Children, do you curse your parents?
      - Under the law, the penalty for that was worse than the penalty for fornication.
        - Fornication called for marriage, cursing your parents called for death.
        - Who do you think you are to call down curses upon anyone?
          - This is the height of wickedness and presumption.
    - Yet, even when you do not go so far as to actually call down a curse upon them, how often do you, with your tongue, speak ill of others...
      - criticise them because they have displeased you in some way.
        - Who do you think you are?
        - I tell you—you are someone who does not yet fear God as you should.
      - Until your speech is perfected, you should continue to count it all joy when you have trials.
        - You need them to teach you that it is God the creator of all who must be pleased, not you.
- B. A second evidence that we still need to change comes from our selfishness that produces quarrelling with each other.
1. In 3:13-14, James says: **Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.**
- Bitter envy and self-seeking—

- where we are unable to have true joy in the success and prosperity of others—and where we put ourselves above them as those who suppose that we *deserve* to be above them—where we resent it when they are above us.
- We may ask, where does this wisdom come from? Is it from above?
  - Indeed it is not!
    - James 3:15-16: **This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there.**
  - Instead of the meekness that we ought to have as sinful creatures, meekness that puts others first, we rather esteem ourselves as superior to them—as more deserving.
    - People who claim to suffer from lack of self-esteem and don't know what they are talking about.
      - They are in fact quite full of self-esteem because they think they deserve better than they have.
      - They say that they are worthless, but if they really thought that, they would lay down their lives sacrificially for others.
      - What they mean is that they are bummed out that they have not attained and cannot attain all the happiness that others seem to have... or that they have not succeeded the way others have succeeded.
      - They are full of resentment and anger about this—so much so that they sometimes harm or even murder themselves.
        - Instead of serving God and others as those with godly humility do, they pout and grumble that they don't have what they want.
        - Wisdom from above is not self-seeking—it seeks the glory of God and the blessing of others.
- In chapter 4, James continues talking about this self-seeking wisdom.
- 2. He tells us that it is the source of our fights with each other.
  - In 4:1-2 he says: **Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires for pleasure that war in your members?* <sup>2</sup> You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.**
  - You want others to treat you a certain way—and when they don't you are angry with them; and they want something of you and are angry with you...
    - Maybe it is even something as simple as a husband wanting sympathy from his wife after a hard day at work at the same time she wants sympathy from him after a hard day of her own.
    - As soon as they meet, each looking forward to what they expect the other to provide, a quarrel breaks out.
  - Too often our prayers are full of requests for what we want—perhaps things that are legitimate...like comfort from our spouse...
    - But we fail to pray that God will give us what is best for us.

- Your prayers are only for what you want in the world... you are not looking for wisdom first.
  - James tells us that our prayers are not answered because of this.
  - Remember what we say in chapter 1. If anyone asks for wisdom—to grow in the fear of God—God will answer him.
3. The problem is that we are spiritual adulterers.
- James calls us that in verse 4, explaining that friendship with the world—where we want certain things in the world—is enmity with God.
  - It makes God jealous and sets Him against us so that He resists us.
    - We are proud instead of humble—and as verse 6 says, **God resists the proud** (who feel entitled and make demands) **but gives grace to the humble** (who realise that they need to grow in the fear of God).

TRANS> So you see that, according to James, what is needed is humility.

- What we have been seeing all along—we are not yet what we should be with God.
  - We need hard things so that we will grow in wisdom and realise the place that He ought to have in our lives as God.

#### **IV. In the rest of the book, James describes what a believer looks like when he has the humility that obtains help.**

A. First, he tells us that there is submission to God...

1. When we see how little we fear God, we will submit to Him and resist the devil (v.7).
  - Verse 9 even says: **Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.**
    - Not a verse that most people put on calendars.
    - But as we have seen... when you truly cry to God, mourning over your sins because you do not fear God as you should, He lifts you up.
2. If you have this humility, you will not be critical of others.
  - James 4:11-12 explains that instead of judging them on how well they please you, you will recognise that God is the Lawgiver and the judge who is able to save and to destroy.
  - Instead of being angry that they did not do what you want, you will humbly recognise that far worse is the fact that you come short of what God wants.
    - It changes your whole attitude about your neighbour so that you submit all judgment to Him.
3. And this submission will be seen in the way you plan things too.
  - Instead of acting like you are in control of the outcomes of your business ventures or other endeavours,
    - you will acknowledge that matters are in God's hands and you will leave it to Him to prosper your efforts or not.
    - As v.15 puts it, you will say, **If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.**

TRANS> So true humility begins with submission.

B. Secondly, when you are humble, James 5:1-12 explains that you will look at things from God's perspective.

1. In chapter 5:1-6, James explains that your perspective about riches and worldly power will change.
  - Instead of glorying in these, you will lament in all the ways you have wrongly used your power and attained your wealth.
  - In the world, we automatically admire the wealthy and it makes us strut when we have more than others... but when you consider that you cannot keep the riches you have heaped up in this world and that you will be judged for all the wrong ways you have attained them, it changes your whole perspective.
2. Instead of living for riches, you should wait patiently for the blessing of the Lord that will come at the last day.
  - James 5:7 says: **Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain.**
    - He is coming, so don't grow weary of serving Him with very little now—even with persecutions and suffering.
    - Verse 10 encourages you to consider the prophets who were abused and mistreated all their days, but continued with patient endurance,
      - looking for their blessing from God instead of from this present world.
      - Be like Job who learned how compassionate the Lord really is when the LORD took away all that he had with the result that Job came to know Him better than he had known Him before.
3. Verse 12 advises you: Don't go swearing about matters as if *you* are in the position to bless and curse.
  - Cursing when you don't get what you want.
  - No, no, that is great wickedness—it is God who decides who will be blessed and who will be cursed—not you!

TRANS> So proper humility is seen first, in submission to God; second, in seeing things from His perspective and now third:

- C. Humility is seen in seeking God's help in daily trials—in putting our affairs in His hands by prayer.
- This is the subject of James 5:13-18 where we are taught...
    1. If you are suffering, pray; if you are cheerful, sing psalms of praise to God...
    2. If you are sick, call upon the elders to pray for your healing and for your forgiveness if you have committed sins... sickness is often because of sin.
    3. And if you have sinned, confess it to others as those who want to be right with God and He will forgive you.
    4. Know that such prayers are extremely powerful—we put all in God's hands and He will answer us—verse 16 tells us: **The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.**

TRANS> And this leads James to speak about the fourth characteristic of true humility...

- D. True humility leads us to pray not only for ourselves but also for others.
1. In verse 17-18, James reminds us how Elijah prayed that it would not rain and how it did not rain for three and a half years.
    - But why did Elijah pray for this?
      - He did that because God told him to.
      - God told him to because the people were praying and sacrificing to Baal who was supposed to be the rain god.
      - Elijah was praying that they would realise that it is not Baal who is in control, but God the LORD.
  2. James encourages us in the last two verses that we are to care about others too.
    - None of us fears the LORD the way we should, and we are responsible to do what we can, as Elijah did, to reclaim those who have turned from God.
      - Those who have lost their focus and become angry instead of submitting to what God has sent for their growth—those who are quarrelling because they did not get what they wanted.
      - We are to point them back to what Christ came to give us—not this present world, but reconciliation with God so that we serve Him as our God—so that we value Him above everything else.
        - That is the work He is doing and it is a precious, most excellent thing.
    - James therefore encourages us, saying: **“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, <sup>20</sup> let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”**
      - Nothing matters more than living for God—that is what we were made to do and that is what Christ restores us to do and that is what we are to encourage each other to do—just as James has done in this entire epistle.
      - Faith without living for God is dead and worthless faith.