

Masterclass

JAMES

Reading Plan

WHAT TO EXPECT EACH WEEK

We're so excited that you are joining us for this 14-week study through the book of James. Each week we will take a particular section of James and look deeper at the important themes we see there. You can participate at a few different levels:

LEVEL 1 Read along with us through the daily reading and reflect on what God is teaching you.

LEVEL 2 Find a friend to join you in going through this Reading Plan. Pray for each other and go through the questions together.

LEVEL 3 Add in time to read the weekly devotional to strengthen the message of that week and help you "make it real".

LEVEL 4 Take part in the weekly challenge to help you take what you are reading and learning and apply it to your life in a practical way.

LEVEL 5 Join us in memorizing the whole book of James! Each week will contain a section of James for you to memorize.

Whichever level of participation you choose, we're so glad you're here!

We hope this reading plan helps you to grow closer to Jesus more every day and integrate His word into your daily life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The book of James was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. Before the resurrection of Jesus, James was not one of His followers. In fact, the few times he is mentioned in the New Testament give us an inside look to the tension that may have existed between the two brothers.

Can you imagine what it might have been like living in the shadow of literally a perfect older brother? Perhaps the perfection of Jesus and the obvious favoritism that Mary must have had for Him rubbed James the wrong way. Maybe James struggled with his own sin and felt exposed by the light of Jesus living in his own home. Perhaps James felt like he could never measure up.

Whatever the reason for the tension, by the time Jesus starts His public ministry, James is not on board. We see him mockingly tell Jesus to go perform public displays of His power at the Feast of Booths (John 7:2-5).

However, after Jesus' death and resurrection, James is one of the first to witness the risen King. (1 Corinthians 15:7). We have no record of the conversation that transpired between Jesus and His brother, but I can only imagine the power it would have held in James' life. From that moment on, James is a changed man. He came face to face with his Lord, no longer seeing his older brother, but the Son of God in all His glory.

James is named among those who began the first church in Jerusalem and would meet in the upper room to pray (Acts 1:14).

We learn later that James goes on to rise to a role of leadership in the Jerusalem church, being named as a “pillar” of the church in Galatians 2:9. James’ life was radically changed for the better, forever marked by passion and fervor for the Gospel message. He goes on to devote his life to the Church and the ministry of the Gospel.

Receiving reports of believing Jews scattered abroad who are struggling under the false teachings of the time, James pens this letter in response. Through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, James writes a letter that not only fueled the faith of the first century believers but has continued to teach and direct believers ever since.

One of the more controversial books of the Bible, the book of James holds a passion for faith that produces fruit. Frustrated by Christians who held their faith as nothing more than a title, James challenged his readers to make their faith more than surface deep. He calls us all to a deeper commitment and surrender to the life-changing truth of the Gospel.

WEEK 1: "TRIALS"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 1:1-4

MONDAY: Romans 5:3-5

TUESDAY: John 16:33

WEDNESDAY: Romans 8:18

THURSDAY: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

FRIDAY: 1 Peter 4:19

SATURDAY: Psalm 22

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Take time this week to write down 3-5 trials in your life that have turned out for your good in the end. Try to look past the pain of that trial and see how it made you stronger, filled you with more compassion, strengthened your faith, drew you closer to others, or opened your eyes to something you didn't see before. Spend time in prayer thanking God for His faithfulness and His goodness. Share with at least one person what you have discovered.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

I was recently talking with a friend about a trial she went through. Like most of us, she just wanted it to go away. She wanted the pain to stop and the memory to fade. But the harder she tried to push it away, the more it seemed to plague her. Trying to just forget and move on wasn't working. It just followed her into her life.

I shared with her a truth that God has been teaching me. Pain, trials, struggles, and trauma stay with us. They become a part of our story. But we don't have to continue to live broken. We can heal and that trial can become a part of a beautiful story that God wants to weave through our lives. Like a scar, it never goes away. But it doesn't have to cause pain.

We can heal and be better for it.

God allows trials to happen in our lives because they can be the catalyst that refines us into the person we were always meant to be. Sin distorts that original design. But when we surrender to the restoring and healing hand of Jesus in our lives, even the trials and suffering can be for our benefit. I've heard it said, there is no "testimony" without the "test."

So whatever trials you are walking through this week or are still weighing heavy on your heart and mind, surrender them to Jesus and allow His refining and healing touch to use that trial for your good.

This is the amazing process of the Holy Spirit that James writes about in this week's passage. It's the supernatural power of God to take that which was intended for our harm and use it for our good (Gen 50:20)

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 1:1-8 this week

WEEK 2: "TEMPTATIONS"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 1:12-18

MONDAY: 1 Corinthians 10:13

TUESDAY: Hebrews 2:18

WEDNESDAY: Romans 6:12-14

THURSDAY: 1 John 2:16-17

FRIDAY: Ephesians 6:10-11

SATURDAY: Galatians 5:16-25

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Take some time this week to ask yourself where you might have dark corners that need the light of Christ. Are there subjects, relationships, habits, or desires that would change if exposed to the light of Christ? If so, what steps can you take to turn on the light and embrace the righteousness that leads to life? What ways can you use the truth of God's word to combat the lies that keep you in the dark places? Find one person you can talk to about these thoughts sometime this week.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

Temptation is a tricky thing. It makes you believe you're the victim while causing you to act and think in ways that you shouldn't. It lies and whispers that it's not your fault you did this or said that. It twists the truth and makes it look like a lie while packaging the lie in just enough truth that you'll swallow it whole. It alters our perception of reality until we aren't even sure what is true, right, or real anymore.

It's no wonder that Satan is called the Great Tempter. His very nature is to twist and tempt. He breathes out lies and temptations as an expression of his nature. In Matthew 4, knowing full well who Jesus was, Satan tried to trip Him up. He tried to get Him to succumb to temptation and forever ruin His ministry before it even began.

But there is another source of temptation too... our own sinful hearts. See, unlike Jesus, we make Satan's job a lot easier by feeding and fueling his temptations. We create a perfect breeding ground for his temptations to take root when we entertain the darker parts of this world and of ourselves. I have this saying, "only bad things grow in the dark." Sin, temptation, evil, discontentment, lies... they all flourish best away from the light of Jesus' truth. And the more we allow them to grow in the dark, the more hospitable we make our lives for the Great Tempter to come in and play. We might as well put out a welcome mat because when we allow these dark corners and closets in our life to exist, we are creating not only a place where he CAN thrive, but a place where he WILL thrive.

So, what do we do to fight against sin and temptation taking root in our lives? We turn on the light of God's truth. We face the darkness with the only thing that can defeat it. Take a look at the story of Jesus in Matthew 4 again. How does Jesus combat Satan's temptations? He battles it with the truth of the Word. In the same way, when we are faced with all kinds of temptation, we can engage in the same tactics. We can turn to the truth of Jesus for everything we need to succeed.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 1:9-16 this week

WEEK 3: "FAITH ON PURPOSE"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 1:19-25

MONDAY: John 15:1-8

TUESDAY: Ephesians 5:15-17

WEDNESDAY: Matthew 7:24-27

THURSDAY: Luke 6:46-47

FRIDAY: Joshua 24:15

SATURDAY: John 13:17

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Go back and read through the back-and-forth comparisons we talked about in this week's devo.

Which one hits home for you the most? How can you choose to not just look at the truth of God's word in this area, but actually put on the truth? What is one practical way you can step out in faith this week to live your faith on purpose?

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

In this week's section of James, we see this back-and-forth comparison that he makes between acts of righteousness and their sinful counterparts. One of the things I love about James is how he breaks down what he is teaching into practical bite-sized pieces that we can implement.

- Listen to people more than you talk. Listening helps us to not get angry about the wrong things.
- Engage the righteousness of God instead of the anger of man to solve issues.
- Be humble (viewing ourselves through God's lens and submitting to His authority) to root out filthiness and wickedness.
- Live your faith on purpose, putting it into action instead of just listening to good talk. Knowing what to do and actually doing it are two different things.
- Slow down and look intently at the Word of God, not just a passing glance easily forgotten. Study Him and His word so that you know what it looks like and aren't prone to forget.

Back and forth James calls out the truth that defeats the sin. Over and over the message is clear- "live your faith on purpose."

James calls us to cling to the truth of what it actually looks like to live a life surrendered to Jesus.

See the issue is that it's really easy to say that we are followers of Jesus and never let that change what we do, what we think, or how we interact with the world. We read the bible, we learn about Jesus and what He calls us to do, we listen to a great sermon, we attend bible study... all good things. But if they don't make a difference in our lives, they are useless. If all we do is look at righteousness, study righteousness, and understand righteousness but we never actually PUT IT ON, then we are fools! It's as absurd as someone who looks in a mirror and then forgets what he looks like.

We have to not only know that we are Christians but act like it too. And the only way to do that is to choose to! It's not a feeling. It's a choice... minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. We choose the righteousness of Jesus over our own brokenness. We choose the identity of "Christian" over the sinful identity that we once held. The life of Christ makes it possible for us to claim that identity. But we have to choose to put it on.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 1:17-24 this week

WEEK 4: "SELF DECEPTION"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 1:26-27

MONDAY: Jeremiah 17:9

TUESDAY: 1 John 1:8

WEDNESDAY: 2 Timothy 4:3-4

THURSDAY: Revelation 3:16-17

FRIDAY: 1 John 2:3-6

SATURDAY: 1 Corinthians 15:33

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Where is one area that you have been guilty of self-deception? How have you struggled to pursue righteousness that required you to abandon comfort? It's important to note that not everyone is called to "sell all he has and give to the poor". But we are all called to surrender all we have into the hands of Jesus. We are called to be open and ready to be used in whatever way HE sees fit. How can you surrender what you have and the "comfortable" things in your life to be used by or removed by God? Find at least one person to talk this through with and ask them to hold you accountable in this area.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

We say that we love the truth. But oftentimes I think we love comfort more. We want to believe that what feels right is right. But really, we are just deceiving ourselves. We live in a culture that says, “follow your heart” and that if it feels good, it must be good. But the bible tells us just the opposite. A lot of the time, we can fall into the trap of self-deception when we are led by our feelings and not by the Spirit and not by God’s truth.

This is what James is referring to in this week’s passage when he talks about deceiving your own heart. It’s what happens when we feel that tug of the Holy Spirit and we ignore it. It’s what happens when we rationalize away doing something that the Spirit is calling us to do. It’s what happens when we follow our comfort over our calling.

James is setting the stage in these two passages and trying to start the conversation about what it really looks like to follow Christ. As you’ll see repeated over and over in the coming weeks, James is not impressed when we can say all the right things. He will make the case that unless you actually do what you say, not only are you deceiving yourself, but you are deceiving others.

See, we, in the Western church especially, can all too easily mistake comfort for righteousness.

We can think that if we are living in the will of God, things should be easy and comfortable. We tell ourselves that if God is pleased with us, He wants us to be happy. We tell ourselves that God would want us to follow our hearts, that He would agree in our doing what we want. But in the end, we are only deceiving ourselves.

Sometimes, oftentimes, righteousness is hard. It means dying to self so we can live for Christ. It means going out of your way to love the “unlovable” in the world around you. It means giving not just until you have given “enough” but giving until it’s a sacrifice. It means spending time doing things you don’t want to do so that you can love others well. It means putting down our rights so that we can pick up the burdens of others.

Isn’t this the example we see in Christ? He gave up His comfortable position in Heaven to come to earth and be uncomfortable for our sake. He served us to the point of death and calls us all to be willing to do the same, to love each other more than ourselves. It’s not easy by any means. We can’t live this kind of life on our own. We need the power of Christ living in us if we are to accomplish it. But when we surrender to the uncomfortable for the sake of the Kingdom, we will find that our lives, our faith, and our purpose are strengthened in the power of Jesus Christ.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 1:25- 2:5 this week

WEEK 5: "FAVORITISM"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 2:1-13

MONDAY: Galatians 3:26-29

TUESDAY: Romans 2:11

WEDNESDAY: Deuteronomy 10:17

THURSDAY: Acts 10:34-35

FRIDAY: Colossians 3:10-14

SATURDAY: Luke 6:31-35

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Can you think of at least one area or one person where you have shown unrighteous partiality? How can you make amends this week? Maybe make a phone call or write out an apology. Maybe it means inviting that person over who you have unjustly rejected. Maybe it means looking for ways to serve others that you might not naturally serve. Find at least one way to root out partiality in your life this week. Then, tell someone about it!

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

Most of you reading this have probably been through grade school and can remember the torture of group sports or PE where the teacher would assign two team captains. Then each team captain would take turns with the other picking players for their team. If you've ever been the last to be picked, you know how frustrating this process can be.

I remember thinking as a kid that I couldn't wait to be a grown-up with the idea that partiality, popularity, favoritism, and being the last one picked would stop. Little did I know that this issue is more than just a grade school playground issue. It's unfortunately rampant through our society and hearts and as grown-ups, causes a lot more pain than being last picked for a game.

As people, we have a tendency to favor others who are like us or who embody something that we want or aspire to. And that's natural, even acceptable to a point. I mean, you can't be best friends with everyone, or you'll really be best friends with no one. There is a point where this favoritism is normal and even acceptable.

Take Jesus for instance. He had hundreds of people who would flock to Him and dozens that followed Him. But He was closest with His disciples and even closer to three of them.

It's normal and healthy to have an inner group of people who you are closest with.

But where we get in trouble is when we start treating people as "less than" or "beneath" us. When personal connection turns into unjust favoritism, we have crossed a line. See, although Jesus had people who were closer to Him than others, He still loved and served everyone well. He went out of His way to meet and love the kind of people that everyone else rejected. He didn't play favorites or fall into bias. His metrics were simple: If you're a child of God seeking the Savior, then you are welcome. Period.

It didn't matter to Jesus if you were rich, poor, healthy, sick, a woman, a man, a child, or an adult. All who came to Him with a sincere heart and sought His righteousness found it. See, it wasn't about a status issue. It was about a heart issue.

We can learn a lot about how Jesus interacted with people around Him. He loved perfectly and acted in perfect mercy. He looked beyond the surface details that we often get hung up on, things like race, ethnicity, wealth, or even popularity. Instead, He looked at the heart and He served without bias and without partiality. Christ came for everyone. So, if Christ came to love and serve without partiality, then we as Christ followers should seek to practice the same.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 2:6-13 this week

WEEK 6: "FAITH & WORKS"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 2:14-26

MONDAY: Romans 2:12-13

TUESDAY: Ephesians 2:8-9

WEDNESDAY: Hebrews 12:1-2

THURSDAY: Titus 3:5-8

FRIDAY: Matthew 5:16

SATURDAY: Colossians 1:10

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Take a hard look at your life. Where are you putting the cart of good works before the horsepower of salvation? How can you work to put them in the right order? Take time this week to talk through this with a friend, spouse, mentor, or accountability partner.

What are some practical steps you can take to make this switch in your heart and in your life?

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

Have you ever heard the statement, “don’t put the horse before the cart”? I think of this statement often when I contemplate the relationship between good works and salvation. See, for most of the world’s religions and faith practices, they’ve essentially put the horse before the cart. They’ve valued good works as a means to attain salvation (or their version of it).

But this is not the way God intended it. When we look at scripture, we see a repeated pattern: True faith leads to salvation and salvation overflows into good works. Our salvation is the horsepower that pulls the “cart” of good works. Not the other way around. When the cart is doing all the pulling, we are bound to go nowhere! Conversely, when the horse is without a cart, he doesn’t produce much good. We need both, working together and in the correct order.

See, the order we put those things in really does matter. If our good works are motivated by anything other than an overflow from our salvation, they will be empty and hollow. In Isaiah 64:4 we are told that because we are all unclean, stained by sin, all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags. When our righteous deeds are built on a foundation of our own righteousness, they have no hope of being anything but unclean.

But, when our righteous deeds are built on the foundation of our redemption in Christ, when they gain their merit based on the righteousness of Christ and not our own righteousness, then they are beautiful and life giving! Even more, when we seek to do good things in hopes of somehow being enough, we nullify all that Christ has done for us. If we could have earned our salvation, Christ would not have needed to die. But try as we might, we can never do enough to be enough. Instead, when we surrender to the life-giving truth that Christ is enough, we find the thing we need, we find the completion and worth we were searching for.

And from that place of “enough” only found in Christ, we can accomplish amazing deeds as an overflow of the grace, peace, love, and passion we have received. Not only is it now a possibility, but it is an inevitability! The amazing truth of the gospel in our lives cannot stay hidden for long. When we fully surrender to and accept the life-changing truth of Jesus, we can’t help but let it out! When we are in submission and obedience to Christ, we will naturally engage in good works for His glory and for our good. God is the source of our good works. And when we are intentional not to put the horse before the cart, we will find all the strength, motivation, and fulfillment we need.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 2:14-21 this week

WEEK 7: "THE TONGUE"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 3:1-12

MONDAY: 1 Peter 3:10
(Psalm 4:12-13)

TUESDAY: Proverbs 12:17-19

WEDNESDAY: Proverbs 21:23

THURSDAY: Ephesians 4:29

FRIDAY: Proverbs 18:21

SATURDAY: Proverbs 15:1-2

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

What is one area of your life that you need to surrender your tongue to the perfecting power of the Holy Spirit? How can you choose to make one change that will bring life instead of death this week? What words do you need to remove from your vocabulary? What words do you need to add? Take time this week to talk to God in prayer about this, asking Him to show you where your tongue is not bringing Him glory or where it could be ushering in His life-giving truth more.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

There's an old saying that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Maybe you've even used this saying before as a way to diminish the effect of harsh words that someone has said to you. But at the end of the day, it's just not true. Words can and easily do hurt us, and the pain they inflict can last a lot longer than the pain of a broken bone.

Words are powerful. So powerful in fact that in Proverbs 18:21 we read that the power of death and life are held in the tongue. It's amazing that this little muscle that is mostly hidden inside our mouths can have such an impact on our lives and the lives of others.

But stop for a second and think about this. We are made in the image of God and God's words are life changing. They bring about life and they bring about judgment. They speak truth that breaks chains and sets captives free. So why would we think that our words would not be impactful too. Granted, I can't speak life into existence like God can, but I can give glory to God and point people to Him. I can't tell the rain to fall or command the earth to spin, but I can instruct those I have been blessed to lead, equipping them with the truth I have been given.

I haven't spoken and told the dead to rise like Jesus did, but I can speak His life-giving truth into someone's life, ushering in the freedom and healing of our Lord, and allowing His truth to breathe life back into them.

See, words are powerful, and they reflect the image of God inside all of us. However, when we use words in a way that contradicts the goodness and truth of God, we will always cause pain. When our words do not represent God but instead represent our own sin, they will always bring death. Like anything in this world that was created to bring God glory, the enemy would love nothing more than to take the gift of words that God has given us and use it against us. He would love to poison and ruin this beautiful thing meant to point us to our Creator. And if we aren't careful, we will fall into the trap of letting our tongues get the worst of us.

But when we slow down, take time to think and pray, and choose our words with diligence and intentionality, we can use our tongues to bring life and health to all those who hear us. It takes surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit and the truth of God's word for us to be successful in this. But in the end, when we do, we get to be a part of telling God's story and participating in His goodness in our lives and the lives of those we know.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 2:22- 3:3 this week

WEEK 8: "WISDOM"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 3:13-18

MONDAY: Proverbs 3:13-18

TUESDAY: 1 Corinthians 3:18-20

WEDNESDAY: Proverbs 4:5-9

THURSDAY: Ephesians 5:15-17

FRIDAY: Proverbs 24:3-4

SATURDAY: Colossians 2:8

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Try to identify at least one area in your life where you are relying too much on the wisdom that comes from this world, knowledge, or age. How can you intentionally seek a closer walk with Jesus to replace these lesser forms of wisdom with the perfect wisdom of God? What is one practical step you will take this week to try to accomplish this?

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

I don't know what comes to mind when you hear the word "wisdom" but for me things like gray hair and wrinkles are among what pops into my mind. I think we naturally associate wisdom with age, with the testing of time and the ability to learn from our mistakes. But that kind of wisdom is hard earned and takes time to accomplish. So, what do we do with verses like Ephesians 5:15 that tell us to walk in wisdom? How does a young person fulfill a verse like this if wisdom is for the old?

To answer this question, I think it's important to distinguish between a few different definitions of wisdom. First, there is the wisdom of the world. As you might have guessed, this is a bit of an oxymoron. We read in 1 Corinthians 3:19 that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God." This sort of wisdom is built on things like karma, revenge, bitterness, selfishness, deceit, manipulation, cunning, and independence. This sort of wisdom will never bring us peace, happiness, or even success in the long run. This is certainly not the type of wisdom that we want.

Another word often mistakenly understood to mean wisdom is "knowledge." Where the two terms are similar, they are not quite the same. But we can all too easily settle for the lesser of the two, knowledge, instead of seeking true wisdom. Knowledge is the accumulation of information and understanding. It is not, however, the application of that information and understanding. Maybe you've heard the saying, "that's the stupidest smart person I've ever seen." Though it's not a nice statement, I think it illustrates that we can be incredibly smart and still lack wisdom.

Conversely, I have met people who are not traditionally book smart but contain wisdom beyond measure. So, wisdom is different from knowledge, though they can and often do go hand in hand.

Another definition of wisdom is what I mentioned earlier- this understanding that comes with age, hard earned, and defined through many trials and failures. And although there is a great value to this sort of wisdom, I still feel like there is something lacking from it. I've met older people who have lived a lot of life that are still missing something. And how does a young person walk in this sort of wisdom?

So, if it's not wisdom from the world, from knowledge, or from age, what is this wisdom that we are told to have? And perhaps more importantly, how do we gain it?

Let's jump back into the text for this week's reading through James. In this passage, James compares the wisdom of the world to that which comes down from above, the wisdom of God. Earlier, in chapter 1, verse 5, James tells us how to attain this kind of wisdom. He instructs us to ask God in faith. See, this kind of wisdom is not learned in a book, through experiences, or even from other people. This kind of wisdom, the best kind of wisdom, is found in God alone. It's a result of a close relationship with God, a constant seeking of Him in faith.

And it's different from all the rest in that it is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, and without hypocrisy. The wisdom that we receive from God both reflects and points to His perfection and His sufficiency. It draws us deeper into relationship and reliance on God, opening our eyes to our ever-present and desperate need for more of Him. It is filling, beautiful, and whole. And it's only found in Jesus Christ.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 3:4-11 this week

WEEK 9: "UNITY"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 4:1-10

MONDAY: John 17:21-23

TUESDAY: Philippians 2:1-5

WEDNESDAY: Proverbs 3:34

THURSDAY: Matthew 23:12

FRIDAY: 1 Peter 5:6

SATURDAY: Luke 18:9-14

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

In what areas of your life have you been guilty of being double-minded or trying to ride the fence? How have you seen that mindset poison your relationships?

With that in mind, seek out a fellow believer and talk about what it might look like to practically change that in your life.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

There is a pervasive belief in the world that you can “have your cake and eat it too” when it comes to following God. We want just enough of Jesus to save us, but not too much lest we have to give up our desires and our pleasures. We want to escape the fires of hell but don’t want to be “too religious” or too passionate about Jesus. But there is no partiality with God. There is no halfway. You’re either with Him or against Him. You don’t get to be a little of both.

We try over and over to ride that fence, never fully standing on one side or the other. But what results is a divided heart and mind. And this internal division ends up leaking out into all the areas of our life, from our relationships with others to our relationship with ourselves to our relationship with God. When we are “double-minded”, as James puts it, we are unstable in all our ways (chapter 1, verse 8).

This is the issue that James is writing about in this passage. He’s pointing out that all the issues they are experiencing, the quarrels and conflicts, the strife, and wars- they all stem from what James labels as “friendship with the world.” He comes right out and clarifies that “friendship with the world is hostility toward God” and that when we wish to be a friend with the world, we make ourselves an enemy of God.

It’s an interesting link, but when you really think about it, it makes sense. When we don’t walk in unity and pursuit of God, we cannot hope to experience the blessings of His presence in our lives. We cannot expect that the good of God will flow from a life that rejects Him. Because when we try to befriend the world, that’s exactly what we do. We run from the very source of strength, goodness, peace, and wisdom that we need for every relationship to flourish.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 3:12- 4:1 this week

WEEK 10: "JUDGING"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 4:11-12

MONDAY: Matthew 1:1-5

TUESDAY: Romans 2:1-2

WEDNESDAY: Romans 14:13

THURSDAY: 1 Corinthians 4:5

FRIDAY: John 12:46-48

SATURDAY: Titus 3:1-7

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Have you been guilty of being judgmental toward someone before? Your challenge this week is to seek some restoration in that relationship. Write them a letter, call them on the phone, set up a coffee date... whatever you need to do.

But specifically set aside some time and choose to be intentional to apologize for where you have unjustly judged them in the past.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

It's so incredibly easy for us to fall into the trap of judgmentalism. The more we learn, the more we can perceive right from wrong, the more likely we are to get caught in its snare. As a rule, we are incredibly forgetful beings. We walk through life, making mistakes and (hopefully) learning from them. We are grateful for the grace and mercy we receive to grow and change. And then we look at another brother or sister, walking their path, struggling in their own way, and we judge. The same mercy and grace that we were thankful for in our own lives is now held back from our brother or sister. I wrestled through this particular brokenness this week and realized a few things that go hand-in-hand with being judgmental. It occurred to me that when we are being judgmental it is a symptom of other issues under the surface.

Judgmentalism is oftentimes a symptom of selfishness. When our focus is only on ourselves, and we essentially hoard the goodness of God, the mercy of God, and the forgiveness of God to ourselves, we are less likely to extend them to others. When we think we have a corner market on these things, we easily fall into the trap of being judgmental. But when we see ourselves as just as important, loved, forgiven, and pursued of God as the people in our lives, it is easier for us to extend the grace which cancels out judgment.

The desire for control can be an issue that leads to judgmentalism too. When we look at a situation and think we have all the answers, when we think our ways are the right ways, and push others to follow us instead of Christ, we fall into judgmentalism. We can easily forget that our ways are not God's ways, and our perspective is not God's perspective.

But when we relinquish control over other people and their walks with God and instead look for ways to love them and encourage them along the way, we help to avoid being judgmental. One of, if not the biggest reason we become judgmental is because of our pride. Either our pride is hurt by something someone has done so we react in harsh ways, or our pride tells us that we are above and better than others. When we look at other peoples' lives and see their sin as worse than ours, the inevitable outcome is for us to be judgmental. But when we are willing to die to our pride and the lies it tells us that elevate us and lessen others, then we can start to walk in the kind of mercy that Christ had for us.

And the final reason that we fall into judgmentalism is that we've forgotten who God is. We've forgotten that He is love and that He alone is the only one qualified to pass judgement. We've forgotten that He is patient and long suffering, and that He works with each person in an intimate and patient way, wooing them toward redemption and righteousness. When we find ourselves judging others, we put ourselves in the seat of God and completely forget our place. See, this is what James means when he points out that there is only one Lawgiver and Judge and you and I are not it! It comes down to the question, do we trust God enough to let Him be the ruling authority in someone's life? Do we trust that He sees more of the picture than we do and hence has a better understanding of the truth? Do we trust that He is perfect, and His ways are perfect? Because in the end, when we do anything less, we will find ourselves hurting others and ourselves through painful judgments and criticisms. But when we trust God, like fully trust Him, and are led by His spirit and not our own perceptions or feelings, that's when we find a beautiful opportunity to love people well and give God glory and honor.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 4:10-17 this week

WEEK 11: "FAITH & GOD'S WILL"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 4:13-17

MONDAY: Romans 12:2

TUESDAY: Proverbs 3:5-6

WEDNESDAY: Psalm 37:4-5

THURSDAY: 1 Thess. 5:16-18

FRIDAY: Micah 5:8

SATURDAY: Proverbs 19:21

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

What is one decision you have to make in the near future, big or small? How can you take active steps to surrender that choice to the authority of God? How does putting it in perspective of eternity and God's glory over your own glory help you to see the right answer?

This week, find a trusted, God-fearing friend to talk this over with. Invite them to pray for you as you seek God's will in your life.

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

One of the most common struggles I hear when talking with people is the question, "What is God's will for my life?" It's one we've all wrestled with at one point or another. We feel this tension between the pull of the world, the pull of success, and even the pull of our own desires. And it's easy to wonder where God and His perfect will falls into all of that.

I was talking with a friend recently about two different choices she had to make. When presented with the two options she evaluated them closely. Neither was sinful, unethical, or wrong. Both had strong benefits for her and her family. Both presented opportunities that the other did not. She was stuck.

When she called me, she conveyed her frustration as she worked through the two different options, and I had to agree, I didn't have a good answer for her. "I just don't know what God's will is!" she said frustrated. Then it hit me... "which choice will cause you to need Jesus more and lean on His strength instead of your own? Which one will bring Him more glory than you?" Silence met me from the other side of the line. When we started to frame both options in light of her relationship with Christ and not her relationship with the things and people of this world, all of the sudden a clear choice presented itself. Interestingly, it was not the one she might have chosen otherwise. But in the end, it was the right one. See, what my friend and I realized that day is that God's will is much less about this world and more about the next. It's about furthering HIS kingdom not our own.

And it's about drawing us near through the choices we make, the paths we walk, and the experiences we have. It's about Him, not us.

This realization has carried with me as I've thought through the different details of my life. See, we think we are in control. But the reality is that I can't keep my heart pounding in my chest or my brain working in my head. If God so chose, I could be gone before writing out this devo. Every second of every day is a gift that I have zero control over.

Now don't mishear me. I do believe that God calls us to make plans and be looking to the future. But those plans and that future ALWAYS have to fall under His authority. That's what James is saying in this passage. Notice that he doesn't say it is foolish to plan. Instead, he says that we should plan with our hands held loosely to those plans and in full recognition of the authority of God. He gives us the example of saying, "If the Lord wills," when we contemplate our plans.

The amazing thing about our God is that, though He is so incredibly bigger than us, so cosmic, so amazing- still He longs to be a part of the intimate decisions, choices, and feelings of our life. He wants to walk with you as you journey through this life. He wants to hold your hand and have you lean on His strength. But it's so incredibly important for us to remember that in the end, it's HIS story not our own that is playing out. And we have the immense honor and privilege of getting to be a part of it!

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 5:1-8 this week

WEEK 12: "MONEY"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 5:1-6

MONDAY: Hebrews 13:5

TUESDAY: 1 Timothy 6:9-11

WEDNESDAY: Luke 12:15

THURSDAY: Proverbs 11:24-25

FRIDAY: Philippians 4:11-13

SATURDAY: Proverbs 22:1-2

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Take some time this week to really have a heart check. What is your attitude toward money? Is it a biblical one?

Do money and wealth get between you and God, you and others? If so, what are some ways you can change that?

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

Money in and of itself is not bad. However, when we love money more than people or God, it can become our worst nightmare. This is what James is talking about in this passage. When he references the rich, it's easy for us to misunderstand that he is talking about is a specific type of rich person- the type of person who gains through the oppression and misuse of others.

When we look at the text, we get a picture of the sort of rich people he is talking about. They have hired workers and when the job was done, refused to pay them what they were due because they valued money more than people. He warns them that the fine things they have acquired and the money they have held back for themselves will all rot and pass away and that they have stirred the anger of God.

Reading James' warnings to these rich people, we should all take a moment to examine our own hearts. Though not many of us understand the toil and hard work of bringing in a harvest and not receiving the money we are due, we all understand what it feels like to be short-changed. In one way or another, most of us have experienced this.

But we can also be guilty of short-changing others. When greed and covetousness seep into our hearts, the inevitable result is that we will hurt others. Any time we strive to benefit ourselves over others, we should hear the warnings of James. When money becomes our god, we've got a real problem that needs to be fixed! But the love of money can be sneaky and hidden if we don't look closely.

Jesus addressed this during His time on earth too. When met by a young rich man on the road, the man asked Jesus what he needed to do to be saved. Knowing what was in the man's heart, Jesus challenges him to sell all his possessions and follow Him. But the man leaves feeling grieved because of all his fortune. (Matt 19:16-22)

See, Jesus knew that this man's wealth had his heart and it was the thing standing between him and fully surrendering to Christ. Jesus didn't tell everyone to sell everything, just this man. It wasn't meant as a rule for believers to follow. But for this man, his money had become his god and Jesus saw that it was the wall that stood between them.

And it was a sneaky wall too! We see in this story that the young man had done all the religious things that the law commanded. He was living a life that looked righteous. But deep in his heart there was greed and a love of money. From the outside looking in, he looked like a great guy. But Jesus saw the brokenness and idolatry hiding underneath and called it out.

My heart breaks for this man because he traded following Jesus and eternal life for the passing glory of wealth. He walked away from his Messiah. How heartbreaking!

We too have the same question when it comes to money. Whether the lack of money or the wealth of it, will we allow it to stand between us and our Messiah? Will the search for wealth take our eyes off Jesus? And will we allow it to cause us to treat others unkindly?

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 5:9-16 this week

WEEK 13: "PATIENCE"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 5:7-12

MONDAY: Galatians 6:9-10

TUESDAY: Psalm 37:7-9

WEDNESDAY: Philippians 4:6-7

THURSDAY: Hebrews 6:11-12

FRIDAY: Psalm 27:14

SATURDAY: Lamentations 3:25-26

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

What's one area that you need patience for?

How can you use the elements of patience outlined in this week's devo to help you grow in patience in this area?

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

Patience is not a natural tendency. None of us does it well without practice and a whole lot of motivation. More now than in decades past, we live in an instant gratification world. We want what we want, and we want it now. And for the most part, we get it now. Compared to even 100 years ago, the amount of patience we're asked to have has drastically dwindled.

If you've ever had to wait for something you really wanted, you understand the anxiety and impatience that often accompanies waiting. Or if you're a parent, you certainly understand the frustration that comes when the thing you are working toward is slow in arriving. It's easy to get irritated, irritable, and frustrated in the waiting. And if we aren't careful, the patience we've been striving for will be completely obliterated by those things.

And when we are angsty, irritated, and frustrated, we often find that other things rub us the wrong way as well. When we are eagerly waiting for something, that annoyance that you usually let roll off your back all the sudden feels overwhelming. We can be snappy and irritable with others. We can see issues where none exist.

In contrast, when we are patient, we can defeat the frustration and angst that accompanies waiting. We can find peace. But, like we said earlier, patience is not natural. So, how do we get from irritated to peace, from impatient to patient?

I think there are a few key elements that make real, God-honoring patience possible. First is recognizing who God is and that He is in control. When we stop trying to manipulate and force the outcome, and just rest in the goodness of God and the truth that His timing is perfect, we can start to embrace patience. When He's in the driver's seat of our lives, we can trust that we will get there when we get there... not a minute too soon or too late.

Next is knowing your why. If you don't know why it's worth waiting, you will never do it. But when we wait on the Lord and His timing, we always have the best "why" because it means we are waiting on God's best.

And finally, keep your eyes on eternity. When we view our life and our circumstances in light of a heavenly kingdom instead of what is right in front of us, it helps us to see what is worth waiting for and what is not. We can let go of silly, fleeting things to focus in on the things that are worth having patience. See, we get so distracted by so many things. Our eyes flit from one shiny thing to another all the while stealing us of any hope of developing patience. But when we bring everything under the banner of Heaven, we start to see what the point really is. And we can start to hone and practice patience, developing this God-given strength and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Memorize James 5:17-20 this week

WEEK 14: "GRACE TO OTHERS"

DAILY READING:

SUNDAY: James 5:13-20

MONDAY: 1 Peter 4:10

TUESDAY: Galatians 6:1-2

WEDNESDAY: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

THURSDAY: Proverbs 28:13

FRIDAY: Ephesians 6:18

SATURDAY: 1 Thess. 5:11-15

WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

We each carry baggage from others who have hurt us. What is one piece of baggage that might be getting in the way of you extending and receiving grace from others?

How can you take a practical step this week to put that baggage down and actively embrace the model of a grace-filled church we see in James?

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL:

We were never meant to walk out our faith alone. James ends his letter with a section that really spells this out. He paints a picture of believers that are so interwoven that they can pray for each other, confess sins to each other, rebuke each other in love, and help each other on their faith journey. What a beautiful picture of the church!

But often, this is not the picture we see when we look at the modern-day church. Instead, there is a separation between people, and independence that causes us to push away from dependency on each other. We cringe at the idea of confessing our sins to someone or asking for help. It's awkward and weird sometimes to ask for prayer when we are sick or hurting, especially by someone in a place of authority in the church.

The community that James paints in this last chapter is one that requires vulnerability, grace for each other, forgiveness, and humility. And it requires surrendering our image and our striving for control. It means letting go of pretenses and preconceived notions of what success really looks like. It means being willing to let others in close and show them the more broken, hurting, and weak sides of ourselves.

And that's incredibly scary.

Some of you reading this have been hurt by people in the church before when you've tried to open up and been burned in return. Can I just take a second here and say, I'm so sorry! That was not the way it was supposed to be.

Each of us has a part to play in making our churches places of healing, forgiveness, and grace. It starts with us. We get to choose to make the first step, to be vulnerable and let others in. We get to choose to extend grace to people who stumble and fall. We get to choose to be longsuffering and keep a short list of wrongs. We get to choose... and it's so worth choosing!

And little by little, as we all consciously make the choice to embrace the model lined out by James, by the early church, and by Jesus Himself, we will start to see this hope become a reality. We will start to see churches where people come to heal instead of walk away wounded. We will see churches that bring hope and freedom instead of condemnation and shame.

It's up to us to be the change.

MEMORIZATION CHALLENGE:

Practice reciting the entire book of James!
Did you do it from memory? It's no small feat! Make sure you celebrate! Well done! We're proud of you!
