

Week 20¹

James - Ἰάκωβος - “Jacob”

James is different from other letters in the New Testament. In fact, it is hard to call it a “letter.” James 1:1 addresses the document, “To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” - in other words, to the Jews wherever they were scattered. That is hardly a useful address for delivering a letter. Further, scholars doubt that we know who this author, “James,” really was, other than a Christian - “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The name “James,” a translated version of the name “Jacob,” could simply point to the Father of the twelve tribes of the Jewish nation. The sons of Old Testament “Jacob” (later named “Israel”) were the patriarchs of the twelve scattered tribes of Israel.

James is also different from most other letters in lacking a focus on Christology (communicating the nature and role of Jesus as Christ). The letters of Paul, Peter, and John included communications to shape the early church’s understanding of who Jesus is. In their letters, it is the life and work of Jesus that is used to justify moral teachings. Not so in James. James was one of the last books of the Bible accepted as authoritative because it was not witnessing to Jesus.

So why was James written? What is its value? James is written to Christians not to inspire faith or to correct our understanding of Jesus, but to tell them what Christians should do with their faith. It is a collection of practical moral instructions to guide Christian behavior. One of the challenges in the early church - and today - is the role of faith and the role of our actions. The Apostle Paul, for example, heavily emphasized that we are saved by faith through grace: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2: 8-9). Paul warns against seeking to be justified by following the law of Moses: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery [to the law]. (...) You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5: 1;4) But it is clear from Paul’s letters that there were some Christians that took this as license to do whatever they wanted - and Paul had to fight against this false view, while continuing to emphasize the centrality of Jesus in providing us forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with God realized through our faith.

James just assumes that we are saved by faith, but goes on to focus on what true faith looks like when lived out in life. Once we have faith in Jesus, James is a great book for helping us learn how to express our faith - faithfully.

¹ Special thanks to Harry Stone for providing this week’s AP

Sunday James 1 (spotlight verses 1:22-27)

For Reflection: How does James counter the antinomian² position that laws and morality don't matter for people saved by faith? How do you understand your freedom in Christ, and your call to be a "doer of the word"? What does Paul tell us about our personal freedom of speech?
Lagniappe: Titus 3: 5 - 8)

Monday James 2³ (spotlight verses 2:18-19; 24)

For Reflection: Evangelist Billy Graham used to ask, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Asked differently - how are you showing your faith by your deeds?
Lagniappe: Ephesians 2:10

Tuesday James 3 (spotlight verses 3: 7-10; 17)

For Reflection: We live in a time when "freedom of speech" seeks to be unconstrained and amplified by social media, often "full of deadly poison" rather than being a blessing. Consider how you can bridle your wise words and influence to be "peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."
Lagniappe: Ephesians 4:29

Wednesday James 4 (spotlight verses 4:13-15)

For Reflection: James now provides the simplest - and hardest - definition of sin: "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." Rather than providing a bunch of rules, this falls into "situational ethics" - the Christian version of which is to judge a decision by agape love having the greatest impact, rather than there being an absolute moral standard. How do you understand "being rich toward God" and living a life making decisions based on maximizing agape love of others?

Lagniappe: Luke 12: 13-21

² Antinomians hold the belief that, because Jesus saved us from our sins, we are freed from obeying Old Testament laws and following other religious and social norms. After all, didn't Jesus heal on the Sabbath and didn't Paul say it was unnecessary to follow the Mosaic law of circumcision? James argues against the antinomian heresy, making the case for Christians to exhibit actions consistent with faith in Jesus and His teachings.

³ Verses 8-11 should make you gasp. Showing favoritism toward someone rich over someone poor is a sin - and if you sin you are guilty of breaking all the law! How can this be? Remember that the law is a covenant - a contract. If you have a car loan contract, and repay the loan every month but fail to have insurance required in the contract, your car can be repossessed. Your one infraction broke all of the contract. If we are going to depend on following the law to be righteous before God, we are in trouble. Thank God for his grace, forgiving us through Jesus.

Thursday James 5: 1-12

For Reflection: Here James speaks to wealth, power, and justice. He warns the wealthy not to hoard wealth and not to be self-indulgent; to pay workers timely; and not to stand by while injustice is done to those without power and wealth. How do you see this speaking today to cries for justice and fairness from historically disadvantaged communities?

Lagniappe: Luke 16: 19-31

Friday James 5: 13-20

For Reflection: James wraps up with encouragement to pray and be in community. The prayers and community have power - for healing, for forgiveness, for turning a person from the error of their way. To what extent do you feel part of this kind of praying community? How are you being called to provide this community and prayer support for others?

Lagniappe: Romans 12: 4-5; 9-13

Joel - יוֹאֵל ("Jehovah is God")

Who Joel was or the exact time the book of Joel was written is a matter of conjecture. Sidon, which is mentioned in Joel, was destroyed about 345 BCE, so Joel was written before then. Joel is prophesying about difficult times - a literal swarm of locust and other insects destroying their crops and a time of fires, drought and famine. Or, perhaps the locust are also understood as a figurative swarm of nations that devastate Israel and Judah - Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. Or both. Joel's message is that if the people fast, repent, and ask God to spare them, God will restore the rain and the crops - a time of plenty. Further, God will bring back the scattered Jews, restore Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem, and judge the other nations. Joel is a message of encouragement. Possibly the most important contribution of Joel is announcing the extraordinary promise that the time was coming when God would pour out His Spirit⁴ on everyone - men and women, old and young, slave and free.

⁴ While we believe in only one God, there are three ways in which man has experienced God: (1) The **Father** who is the creator and sustainer of all that is - visible and invisible. I sense the Father in the laws of nature which He created and which are sustained to perform without fail in all times and places. (2) **Jesus Christ** - God taking on "human-hood." Jesus provided the unique opportunity to gain insight into God by experiencing God as a fellow human. (3) The Spirit of God, or the "**Holy Spirit**" is the presence of God everywhere. Each person that asks of God can have the indwelling Spirit of God, uniting us with God. The Holy Spirit serves as the source of all "good thoughts, pure desires, and holy counsels" in people. When Jesus (God as man) finished His ministry on Earth, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was sent at Pentecost (50 days after Jesus resurrection) and filled the disciples. Since then the Holy Spirit - the very presence of God - has been within those who have asked Him into their lives.

Saturday

Joel 2 (spotlight verses: 2: 28-32)

For Reflection: Do you have a strong sense of the Holy Spirit in your life? (Not everyone has this as a “feeling” - Saint Mother Teresa went half a century without such feeling - but the Holy Spirit is still present.) Think about the ways that have you have been guided, comforted, and reassured by the presence of the Holy Spirit. If you have never invited the Holy Spirit to dwell in you, just ask God for “enthusiasm” - literally from the Greek to be “possessed by God.”

Lagniappe: Acts 2: 14-22