

## Wisdom and Warnings: The Book of James

### An Overview of James

James 5:19-20

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*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19–20).*

One of my favorite questions to ask someone that I don't know very well is: "What are the books that most shaped your life?" The answer to that question is quite revealing. Imagine for instance if someone said: *Go Dog Go*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *The Cat in the Hat*; you'd probably have some questions. Or what would go through your head if the person said, "I only read Stephen King novels." More questions.

But what if we moved to books of the Bible? What if I asked you, "What have been the most impactful books of the Bible that you've read?" Or, "What have been the most helpful books that you've heard preached at your church?" If I had to choose that list for me at College Park, I would list Colossians (my very first sermon series here at College Park), Romans, Lamentations, and (now) I would add James.

One of the reasons that I love preaching through books of the Bible is that they mark the body of Christ. Some of you, for instance, will memorialize your membership at College Park by saying, "I joined in the book of James."

I'm also excited for what is next—our year-long study in the book of Isaiah. This book is all about the way that God saves his people as they turn to him, believe in him, and live for him. Tonight, during our prayer meeting Pastor Nate is going to give us a high-level summary of the book of Isaiah so that you can pray into it over the next few weeks.

Just to remind you, we began our study of James in August of last year. The pandemic was in full swing. We had just re-opened Sunday morning services. The 2020 election was in front of us. We were waiting for vaccines and the possibility of a second wave. Additionally, I was trying to help us think through the difference between a theological issue, a political issue, or a cultural issue. Every week there were new controversies, conflicts, and conspiracies. Whether it was COVID guidance, politics, racial reconciliation and justice, or trust in leaders (even church leaders) this was the environment in which the Lord led us to James.

Those issues and challenges have not gone away. But it's interesting to think about where we were, where we are, and how providential this book has been for us.

Every book has a context. And every sermon has a context. I am so thankful for the book of James, but I'm also thankful for when we were studying it. I'll never be able to separate the two. If you were to look at my preaching Bible from 2008, you'd find "thumb marks" where I was sweating and it left dark marks on the page in the book of Colossians. I'll never be able to separate Colossians from that season. The book of James will always be tethered to our perseverance through a global pandemic.

So, on this last message in James, I think it's important to stop and thank God. We're not crossing the finish line. It's not like everything is better. There are still many challenges ahead of us. There's still a lot of work to do. We need to figure out how to care for people who are spiritually languishing. But here's the thing: God has helped us.

Just think of all that he's taught us.

Once again, the Lord has proven to us that hard is hard, hard is not bad.

As we draw this book to a close, I want to highlight both a final exhortation from verses 19-20 and then three big picture themes from James that I hope we'll remember for a long time.

### **A Final Exhortation**

Throughout the book of James, I trust that you've noticed and appreciated the directness of James. The body of Christ needs people who are nuanced and wrap everything they say with a three-inch layer of grace. And the body of Christ also needs people who speak with godly bluntness.

A friend of mine calls another friend, "O captain, my captain!" And if you were to ask him why he calls his friend "captain," he'd say, "Because no one tells me what to do more than him." That's James. Theologian Doug Moo says that the book of James features more imperatives per word than any other New Testament book.<sup>1</sup>

So, notice how this book concludes. It's doesn't end with a series of greetings to friends or a spiritually encouraging benediction like in Romans 16:25-27:

*Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom. 16:25–27).*

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, [\*James: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 236.

It's almost laughable how different the book of James is from this conclusion! James concludes with another command! And notice the serious tone. He essentially says, "Help each other not to wander away; it's really important."

Allow me to highlight three observations and thoughts here, followed by three themes to remember from James:

**1. There's an orientation toward "one another" in this text.** He talks about "brothers" and looking out for "one another." James concludes this letter not by focusing on individual righteousness, as important as that is. Rather, he's calling suffering people to be concerned about one another's spiritual health and perseverance.

This is important because in our Western, American version of Christianity, we tend to be overly individualistic. This creates a natural bias toward Christianity and the church that is more consumeristic. For example: "Invite Jesus to be your personal Savior and Lord," "What did you get out of the sermon today?" and "We are 'church-shopping.'" We are more interested in customer service than community service. We tend to view a good Sunday one when people show concern about us, not necessarily when we show concern for others. Therefore, we have to work hard—really hard—to feel the importance of our connection to one another, especially in a larger church.

There are so many things that are amazing about large churches, but finding a connection and being concerned about one another doesn't easily happen organically. That's why we have church membership, groups & classes, Next Steps Area, our DISCOVER-CONNECT-JOIN events, and our parish model for shepherding. But that isn't enough. We actually need every one of us to realize the mutual care and responsibility we have for each other.

In other words, spiritual growth and persevering to the end is not just about individuals. It's about making it together. So when you think of James, let me encourage you to not only think about how this book applies to your life, but also how you would want it applied to the lives of people you love.

There were many times during our study that I told you, "Don't think of how this applies to someone else." That is true and right. It's the appropriate initial response. But it can't be the only response. We should love each other enough to care about the spiritual condition of each other.

The other reason for this concern about others is how it relates to the nature of suffering. It tends to make us fall back into self-centered, survival mode. It's easy to feel like you don't have the emotional or spiritual capacity to deal with other people's issues because you are barely making it. That's entirely understandable at one level, and there is a needed balance. But that can't be our posture forever. It's interesting and instructive that James ends his letter to suffering people this way.

It might just be that some of us need to find ways to pull out of the myopia of our own misery and see what we can do to help others. James calls us to be spiritually concerned for each other.

**2. There's a concern about someone "wandering from the truth."** We tend to think of the word "wander" as something that is pointless and maybe unintentional. That may sometimes be part of the

equation, but it would seem that James has something more in mind. He's concerned here about the person who is deviating, walking away, or in danger of being lost because of their bad path. Sometimes "wandering" people have no idea, but more often than not they fail to realize the seriousness of where they are headed.

When James says that they are wandering from the "truth," we need to understand this in context. Through this book, James's focus has been on the implications of the gospel. That's why he said, "faith without works is dead" (2:14-26). The wandering that James has in mind is not merely what a person believes. He has in mind works that don't fit with the gospel.

I think that's why he talks about saving a person from death and covering a multitude of sins. Don't get me wrong, what we believe really matters. But most of the problems in the church don't relate to someone reject their belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Most of the problems relate to the disconnection between the gospel and how we live. In other words, most of the problems in the church relate to behavior, not belief. And most of the ways that people "wander from the truth" will relate to what they do.

James would want us to watch out for one another, especially in terms of how we live out the gospel in our behavior—how we treat other people, how we talk about and to people, how quickly we get angry, how we treat people who are easily mistreated, how we might exhibit partiality, and how prone we are to selfish ambition.

But isn't this hard? I think it might be easier to talk to a brother or sister about their unbiblical views about the Trinity than it is to talk with them about their consistently nasty and rebellious tone online. It's easier to talk with someone about what truth they believe than it is to talk about how they live. And yet the whole point of this book is the connection between faith and works.

Church, there is no book more focused on the connection between belief and behavior than James. If you don't feel the weight of that connection after this book, I'd be pretty nervous for you. Christians are not perfect people, but there must be a connection between what we believe and what we do.

If you are not a Christian, I feel compelled to tell you that a relationship with Jesus changes people. When you are forgiven of your sins, it means that new power and authority are ruling your life. It means that you have a new reason to live and that your life is forever changed. Sadly, there are some people who claim to believe that but whose lives never reflect it. They probably aren't Christians. And I would urge you not to push aside the claims of Christianity because of the hypocrisy of some.

Behavior matters.

**3. This concern is serious.** James makes it very clear that this is something significant that he is saying. In verse 20 he says that if you bring a sinner back from wandering two things happen: (A) "save his soul from death" and (B) "cover a multitude of sins."

By saving his soul from death, James means that continued disobedience would have raised the real possibility that this person was not a true believer. A life of wandering into sin would have called into

question his belief in the gospel and made him liable for eternal condemnation. By calling a person back into fellowship with God and the community of faith, a person's soul would be saved. That's a big deal!

But additionally, a multitude of sins are covered. This means that the error of his ways has been corrected. The future sins that would have happened have been prevented. And the sins that were committed are now forgiven because the brother or sister has repented.

This is an incredible statement, and James invites people who love the combination of faith and works – true Christianity—to enter into the activity of God in helping believers to make it to the finish line. Throughout the book of James, he's emphasized the danger of self-deception, and he's warned his listeners about the possibility of being double-minded. It takes other people to help us both to see the error of our ways or to love us enough to call us back.

Let me ask you two questions in light of this:

Do you only care about James applying to you or do you see your responsibility to lovingly help other believers, especially those in the same church to follow Jesus effectively? This text is a beautiful calling to realize our commitment to one another.

Are you known well enough by other Christians such that they would be able to and feel the freedom to gently raise a concern about where you are headed?

He says to watch out for each other. Help each other persevere!

This is how James ends! No greetings. No benedictions. No nice summaries. After all the imperatives, after all the instruction, he leaves us with one more: take the spiritual lives of other people seriously.

### **Three Themes to Remember**

With an understanding of the last two verses, let's conclude by reflecting on the book of James as a whole. Here are three themes that I hope you'll remember for the rest of your life:

#### **1. Remain Steadfast**

This book began with a clarion call to joyfully persevere through various trials. James wrote to a group of people who were experiencing some kind of hardship and suffering. And he wants them and us to see beyond the hard and challenging circumstances to the greater purpose of God.

You may not know what is happening or why it's happening but you can always know what God is doing.

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).*

*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).*

*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. (James 5:7).*

Patience and perseverance are not “Plan B” when it comes to hardship. Trust the Lord. Your waiting is not a waste!

## **2. Live Out the Gospel**

We talked a lot about the implications of the gospel. Because of the power of what faith is we should understand what faith does. Both are important. If you don’t live out the implications of the gospel, you might not understand the gospel.

*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (James 1:22).*

*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14).*

The gospel was meant to be lived out in the hardest of times and with the neediest people. As we’ll see in Isaiah, the people of God are always in danger of two kinds of idolatry—either worshipping a false god or worshipping God while living as if he’s not really alive. You can abandon the truth of the gospel by denying the gospel but also by defaming the gospel.

James is concerned that we never forget about the implications of the gospel.

## **3. Love Each Other**

Finally, James is filled with important commands about how we treat one another. Faith without works is dead, and much of the works which are neglected relate to how we fail to love one another. Here’s a list:

- We can be sinful in our words, a refusal to listen, and become quick to get angry (1:19-20)

*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:19–20).*

- We can show sinful partiality and truly love each other (2:1-13)
- We can use words to be destructive (3:1-12)
- We can be selfish, jealous, and quarrelsome because of what we want (4:1-12)

*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. (James 4:1–2).*

There is a glorious and critical connection for James between what we say we believe and how we treat one another. A grace-receiving people must be a grace-giving people. Faith and works must go together.

And so we bid farewell to a book that has served us through a global pandemic, controversies and confusion, suspicions and divisions. James has helped us remain steadfast, to be convicted, and renew our commitment to not give up.

I thank God for the book of James. It's a book I'll never forget.

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