

The Rich Beggar

I have been looking forward to today because we are starting a new series of messages from the New Testament Book of James.

I'm nerdy about this stuff... so starting a new series really excites me! I believe the Bible; when we take any sort of *deep dive* into God's Word, I'm excited to see how it changes us. I hope you are excited too... or are at least willing to put up with my *nerdy* excitement.

We are calling the series **Working Faith...** *keying off* what many consider a key phrase in James (any guesses):

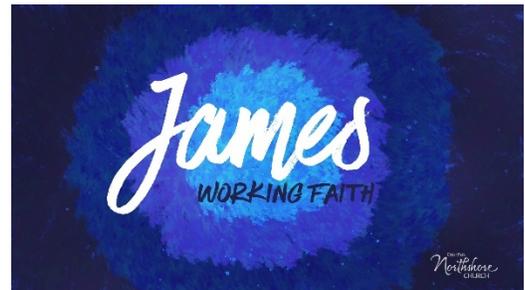
faith without works is dead¹

I'm not sure that is the *main point* of James... but it is a prominent, important point... perhaps one of the more *memorable* points.

It does allude to what I think **is** the main point of James. The Book of James answers the question: **How does this Christian faith work?** How do we know that our faith is genuine and alive... working?

We are going to find that the Book of James is:

- **Practical:** The Book of James is a sort of *manual* for Christian living. The more we can manage to live out, and live up to, the Book of James, the better off we will be.
- **To-the-Point:** There are some New Testament books packed with complex sentences and ideas. James is not like that; it is to the point. The ideas are presented plainly and clearly.
- **Easy to Understand:** With great illustrations, similes and metaphors... if we will dig in, we will find the Book of James is easy to understand.

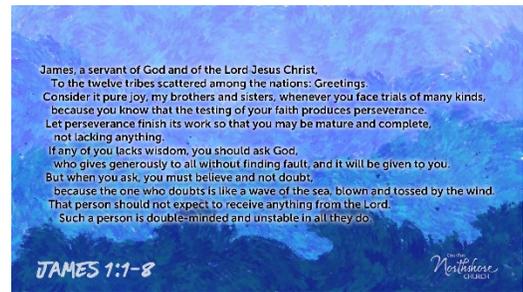


¹ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Jas 2:26). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Here's how it starts:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.²

The Book of James, like many other New Testament books, was originally penned as a letter. It was a personal message from a real person to real people.



James, of course, was a real guy. While some scholars have various theories about his identity, most scholars (the scholars I trust) are pretty sure that this is James, the brother of Jesus.

We might wonder... just what kind of *brother* was James? Was he a brother like we often think of Christians as *brothers and sisters in the Lord*? Or was he a brother like my brother Randy... born of the same parents? It doesn't seem like he could be that sort of brother... since Jesus had **unique** parents. It is printed in the Apostles' Creed that happens to be in the bulletin today. Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." We can be certain that James was not conceived by the Holy Spirit, nor born of a virgin.

James and Jesus were almost certainly stepbrothers, sharing **one** parent. There are two, perhaps obvious, theories: either they shared Mary as mother, or Joseph as father. So, James was either the younger brother of Jesus (conceived by Joseph and Mary) or some theorize that Joseph was a widower and brought children into the marriage. *I think* James was the younger brother of Jesus... but it doesn't really matter that much; the point is that they were raised in the same family, as brothers. James had a special perspective on Jesus, the kind unique to close, family relationships.

Interestingly, James was not a disciple of Jesus, not one of the Church's founding Apostles. Scripture records that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection (before His ascension). It appears that s when James believed. I understand that; it would take some extraordinary evidence for me to believe that my brother was anyone extraordinary... let alone God in the flesh, the Messiah, our Savior.

² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Scripture also records that James rose in leadership in the early Church, leading the founding Church in Jerusalem (we can see that in the Book of Acts). It is from that position of authority, writing as a leader from headquarters, that James addresses fellow believers. And it was with a unique understanding of, and relationship to, Jesus, that James wrote.

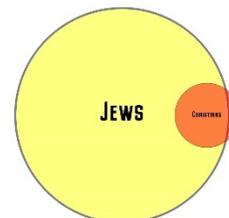
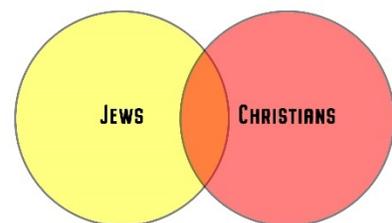
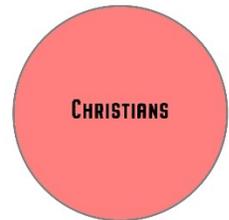
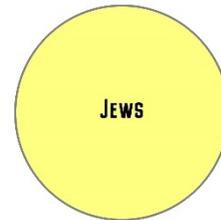
The theological underpinnings of the Book of James align closely with the theology that Jesus preached, especially in the Sermon on the Mount... perhaps more closely than any other New Testament book (with the exceptions, of course, of the Words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels). Are you looking forward to digging into the Book that closely aligns with the words of Jesus? I am.

James wrote “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” We ought to ask, “Who are *they*?” *Twelve-tribes* is a reference to the **Jewish** people. So it could be assumed he was writing to Jews scattered around the then-known world (the fancy word is the *dispora*).

Twelve-tribes could also be a reference to the **Christians**. James could have been thinking in terms of Christians being the *fulfillment* of the promised *People of God*. There are other ancient writings, including other parts of the New Testament, that could support this idea.

Most likely, James was referring to those who were **both** Jewish and Christian. These early believers, from Jewish faith and ancestry, made up most of the earliest Church, and were scattered among the nations because of persecution. It was bad enough being a Jew in the first-century Roman Empire... being a Christian Jew only multiplied the persecution.

Actually, the more accurate Venn diagram would look more like this. James was likely writing in the mid-to-late 40s, the very earliest years of the Church (around half way through the Book of Acts, if you like), when the Church was viewed by most as a *sect* of Judaism (the Roman government saw it that way).



Most Christians in those early years were Jews... and they made up only a small portion of the Jews as a whole.

Nevertheless, while James may have been written **to** these early Jewish Christians, James is **for** all Christians. If you are a Christian, this is **for** you.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.³

James is an encourager. These early believers, persecuted for their faith, displaced from their homes, were suffering. James begins by saying “consider it [your trials and suffering] pure joy.”

Their troubles were not evidence that their faith was unfounded or misplaced; their troubles were used for the good of their faith (God does not waste pain).

Whatever their trials (whatever our trials), the testing of faith produces perseverance.

⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.⁴

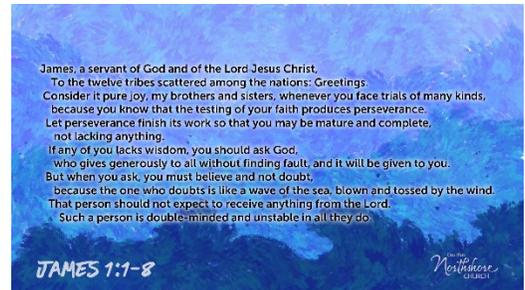
Just like a muscle is only strengthened with stress, so it is with faith. Muscles that are only at rest wither; only muscles that are tested, stressed, and pushed grow and become stronger. So it is with faith. As the weight room is for muscles, trials are for faith.

We are going to find that the Book of James is about **faith**. Don't let anyone tell you that the Book of James is about *works*; it is about faith.

He said that perseverance will result in not **lacking** anything, and then he says:

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.⁵

Wisdom is the highest prize. We are going to see that the Book of James is certainly about faith, and it is about **wisdom**. *Theologically* James has a lot in common with the Words of Jesus in the Gospels; in *content* it has a lot in common with the Old Testament book of wisdom: Proverbs. While it is not written in the form of Proverbs, we will find many short directives for living like those we find in Proverbs.



³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:2–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

James tells the early believers that they should find joy in trials and suffering... and then he says that they should pray for *wisdom*... not provision, or rescue, not healing or deliverance... wisdom. I'll admit it. When I am in trouble or need, my first prayer may be for rescue or healing, but James says to pray for **wisdom**.

Wisdom, in this Biblical context, is the insight to see things as God sees... and the understanding to choose as God would choose for us.

More than provision, healing or deliverance... not wealth or health or any sort of prosperity... what we need most is **wisdom**. Especially when enduring trials and testing, we need insight to see things as God sees things, and understand to choose as God would choose for us.

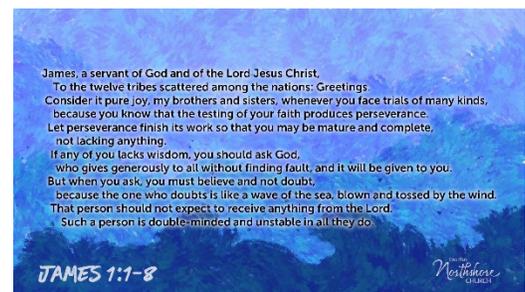


When God presented King Solomon with the opportunity to receive anything Solomon might want, he asked God for wisdom. God was pleased to answer that prayer... and added everything else.

We should want the same. Wisdom should be the highest priority. We should desire wisdom for ourselves, and seek it in the leaders we choose to follow.

It seems that we aren't *so great at that* as a culture these days. Do we choose wisdom as the highest priority, the most desirable attribute of a leader? It seems that when choosing leaders for our governments, and businesses, and even our churches, we prioritize attributes other than wisdom (charisma, likeability, ability to give us what we want, beauty, and such). God help us to prioritize wisdom... both in ourselves and our leaders.

⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. ⁶



Remember I said that James is *easy to understand*. Verse 6 demonstrates what I mean with a simile. The word-picture is of a wave, not a wave crashing on a beach, but more along the lines of waves in open water. Open water is in constant motion, responding to the environment, specifically the wind. James is encouraging single-minded faith in the Lord, focused on God, not blown around by the surrounding circumstances.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:6-8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

You may recall, just a few weeks ago (the Sunday after Easter), I brought our attention to the meeting between Thomas and Jesus after His resurrection ([check it out online](#) if you missed it). My main point that day: *Jesus shows up in the midst of doubt*. So which is it? Is there room for doubt or not? It seems to me that there *must* be room for doubt... or I am doomed. Am I alone?

I think there is a difference between the doubt demonstrated by Thomas and the doubt referenced here. In the case of Thomas, it appears that he was in search of evidence, he wanted the same experience as the other Disciples, he wanted to believe, and needed to see more to overcome his doubt in what he was hearing.

The doubt that James is referenced is further illuminated by verse eight when he describes the doubter as “double-minded and unstable in all they do.”

A strong, underlying theme of the Book of James is the believers’ struggle with what we’ll call **worldliness**, answering the implied question: “How are Christians (citizens of the Kingdom of God) to function in the kingdoms of this world?” How do embrace God’s Kingdom (His wisdom) over the kingdoms of this world (our culture)?

The warning given by James: Do not be **double-minded**. The word that James used is *dipsychos*. I don’t often bring up the words of the original languages of the Bible, mostly because I’m not all that qualified. But this word is one that we might be able to comprehend: dipsychos (two psyches). Rather than *double-minded*, a better translation might be *double-souled*.

With that consideration, let’s go back to the beginning. James tells believers to take joy in facing trials. How might we do that? James says to seek insight to see things as God sees, and understanding to choose as God would choose for us: **wisdom**. How are we going to get that wisdom? Well it is not by being *double-souled* (double-minded). It is not going to come with our souls having dual allegiance, somehow aligned with *the world* and God’s Kingdom. The wisdom we need to see and understand God’s purpose is not going to come from the world, the **source** of trials and suffering. That kind of wisdom is only going to come from God... so be single-souled, single-minded, single-directional in pursuing that insight and understanding, that wisdom from God.

There are those who pull verses 6 and 7 out of this context, applying it to every petition to the Lord. Need rescue, deliverance, healing, provision... perhaps even a new car or house or shoes?

when you ask, you must believe and not doubt...⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.⁷

Have you heard that? Do you believe that?

My problem with that *broken* theology is that it reduces prayer, and our relationship with God, to some sort of *magic* that is contingent on our skills of *incantation*. If we want something, and we say the magic words, but still not get it... then it must be because of our broken faith.

Do we think that we are so empowered to manipulate God? Do you think that God's miracles are contingent on us... that they can only happen with our skill, and can be stopped because of our lack of it?

If that is our notion about such things, then we really do need wisdom... the insight and understanding that only comes from God.

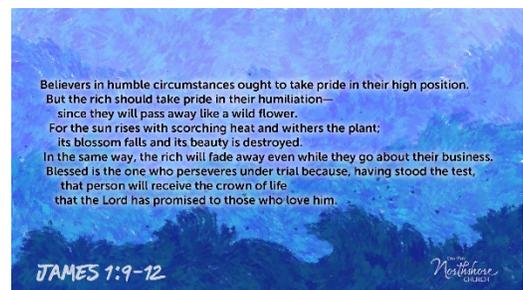
We may have doubts... doubts that we might not understand, doubts that we cannot see what is really going on, doubts about what the best answer may be... but we can trust God. With single-mindedness, with single purpose and direction of our soul, we can come to God *doubtless*, asking for wisdom, trusting Him to provide His insight and understanding.

Verse 9 further exposes the struggle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world:

⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation⁸

The world's perspective is that the rich are blessed, and the poor are cursed. The world's perspective is that we get what we deserve.

The Gospel's perspective is that the humble receive God's grace. Our only hope is to trust Jesus. Whatever our social status or wealth, no matter our personal strengths... it is all weakness in light of God (we are all poor in comparison to God's holiness and riches). The Gospel's perspective is that the poor are blessed, that the humble are lifted by God's grace. We do not earn it, and we do not get what we deserve; we deserve God's wrath, but receive His mercy.



⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:6–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 1:9–10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

... James's encouragement to ~~that person~~ [the rich, in the eyes of the world, is] to *take pride in [a] low position will mean that* the rich believer is to boast not in his wealth or his elevated social position, but in his identification with Christ and his people, a matter of "humiliation" in the eyes of the world.⁹

A single-minded/single-souled believer, with God's wisdom, sees the eternal picture. Wisdom from God reveals a glimpse of what is beyond.

The value of worldly riches is fleeting

since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. ¹⁰

Verse 12 then brings us back to where we started, with **trials**:

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹¹

When we think of a *crown*, we likely think of a sort of precision and jeweled crown of royalty... but this crown is more likely along the lines of a *crown of laurels* presented to victors in athletic competition, like the winner of a race. It seems clear that this crown is a *figure of speech*, not a literal trinket to be *shown off* for eternity. Jesus is the reward, eternity with God is the reward, not some fancy hat.

This picture highlights another important theme and perspective we'll see throughout the Book of James: **Eternity**. The reward of eternity in God's presence is real, and motivates us to run the race, to run the race well, to run the to win. Jesus has won the race for us, and we are called to run, and win, with Him.

Like I said before, the Book of James is about **faith**. Here we see that faith, true faith, is tested faith. Faith is tested and perseveres under trial. That is the *blessed* life. It is not like the mere happiness that comes from worldly riches... a mere blossom that withers and passes away. Faith perseveres and is rewarded with eternity.

So what about us?

Are there trials? Are we persevering under trials? Are our trials going to overtake us, or will they make us stronger?

Are we rich or poor?



I suspect that we are both rich and poor. This is the sort of determination that requires a context. Are we *Medina* rich? Are we *Burundi* poor? (Per capita wealth in the US is 100 times that of that war-ravaged African nation, according to *Global Finance Magazine*). The poorest among us live like kings compared to some, and the richest among us live like paupers compared to others.

When we think we are rich, we must remember that we are actually beggars. And when we think we are poor (like mere beggars), we can know that we are actually rich because of what God has done, and is doing in and through us.

The calling of God's Word, here before us in James, is to not merely settle for the kind of wisdom we find in *Global Finance Magazine*... but rather to seek the wisdom of God, to receive from Him insight and understanding, so that faith can arise, and grow strong.

God's call is to a life of faith that perseveres. Our prayer is for wisdom, insight and understanding.

In our trials and suffering, God give us gifts of wisdom, faith, courage, and strength to persevere.

⁹ Moo, D. J. (2000). *The letter of James* (p. 66). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.

¹⁰ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Jas 1:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Jas 1:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.