

Scripture: James 1:2-4, 12-18, 22-27**Introduction:**

Last week we talked about the book of James as a practical letter written by James, the brother of Jesus, to the church scattered throughout the Roman Empire. His goal was to give people everyday tools that they could use along the way of their discipleship journey and to remind them that faith, salvation, and the Christian life is not just about believing in Jesus, but that it is also about the way that we live those beliefs out every day.

This week we are going to dive headfirst into James chapter 1. As a caveat, there is far more in chapter 1 than we could hope to successfully cover in one message, so I'm just going to draw out some of the main takeaways. I would definitely encourage you to spend some time in James over the next month.

We are going to be considering 3 tools that you can add to your spiritual toolkits. Specifically we are going to look at the relationship between facing trials and building endurance, the importance of not just 'hearing' the Word of God, but also doing what it says, and finally James' vision of pure religion which is made up of compassion untainted by the sins of the world.

1) Trials and Endurance (vv. 2-4, 12-18)

After James identifies himself and greets his audience, he begins the body of the letter in v. 2 saying "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." There are a couple of things that I want to note about his words here. First, he says "*whenever*" you face trials. James begins not by saying 'if you happen to face some struggles' but instead by acknowledging that the church will indeed have hard

times. And obviously we know this is true, but to me it's a refreshingly honest reminder that just because you are saved, just because you are a part of the church and on the journey towards Christlikeness does not mean that life will be easy. I think that this is an incredibly important place to begin, especially as we are gathering tools into our spiritual toolbox, because unfortunately the church over the years has put out the idea that once you become a believer, everything is just going to be rainbows and sunshine. This is harmful for a lot of reasons, first and foremost because it just isn't true; and if you've been sold this brand of Christianity you're going to be disappointed, if not put off when difficult times come. Alternately, some strains of Christianity have taught and believed that if you're a Christian and you run across troubles, it must be because you've done something wrong or are guilty of some sin. James' words here tear down both of those wrongheaded teachings; Christians aren't immune to trials, and bad things don't just happen to bad people. Rather, "whenever you face trials of any kind."
WHENEVER.

James was acknowledging to the Church that they were going to face very real trials and persecution. They were living under the rule of the Roman Empire, who besides having a pantheon of gods for the people to worship, also required worship of the emperor. And for those who refused to offer sacrifices to the emperor god, they faced death. They were already experiencing this and they would continue to experience this.

The second thing that stands out about this verse is that he says 'whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.' **NOTHING BUT JOY.** When I think of joy, I think of

those times with Erin and Rivers where we are laughing, enjoying time with each other, have nowhere to go and nothing else in the world to do. I tend to be pretty low key, so for something to be ‘nothing but joy’ the situation really has to be perfect. That’s just my personality and it certainly is different for every person, but the point is, I would never equate the TRIALS I go through with JOY.

But James tells his audience to consider these trials joy. Why? Because of what they would experience, even and maybe especially because of their adverse experiences, they would be able to grow in their ability to handle future trials. Like an athlete in training, running faster and harder before the season begins builds up endurance so that their energy can stay as high as possible throughout the length of the game.

Endurance isn’t just for the purpose of future trials, but it is also a part of the discipleship process. Through our trials, God is able to help us shed our weaknesses, our complaining, our doubts, our anger, and all other natural but ungodly things, so that we can become complete as God intends for us to be.

James returns again to this theme of trials and endurance in vv. 12-15. He says in vs. 12: ‘Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.’ This is the natural progression of the thought that James started in v. 2; when we face trials and stand strong through them, building endurance, we are considered blessed and will be given a reward from God: the crown of life.

Biblical Scholar William Barclay writes: “All kinds of experiences will come to us. There will be the test of the sorrows and the disappointments which seek to take our faith away. There will be the test of the seductions which seek to lure us from the right way. There will be the tests of the dangers, the sacrifices, the unpopularity which the Christian way must so often involve. But they are not meant to make us fall; they are meant to make us soar. *They are not meant to defeat us; they are meant to be defeated. They are not meant to make us weaker; they are meant to make us stronger.* Therefore we should not bemoan them; we should rejoice in them. The Christian is like the athlete. The heavier the course of training he undergoes, the more he is glad, because he knows that it is fitting him all the better for victorious effort.”

Transition: So the first tool that James gives us is the tool of trials and perseverance. Let’s shift gears now a bit and consider the next tool he gives us here in chapter one.

2) Hearing and Doing (vv. 22-25)

I’m sure that all of us have had this experience before. We either ask or are asked to do something, and for some reason, we or they never get around to doing whatever it was we agreed to. It might be that you asked your children to pick up their clothes and put them away, and you go in their room and there the clothes are, on a pile, in the middle of the floor. Or maybe your spouse asked you to take the trash out, and an hour goes by and they ask again, to which you reply, “I’m gonna do it right now” which in reality you totally forgot about it, but you can’t let them know. In any case, all of us have been on both ends of the hearing something and not doing it. Why does that happen?

Maybe you meant to do it, but unintentionally forgot. Or maybe you never meant to do it, but just agreed to get whoever it is off your back.

James writes in vv. 22-25: It's not enough just to listen to the word of God, you have to do it! These should be sobering words. Just merely coming to church on Sundays and listening to sermons is not enough, if the messages never manifest into changed lives. It's not enough to sit in Sunday school and discuss Scripture if your life isn't pushed towards real change. It isn't enough to be in small group if you leave the same as you came in. As a preacher, I feel a lot of responsibility for this; if my messages aren't inspiring enough, then maybe you will just hear and leave unchanged. And there is some truth that I have a great responsibility in sharing the Word and Gospel in a way in which God can take hold of your heart. At the same time, it is ultimately up to you whether or not you want God to change you into a 'doer' and not just a 'hearer.' Do you come to church on Sundays expecting God to grab hold of your life? Do you want to hear the word and be changed, or are you happy with the way things are?

In vv. 23-24, James compares people who hear the word but do not follow it to people who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ *for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.*” I always assumed that he meant that by not following the word, you would quickly forget what God was asking you to do, just like somebody who is no longer looking at themselves in the mirror might forget the details of their face. But some of the commentaries I was reading for this week suggested that the person who looks away from their reflection

might not remember because they choose not to remember because they don't like what they see. Which got me thinking, maybe one of the reasons we hear God's word but don't make it a part of our lives is because we know we aren't living how God would want us to in all things, but we also know that change means owning up to who we really are. And so we would rather just walk away and pretend like everything is just fine, when we know it's not.

Transition: Hearing and doing, the determination and ability not just to absorb God's word through sermons, Sunday School, small groups, and personal reading, but to put that Word into action, is another tool in our toolkit. Really, this tool is essential; without this, we could be top tier bible scholars or on the winning Bible quizzing team, but the content of our faith would be meaningless information. Instead, we should be actively pursuing becoming like Jesus through hearing God's word and practicing what we hear.

3) Compassionate and Unstained (vv. 27)

The final tool that we are going to tackle this morning is chock full of meaning and practical challenge, but it comes from one small verse at the end of the chapter. In v. 26, James challenges people who believe they are religious to watch what they say because if they aren't able to control their tongues, their 'religion' will be undermined. Then, in v. 27, James what 'religion' is. ²⁷ *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

I really like the way that the Message paraphrases these verses, so I want to read that for you now. ²⁶⁻²⁷ *Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.*

Religion is such a difficult thing to define; today, it is about the organization and rules of the worshiping institution. And culture is largely moving away from ‘organized religion’ because of perceived hypocrisy but not necessarily moving away from spiritual experience. And so we get the phrase ‘spiritual but not religious.’

This is not what religion is to James. To James, religion is about how you live out the faith that you claim. Religion here is not about an organization or an institute; it is about the way we worship through our lives. And so he gives here two characteristics of “pure” and “undefiled” religion. And they are, at first glance, two seemingly unconnected things.

First, pure religion is compassionate: “to care for orphans and widows in distress.” James here is echoing the words of the prophets Zechariah and Micah.

Zechariah 7:8-10: ⁸ The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying: ⁹ Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; ¹⁰ do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Micah 6:8: ⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

So what does compassion have to do with proper religion and worship? Unfortunately the church has allowed compassion ministries to be co-opted by secular organizations, who oftentimes are affiliated with one political party or another. Now there is nothing wrong with secular compassion organizations that help those in need, but for some when thinking about how these organizations are politically linked, it can be a turn off to compassion ministry altogether. This is unfortunate because there is no doubt that God, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament and especially through Jesus, cared for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the most fringe groups in culture, including widows, orphans, and even immigrants. And so we are called by God to imitate his care for the least-of-these in our own lives. This is a perfect example of ‘hearing and doing.’ We can’t hear that God is love and not act in love towards our neighbors. We cannot hear ‘pray for your enemies and those who persecute you’ and not act in love towards those who would harm us. We cannot hear ‘feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit those imprisoned,’ and ignore the very real needs of people around us. Hearing and doing. Pure religion is hearing and practicing God’s compassion.

Second, pure religion is to keep oneself unstained by the world. The Message paraphrase says ‘*guard against corruption from the godless world.*’ So how do we act compassionately towards

our neighbors while at the same time guarding ourselves from being tainted by the ungodly nature of the world? I'm reminded of the old saying being "in the world but not of the world." This comes primarily from Jesus' prayer for his disciples in James 17:11-15.

John 17:11-15

¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

Jesus tells us several important things here about what it means to be his follower. First, if we hope to follow after Jesus, we need to know that the world is going to hate us just like it hated him because we come bearing the same message. This is a struggle, which goes back to our first tool from James, that we will struggle but through our struggle we will develop endurance and be rewarded for standing strong.

Second, when we decide to follow after Jesus, we change our citizenship from the Kingdom of the World to the Kingdom of

Heaven, and now, we no longer belong to the world. However, Jesus is not going to take us out of the world because we still have a mission to accomplish. Instead, His prayer is that God will protect us from the destructive influence of the world.

So pure religion is actively pursuing God's mission of compassion to the world, recognizing that many in the world will reject that message of salvation, and simultaneously Satan will try to change our paths, and so we need to lean into God for protection from being tainted by the world while we are in the world.

Conclusion:

This morning we considered three practical tools for discipleship: trials which lead to endurance, hearing and doing, and pure religion which is compassion towards the least of these and praying for God to guard us from the world. I wonder, as you consider your own faith journey and where God is currently taking you, which of these tools stands out most as something that you could use today? Maybe you are currently in the middle of a trial and need encouragement that God is using this experience to make you into a more complete disciple. And that when you stand firm through the trial, God will reward you. Or maybe you have taken a look at yourself in the spiritual mirror, or maybe you need to, and you realize that you don't like what you see and don't know what to do about it. The next step then is to take small steps towards taking what you are hearing from the Word and practicing them in your life. There is no need to be overwhelmed, discipleship is a journey made up of many steps. The important thing is that you are taking steps. Maybe God is calling is calling you to open your eyes to the needs of

your neighbors and practice pure religion by acting with compassion towards those needs. Or maybe you've been too influenced by the world, and you need to pray for God to strip those influences from you and protect you from any further corruption. I would encourage you to put all of these tools in your toolkit, but grab hold of one of them today. God is calling you to deeper discipleship, and there is no better time than now to take that next step. It doesn't have to be dramatic, but it should be something. Ask God to reveal to you where you can make some headway in your faith walk through one of these tools.