**James: A Toolkit for the Faith Journey**

**Introduction:**

What’s in your toolkit? I’ve got mine at home, stocked with tools I might need for everyday things: putting up a picture, tightening the nut on the dog line, fixing a bike, etc. It’s not very extensive, but it’s enough to get me through most small household projects.

In order for my toolkit to be useful, I need to know what each tool can do and how to use them. The challenge, though, is not only knowing the *what* and *how* of the tools but also having the wisdom to decide *when* it’s an appropriate time to use each tool.

What’s in your spiritual toolkit? What tools do you have to use on your discipleship journey as you navigate the trials and struggles of everyday life? Do you know what tools there are and what the tools can do? And do you have the wisdom to know when to use the tools in your spiritual toolkit?

Today we are beginning a new series looking at the book of James. James is one of the most practical and down-to-earth books of the New Testament. He offers many different tools to put into your spiritual toolkit that we are going to look at in the coming weeks. A good place to begin, however, is with a prayer for God’s wisdom in knowing how and when to use these tools. **James 1:5**: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.”

This morning we are also going to take look into the background of the book of James and consider how we can make it an important, practical addition to our spiritual toolkits. We’re going to do this by answering the questions, what kind of book is this, who wrote it, who was it written to, and what was its purpose?

**First**, we have to establish what genre of Scripture this is. The Bible is a collection of 66 books that are different literary genres. There are historical books, such as Kings and Chronicles, there are law books, such as Deuteronomy and Leviticus, there is poetry found in the Psalms and Song of Solomon, and wisdom literature found in proverbs, there are the gospels which tell the recorded history of Jesus, prophecy as found in Daniel and Revelation. But the genre that makes up most of the New Testament is Epistles, which is just a fancy word for letters. So James is a letter, which means like any other letter, in order to understand it we need to know the author, the audience, and its purpose.

**Second**, who wrote the book of James? The answer to this may seem obvious, after all we refer to it as “James” and the author does identify himself in the first verse as “James, a servantof God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” But it isn’t as easy as you might think. We’ve got a name, but James was a really common name in the early church. In fact, there were three possible authors named James that were important in the church at the time. There was the Apostle James, who was the brother of John and son of Zebedee, known as also as the Son of Thunder because of his fiery disposition. There was also James the son of Alphaeus, who was known as James the lesser. And finally, there was James the brother of Jesus. Scholars not only debated which of these James’ wrote this letter, but also speculated if it wasn’t written by an anonymous author under the pseudonym James in order to gain credibility for his letter, or even just a collection of sermons and teachings given by various Apostles compiled and composed under the name James, again to gain credibility. For us today, those possibilities seem wrong and unethical, but in Biblical times these were commonly accepted practices.

Because of the content of the letter, and based on the roles the various James’ played in the early church and when they all supposedly died, most scholars believe James the brother of Jesus wrote the letter. The biggest detraction to this theory is that he never explicitly calls himself “James the brother of Jesus,” which is pretty strange if you think about it. If you wanted a group of people to take your words as authoritative, wouldn’t you want to give yourself some leverage by reminding them that you were Jesus’ brother?

So what do we know about James the brother of Jesus? James had quite the conversion of heart on how he felt about Jesus from the Gospels to post-resurrection. In Mark 3, after Jesus had been teaching and healing, he returns home only to have his family confront him and urge him to stop what he was doing. **Mark 3:21**: “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

We don’t know exactly why his family tried to intervene; maybe they were worried about their reputation, maybe they were worried for Jesus’ safety. Either way, James, his siblings, and their mother Mary tried to step in because they didn’t understand what it was that Jesus was about.

Something changed though. In 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, Paul lists all of those Jesus appeared to following his resurrection, including James. From there, we see in glimpses that James becomes an extremely important part of the church at Jerusalem. Most notably, in Acts 15 James is presiding at the council of Jerusalem, which was a watershed moment for the early church. James had to navigate the tension between the Jewish Christians, who still wanted to follow the law and believed that the Gentile Christians should also adhere to Jewish law, and the Gentile Christians who were being unduly burdened by Jewish laws regarding circumcision and purity. He also had to mediate between two very strong personalities in the early church, Peter and Paul. Peter tended to side with the Jewish Christians while Paul sided more with the Gentile Christians. James had to act as leader and a peacemaker. It is most likely that this letter was written to the churches after the council at Jerusalem, so James is writing as a seasoned veteran of church conflict and mediation.

Interestingly enough, James’ continuing care for the Jewish members of the church comes through in his Epistle. According to William Barclay, there is nothing that an orthodox Jewish person couldn’t agree with. There are only two references to Jesus, and there are no references to the resurrection, which was one of the primary contentions that the church had with including James in the New Testament. The fact that his letter mirrors many Jewish ethical concerns shows James acting as a peacemaking leader of this diverse church, being concerned with not alienating Jewish members of the church who were already struggling with so many changes to their understanding of properly practiced religion.

It makes sense that James, who became a leader of the church at Jerusalem and had to navigate the challenges of everyday discipleship for himself as well as for a diverse group of new believers would write such a practical letter with plenty of good tools for spiritual toolkits. And he includes a plea for wisdom for these early Christians to know how to use these tools in the best way possible.

**Third**, who was the letter addressed to? Most of the epistles in the New Testament were written to the church in certain cities, like Paul’s letters to the church in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Galatia, etc. James on the other hand, is a letter written to the church in general. In the greeting line in James 1:1 James addresses the letter “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” James is referring to the twelve tribes of Israel, which has become the Christian church and is now spread out across the occupied Roman Empire.

**Finally**, what is the purpose of this letter? I think most basically, James wanted to give a practical toolkit for the church to help her live out her faith in a real, tangible way. That is why he addresses such a wide variety of real life issues and situations that Christians would face in their lives. James is really giving the church a sermon, written in the style of Jewish sermons. But rather than having one central theme with supporting points and an overall arc, James, like a traditional Jewish sermon, wrote out brief strung together teachings and truths. Biblical scholar Edgar J. Goodspeed writes: “The work has been compared to a chain, each link related to the one before and the one after it. Others have compared its contents to beads on a string…And, perhaps, James is not so much a chain of thoughts or beads as it is a handful of pearls dropped one by one into the hearer’s mind.”

There is a second important, and much misunderstood, purpose to James’ letter. James was writing to correct those in the church that had taken Paul’s words about salvation through faith alone too far and had abandoned following Jesus’ example of goodness to the world around them. Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:8-9**: “**8**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9**not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Paul did not want this church that was just coming off of the Jewish teachings of a strict following after the law to transfer those thoughts and practices over to Christianity by thinking that they could earn their salvation through works. Unfortunately, though, taking that to the extreme could mean that a person confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and savior but never changes his or her action. So when James writes in James 2:17 that “Faith without works is dead,” it was not written as a counter-point to Paul’s doctrine but instead was written to counter the Christians who were perverting what Paul said about justification by faith, using it as an excuse not to act ethically.

One interesting feature of the letter is that James reteaches some of Jesus’ ethical teachings given at the Sermon on the Mount, such as his teachings on forgiveness, bearing good fruit, and oath swearing. James wanted to remind the church that ***to be a follower isn’t just about salvation and the afterlife, but it is about living the here and now in a way that honors what Jesus’ life was all about.* And this is really the primary purpose of James letter and what I hope you take away from this morning. So I will say it again. *To be a follower isn’t just about salvation and the afterlife, but it is about living the here and now in a way that honors what Jesus’ life was all about.***

**Conclusion:**

So, how do we know how to live in a way that honors what Jesus’ life was all about?

As we journey through the book of James adding tools to our spiritual toolkit, begin with praying for Godly wisdom.

What is Godly wisdom? In 3:17, he tells us that “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Godly wisdom is modeled after the character of God. When figuring out how to live like Christ, we have to remember that this kind of life looks like peace, gentleness, mercy, and is without hypocrisy. It looks nothing like the life the world models for us. **James 3:13 *13****Who is wise and understanding among you?* *Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.*

If we are going to live in the here and now in a way that honors what Jesus’ life was all about, we need to have a full spiritual toolkit. And to know how to best use that spiritual toolkit, we need to start with God’s gentle wisdom.

As we continue throughout the book of James over the next five weeks I would encourage you to take time each week to read the book of James, all 5 chapters. It will give you a better grasp of the letter and give you a chance to gather more tools for your toolkit.