

## **“Wisdom for a Divided World” based on James 1**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sept. 1, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

This week we will begin another series, this time on the Letter of James. For the month of September, we will go through this letter and its content. As you may know, I follow the Revised Common Lectionary, which offers a three-year-cycle of texts that cover most of the bible.

Each week, the lectionary has from four to six texts available to choose from. Each week, I select one or two that seem relevant to our context as a church and for the world in which we live. After doing a series on Ephesians, I tried to resist going into another series on a letter, but it seems perfect – perhaps divinely ordained even – that these two letters would pop up back-to-back in 2024 since they deal with the issues we are facing in a polarized election season. Now more than ever, we need the wisdom of scripture in our divided world.

You see, the letter of James is written to address religious, political and cultural tension. It was written to people who were caught between their cultural mores and their faith. It was written to an anxious people who felt persecuted and saw great injustice around them. They were not sure how to address anxiety and fear being stoked by people in power. It was written to people who felt the need to pick a side, because for them, their faith was tied to their nation, and their nation was divided into many factions, each offering their own solution to the problem.

Now if that doesn't seem relevant to you, I give you permission to take a nap. I'll wake you up when communion comes. But my guess is that this nearly 2,000-year-old letter will be surprisingly relevant for today, My hope is that this letter might help equip us for the world in which we live.

You see, there are mixed opinions on when James was written. Two hundred years ago, scholars gave a very late date, but at this point most scholars today believe it was written before 150AD. Some argue for an early date of around 40AD to 60AD and say it may well have been written by the person it claims to have been written by – James the brother of Jesus. Others choose a date around 125AD. Each of these dates corresponds to times of great tension. Each one lines up to a time before a Judean revolt against Rome.

I am in the camp that thinks it was written around the year 60, by the elder James, or Jacob, who was the first bishop of Jerusalem. He was known as a pious man of faith by all. He was called the brother of Jesus and was murdered for his faith in around 62 AD.

In the writings of Josephus, the great Jewish historian, we are told of the turmoil of this time. He writes of “wicked men who deceived,” and “deluded people under the pretense of divine inspiration,” which he says was really aimed at changes to the government under which they lived. They eventually persuaded the people to engage in a full revolt, urging people to assert their liberty, by inflicting death, on any, who continued to obey the government.

Australian biblical scholar Jim Reihner makes a compelling case for an early date, using Josephus's work, and said the author, be it Jesus's brother or another James, “knew that these groups had appeal. He was deeply concerned with the possibility that some Jewish Christians were compromising the Christian message and participating in this worldly option of using violence to address injustice.”

Regardless, the same tensions were present in the lead up to the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 AD. Again, the Jewish people mounted a rebellion against Rome, and they were defeated. It resulted in the Jewish people being exiled from Jerusalem, not to return until a Muslim caliphate took the city.

The tensions were extremely high, and surely some were tempted to join the fray. The key difference for me is that people claimed Bar Kokhba was the Messiah, and so, it is unlikely the author would write this letter to Christians, without also making an explicit defense of Jesus as the Messiah as opposed to Bar Kokhba.

Regardless, for our purposes, over these next five weeks, we will read this assuming the earliest date, but knowing that even the later date still makes the letter relevant, to us today.

Another key aspect of the letter of James is that it is wisdom literature, which are writings about God and personal virtue through dialogue, sayings or parables. In James's case, it is mostly sayings. It is the only piece of wisdom literature in the New Testament, whereas the Old Testament has Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and a lot of Psalms. It is not designed to expound theological ideas or even history, but to be a practical guide for believers to live out their faith.

So, enough about the background, let's look at the letter. James bursts out of the gate by telling his readers to consider trials and sufferings as joy, because the testing of our faith accomplishes endurance, or works patience, in us. If this endurance, or patience, is allowed to complete its work in us, then we will lack nothing, be complete or perfect and whole. But notice he is not telling us to seek suffering. He knows suffering will come on its own, each of to a different degree in our lives.

We can face it by praying for wisdom, which God gives generously, giving to all without upbraiding – as the King James Version puts it. We don't use this word any more, but it is an old word for "shaming." There is no shame in depending on God. There is no shame in admitting what we lack. There is no shame in desiring to be better.

The world tells us that we are to be self-sufficient, or community strong with our tribe, whether biological, ethnic, national, or ideological. The world says we cannot admit that we or our tribe might be failing or wrong in some way. Likewise, we cannot admit our own faults, but with God, there is no shame in admitting we need help. With God, there is no shame in admitting collective failure either – the sins of our group, our nation, our church even. It's ok to admit those. There is no shame with God.

James says what God does not appreciate is our wavering – our acting like we trust God but seeking the ways of this world. The KJV had this one right with wavering, but your bible may have the word doubt. This is not about doubt. This is about when we seek God's honor by seeking the world's honor even when they're opposed to each other. It's about being double minded, floating on the waves, unstable.

James says we cannot seek the status of this world, while trying to embrace humility with God. Rather, James tells the poor or those of low status to hold their heads up high. Often, this is translated as "exult" but the word means to straighten the neck. He says when you are lowly, hold your head up high. The rich, or properly, people of high status, should hold their heads high when they are humbled, made low. We do this because all of humanity is mortal like a flower.

Our bibles often have this as “rich” or “poor” and that is not what James is getting at here. In the ancient world, there was no economic distinction of rich and poor. Capitalism didn’t exist and there was no economic distinction of rich and poor based on bank accounts, since these didn’t exist.

No, the account that mattered was your honor account or esteem in the eyes of others, over against your shame, when people looked down on you. The person who was poor was one without honor or status. It probably also meant they were without financial means, absolutely. The person who was rich was one with honor and status and likely also had financial holdings, but the idea of rich or poor had more to do with status.

James says that just as a beautiful and honorable flower will fade, so too the honor we have in this life will fade. The honor we have in the middle of our pursuits, in our ways, will fade away when we are no more. He encourages us to endure trials, not to seek victory over others for our own comfort. If we feel stifled in our faith, and even if we feel persecuted, the answer is not to stifle others, persecute others, but to endure in this world with love.

This is what we see in the person and work of Jesus. In Jesus, the eternal Son of God, fully equal to the Father and Spirit, was humbled to become human, sharing in our limits. He endured all that sin and death could muster. He was hanged on a cross to die for us. But on the third day he rose again for us. He ascended to the Father for us. He sent the Spirit for us.

Each of these good gifts comes directly from God, just as our own good gifts to each other are gifts of God. This is because we are the body of Christ, empowered by the Spirit, to give these gifts. God does not tempt us – our own desires tempt us and draw us from God. Instead, God is with us, because even though sin gives birth to death, God has given birth to us by the Word of truth to be a kind of first fruits of creation, to share God’s love through us.

Beloved, here is the challenge to us as Christians – in the midst of tension, turmoil, and division around us. When we see injustice and persecution, violence and shame, what are we to do? All of this will provoke anger in us, but James says “stop.” He says we should be swift to listen, and slow to speak, and slow to anger. This is hard. He wants us to let our opponents be heard. That’s hard. We are not to be quick to speak a defense, but we should listen. We are not to be angry, but patient. Our anger does not produce God’s justice, or God’s righteousness.

It is humility – putting aside the dirt that clings to us and the misery or evil we feel. This humility opens us to receive in us the ingrown Word. It opens us to receiving Christ, who is capable of saving our souls, but not just our souls, our whole being, our identity and who we are. We are to become doers of the Word, imitators of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not just people who hear the word and claim to believe it.

Jesus never asked us to intellectually agree that he exists. That’s a pretty low standard. Jesus asked us to “have faith in him” to “believe in him.” To believe in something is live as though it has an influence on our life. He calls us to “allegiance” and “faithfulness.” James sums this up as God desiring us to be doers of the Word, not simply hearers of the Word.

As Josephus wrote of those who spoke under the pretense of divine revelation, but were really working to undermine and change the system of government, so, James tells us that someone may seem pious, or seem religious, but if they do not bridle the tongue, refrain from speech that brings

misery or hurts, then they deceive their own heart – their piety or religion is in vain Actual piety and purity, religion that is undefiled before God, is to visit those without status in their affliction. Actual piety and purity is to be with the lowly, the orphan and the widows. It means to worry about your own sin, and not obsessively focus on the sins of the world outside.

Beloved, in this world in which we live, we may be pulled in many directions. Our job is to seek the Kingdom of God and our status with God is what we seek. We know God loves the humble. If we seek God's will, and the world knocks us down, we can hold our head high, knowing that the honors of this world fade like the beauty of a flower. We can choose to listen to our enemy, and show them love, not anger. We can do this because God gives generously to all who ask and God does so without shaming us for our failure. We should be single minded in seeking God, and not divided in seeking worldly praise.

James is going to challenge us a lot. Temptation comes from our own desire, not God – who gives God's self to us in love. God is all about self-giving love and that is where we can live in the complete law of freedom – the perfect law of liberty – which calls us to do what God commands, to live as Christ lived, with humility and self-giving love. It's not about looking religious, or looking pious, but about loving and serving those who are of the lowest status among us. It's about helping the poor, the low in status widows and orphans, while doing our best to be good ourselves.

The people James was writing to knew the challenge he laid out before them. Likewise, this text speaks the same challenge to us today. In a world that wants to divide us, by increasing our anxiety and fear. The world puts us in circumstances of "us" versus "them" to give us security within our in group.

It is within that type of world, James offers an alternative and we will do well to listen to him, It's not an easy path, but it is the path of love. It is the path of justice. If we listen to James as he shares the wisdom of God in our divided world, we will see Christ revealed in his words. If we live by these words, others will see Christ revealed in us. Amen.