

Introduction:

I know it is odd to say in a year focused on “Pursuing Holiness” we plan to examine a book that doesn’t even use the words “holy” or “holiness.” However, James’s letter/sermon is full of the concept. In fact, the book begins with the exhortation to let our trials lead us to being complete, mature, lacking nothing (**James 1:2-4**). If that is not a goal of holiness, I don’t know what is. And the book ends with the exhortation to draw the sinner who is wandering from the truth back to it so his soul can be saved from death and his sins be covered (**James 5:19-20**). If that is not a plea for holiness, I don’t know what is. In a lot of discussions, holiness is seen almost as an ethereal goal, and since we can only be holy by the blood of Christ we only pursue holiness in a metaphorical sense. The problem is if we are not careful, as we continually remind ourselves we are unholy and can only have holiness by the sacrifice, blood, and grace of Christ, Satan will pervert that into thinking unholiness doesn’t matter. He will strive to convince us that since we can only be holy by Jesus, we have no need on a practical, pragmatic, day-to-day level to pursue holiness. James stands out in opposition to that. Though it doesn’t use the word, I hope we can see James’s brief essay takes us on a journey of practical holiness. In future lessons, we will dig deep into certain topics and sections of James, but in this one, I’d like for us to see the book as a whole.

Discussion:

I. Getting into the original frame of mind.

- A. The explanations of **James 1:1** and therefore the setting various teachers and scholars place this book in are myriad. No doubt, we could spend hours trying to work through all the evidence folks present on why they see the book the way they do. I’d rather just let you know the approach I take so we can all get into that same mindset as we read and study this book together.
- B. The author of this book is James. Of the various Jameses mentioned in the New Testament, the most likely one, and therefore the one I believe is the author, is James the brother of Jesus who became a leader in the church in Jerusalem (cf. **Matthew 13:55; Acts 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19**).
- C. He is writing, he claims, to the 12 tribes in the dispersion. Folks see this in multiple ways. Some see him as writing simply to Jews, especially those outside of Jerusalem. Some see him as writing to Jewish Christians outside of Jerusalem. These ideas come from the fact that the Jews saw two kinds of Jews. There were the native Hebrews who lived in the homeland, the Promised Land. Then there were those who still lived out where the Jews had been dispersed during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. That was simply called the Dispersion. Some see him as writing to all Christians saying that 12 tribes language was used metaphorically of the New Israel which is dispersed in the world rather than gathered home to God’s presence. This is how it seems Peter uses the same imagery in **I Peter 1:1**.
- D. I tend to think this is a play on words. That is, what happened to the Jews in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities had happened to the Jewish Christians in **Acts 8**. Most of them had been dispersed from their homeland. In fact, in **Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19**, the verb form of the word for “dispersion” was used to describe what happened to those Jewish Christians. While I have no doubt this encyclical sent out to churches outside of Jerusalem would have applied to all Jewish Christians, we need to see recipients who have been oppressed, afflicted, and driven from their homes. As **Hebrews 10:34** says, they had endured the plundering of their property. Anywhere they went, they went as the poor, refugees from their homeland, trying to start over. They brought with them what they could carry on their backs and their fellow Christians who traveled with them. I don’t know exactly how long before James wrote this sermon (and it is more of a sermon than a letter), but we need to see this as a leader from the home congregation shepherding his scattered flock, helping them maintain their faithfulness and holiness though they have been sent far away, not that he was trying to shepherd the various congregations, but providing guidance for those who had been part of his flock.
- E. Finally, there is a really cool play on words in this when we step into Jewish shoes and read this introduction from their perspective.
  1. Many times when names get translated from language to language, some significant changes get made. For instance, though in English we see the author’s name as “James,” those who read the original letter heard his name as “Ἰάκωβος/Jacobos,” in other words, Jacob. This happened because in the Latin the

hard “B” was softened to an “M,” producing “Jacomus.” This led to names like “Giacomo” in Italian, “Gemmes” or “Jaimes” in Old French, or “Jaime” in Spanish. These came into English as James.<sup>1</sup>

2. So, keep in mind that the original Jewish Christians who received this letter/sermon and had it read to them in their assemblies heard the opening lines as, “Jacob, of God and the Lord Jesus Christ a slave, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings.” Do you think they could help at least having the thought of the patriarch, Jacob, writing to his captive and dispersed descendants? Don’t misunderstand, I’m not saying this was a pseudonym for some author trying to present himself as Jacob writing to Jews. I mean that the opening James started with provides a picture to Jews that really parallels what his intent was.
  3. That is, there is this picture of a father writing to his struggling children, comforting, encouraging, rebuking, instructing. And that is the exact picture James was presenting as a shepherd writing to his scattered flock, comforting, encouraging, rebuking, and instructing. Just as the patriarch Jacob would want to write to His descendants to help them in their struggles, James is writing to his spiritual children in theirs.
- F. While we are obviously not Jewish Christians, driven from our homes into foreign lands, struggling to start over and stay faithful, if we want to see how this letter/sermon is going to help us, we need to read it from that perspective first.

## II. Five Questions from **James** for Practical Holiness

- A. With all of that in mind, let’s examine a brief overview of this letter’s/sermon’s comfort, encouragement, rebuke, and instruction. We often struggle with seeing any organization to this letter. It seems like it is just talking about a bunch of different topics that James mixed and matched together as varying thoughts came to his mind. However, as we dig a little deeper, what has been divided off as our first chapter really provides an index of topics that James is going to weave and mix together in a powerful fashion.
- B. See how this works:
  1. The trials and joy of **1:2-4** come back in **5:7-18**.
  2. The wisdom of **1:5-8** comes back in **3:13-18**.
  3. The contrast of poverty and riches in **1:9-11** is developed more in **2:1-7; 4:10, 13-17**; and **5:1-6**.
  4. The contrast of personal desire vs. God in **1:12-21** comes back in **4:1-9**.
  5. The contrast of hearing/speaking with doing of **1:22-27** is expounded in **2:8-26; 3:1-12; 4:11**.
- C. With this in mind, this first chapter and the rest of the book pushes us to ask 5 questions of ourselves. Though James doesn’t ask these questions explicitly in so many words, we should see he isn’t writing this for us to nod our heads, pat ourselves on the back, and go our way unimpacted. He expects us to take these teachings and lay our own lives out beside them and see how we measure up. As such, if we want to pursue holiness on a practical level, we have to ask five questions **James** brings to mind.
  1. *What is your outlook?:* In **James 1:2-4**, James challenges the common outlook we have on life. We have the idea suffering is awful. We shouldn’t have to endure it. We go through all kinds of hoops to avoid it. When pain happens, we think we are being punished. Can you imagine what folks driven from their homes, having lost everything, might think about that? They might begin to think God had abandoned them. But James challenges his sheep to have a different outlook. Their trials meant God was, in fact, on their side. After all, when our faith is tested, its perfect work is making us perfect, lacking nothing. Therefore, in **James 5:7-11**, James encourages us to steadfastly persevere with patience like the prophets before us and like Job. The question is what will your outlook be? Will you take everything not going quite your way as a reason to turn away from God or a reason to turn to Him?
  2. *What is your source?:* In **James 1:5-8**, after saying the blessing of trial leads us to lack nothing, James encourages us to turn to God for what we do lack: wisdom. James stands in the New Testament in the same vein as **Proverbs** and **Ecclesiastes** from the Old. It is a book of wisdom whose themes mirror much of what the Jews throughout the ages saw as wisdom. But what is very important is where James wanted his scattered sheep to find their wisdom. God is the giver of wisdom. And so, when he comes back to this theme in **James 3:13-18**, we see we have a choice. Either God will be our source or the world? Everyone has their advice about how to face life and be successful. God’s approach seems like foolishness to the world and if we listen to it, we will actually find ourselves in foolishness. If we want real holiness, we have to realize God is the source, not the world.
  3. *What will your goal be?:* Of course, the reason why the world’s advice is foolish to God’s people, and God’s advice is foolish to the world is because God and the world are pushing us toward different goals. The world is looking for political power and self-aggrandizement. This is most often demonstrated by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Yale University Press, 1995, p 93

pursuit of wealth. James shocks our perspective again in **James 1:9-11**. The man who is pursuing wealth as his goal is going to wither away in the midst of his pursuit. But the man who is looking for God's exaltation will be lifted up. And so in **James 4:10**, James reminds us to humble ourselves before God, so He may exalt us. Further, in **4:13-17** he explains that those who boast in all the profit they are going to make forget that they are a mist that vanishes (hearkening back to the flower of the grass that fades away). Finally, in **5:1-6**, he rebukes those who, guided by the goal of wealth, do not love their neighbors. This doesn't mean, of course, that none of God's people are ever blessed by God with wealth. In fact, recognize that Job who was wealthy before and after his trial is used as one of our examples in **James 5:11**. But if we want to pursue practical holiness, we need to make sure we have God's goal as our goal: eternal exaltation, not temporal wealth.

4. *What is your guide?:* This mirrors question #2, and perhaps simply demonstrates the importance of this idea. But in question #2, the contrast is between God being our source of wisdom and the world. In this question, we see a contrast between God as our leader and guide versus our own desires. In **James 1:12-21**, James contrasts the two potential guides. There is God who gives only good gifts (which, we remember, sometimes includes trials and suffering). Then there is our own desire. What does our own desire bring? Temptation, sin, and death. God offers a crown of life, but our desire ends in death. Interestingly, in **James 4:1-11**, when James comes back to this theme, he demonstrates that our desires not only kill us, but they kill each other and they kill the fellowship we have in God through Jesus Christ. What causes our fights with one another? Our passions and desires. The fact is when there is trouble in the ranks it will always come back to this, somebody is letting desire be their guide instead of God. If you want holiness, you have to put your desires to death and let God be your guide.
5. *How will you walk?:* In **James 1:22-27**, James brings all of this home to brass tacks. This is where the rubber meets the road. We need to ask about our outlook, our source, our goal, and our guide. But those questions are all intended to lead us to this one, how will we walk? Some will listen to the word, some will even listen to James's letter. Some will talk a lot. Some will even set themselves up as teachers of all these things (cf. **James 3:1-12**) talking, talking, and talking. But James is looking for walkers, act-ers, doers. And so, we can't claim to be asking for wisdom in faith (cf. **1:6**) if our asking isn't accompanied by doing what we learn from the wisdom of God. James almost immediately comes back to this in **James 2:8-26** explaining that our believing is dead if not accompanied by doing. Further, he is not actually trying to say that only a few Christians should really be teachers in **James 3:1-12**, but is rather highlighting that if we aren't going to live the faith, we shouldn't be talking the faith. Finally, he hits the nail on the head as he wraps up his discussion about in-fighting among brethren by pointing out that God hasn't called us to talk about His will in a way that belittles our brethren but to do His will ourselves. Of course, we are to call our brethren who have turned to error and sin back to the truth (**James 5:19-20**), but we need to remember that the purpose of God sharing His wisdom with us is so we can walk in faithful holiness, not so we can be teachers of holiness and complainers about the lack of holiness in others. First and foremost, we must focus on doing God's will. How will you walk?

#### Conclusion:

James sent his letter/sermon as an encyclical to the scattered and dispersed sheep of the Jerusalem flock. They were facing major hardship and he wanted to comfort them in their trials, encourage them to continue in the faith, rebuke them where they were turning away, and instruct them in practical holiness. These five questions will help us bring James's lessons to our lives. What is your outlook? What is your source? What is your goal? What is your guide? How will you walk? Will you walk in practical holiness? Or will you simply listen and talk about it? What's your plan?