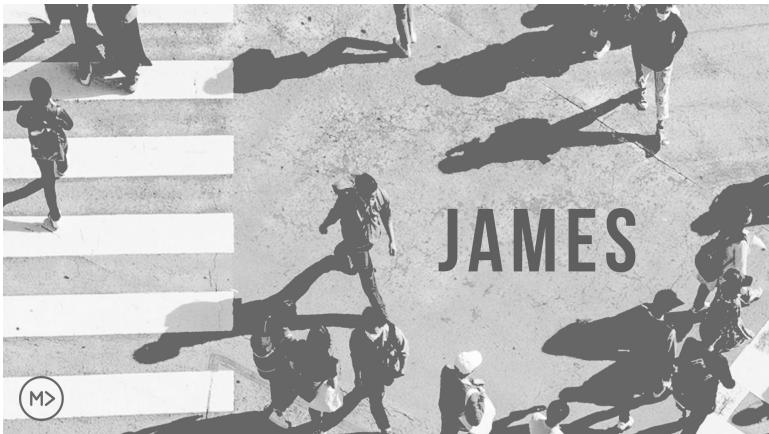


THE COMPLETE DISCIPLE



A Study in the Book of James

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I. FORWARD

Should we even read this book?

The great church reformer Luther once said: “St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it” (*Word & Sacrament*, Luther). Harsh! If this is what Luther thought about James, why should we bother or be excited about spending 12 weeks listening to what James has to say? That is a great question! And here are the three reasons why we are excited for this letter to radically shape the people of Missio Dei as complete disciples of Jesus.

1. “Toto, I have a feeling we are not in the Middle Ages anymore.”

Luther’s posture toward the book of James was highly shaped by his cultural moment in the Middle Ages. The Protestant Reformation was in response to the church’s collusion with the empire, leadership corruption, and the selling of indulgences. Luther was trying to unmask the forgotten reality that Jesus is the hero of the Story and only through Him can people experience forgiveness, grace and mercy, no conditions attached. Hence, for Luther, James didn’t fit the vision of “by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.”

However, the pendulum has swung, where now the Western church has largely skewed the Reformer’s mantra with the vision: “*All I need to do is accept Jesus into my heart and then I will go to heaven.*” This has resulted in a weakened ethic of the church and a loosened commitment to becoming complete disciples of Jesus. James is helping us re-envision discipleship for all of life. I think Luther would be proud of us.

2. “Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words.”

Saint Francis is erroneously attributed to saying the above quote, but it is widely used today. In response to this statement, many in the evangelical church have attacked this quote by pointing out that the gospel must be declared with *words* or it is no gospel at all. In other words, action is secondary to words. This entire argument sets up a false dichotomy. James displays how the gospel, which is the True Story, should be declared *and* demonstrated. Action and Words always go together to create story-formed living. Maybe James is not a straw of an epistle after all. :)

3. “Practice makes Perfect”

Apart from the Sermon on the Mount, you could argue that James is the best manual on what it means to be a mature disciple of Jesus. James is inviting his listeners to recover a practiced Christianity. In other words, James makes it clear that correct doctrine and right thinking are not a substitute for right living. They need to go hand in hand and, for those of us who like clear instructions, James is a home run. In our cultural moment, the church is in dire need of recovering its formational identity by developing distinct Christian practices that are scattered all throughout James. The goal (*telos*) of James is that, through practice, we might become perfect in the biblical sense which means to be complete, lacking nothing (James 1:4).

II. INTRODUCTION

A. James: A Member of the Wisdom Gang

What is wisdom? In the Scriptures, wisdom usually dealt with ‘practical insight and instruction in the conduct of life’. Wisdom literature, then, is a genre filled with this practical instruction and is represented in the Scriptures by books like Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job, and so on. The book of James is a New Testament member of this wisdom gang. Now that we know what it is, we might ask what is it intended to do? What is the purpose of this distinct literary group? Well, the unique function of wisdom literature was to help Israel, and now the Church, both to understand and conform to the wisdom of God’s creation. God made his world and human beings to function and live a certain way. The more we are conformed to God’s good order the more we enjoy the fullness of life we are intended for. Moreover, the power of our witness and ability to display a way of life that is oriented to God is directly linked to this conformity.

Therefore, God in his kindness gives his people the gift of sages throughout history who are given an uncanny amount of insight into this creation order. Their role is to teach and distill this insight in an accessible and memorable fashion. In fact, this goal of accessibility and recall became the factor for the unique phrases and structures in many of these books, including James. Let me list a few and see if they sound familiar: aphorisms, parables, and beatitudes. It’s likely that the list made you think of the teaching of Jesus. This is not coincidental. Jesus and James stand as God’s dynamic sage tag team and their ability to empower others through wisdom is bringing joy to all who submit themselves to God’s good order.

The teaching of James, however, has its own distinctive construction. He starts with a greeting (1:1) that is standard of many New Testament letters, but everything after that is quite peculiar. In James 1:2-27, we find an introduction to all the topics that he plans to address in further detail later. This is followed by twelve distinct, smaller sections (James 2-5) that disclose the wisdom James has acquired through experience as a brother of Jesus, apostle, servant, and teacher (see figure 1). I wanted to draw our attention to this unique outline to remind us that the writing of James is quite different from that of Paul's, for example. The coherence in the book of James is not found in a sequential argument, but rather through one consistent vision of a kingdom way of life. Whether James is talking about the tongue, persevering through suffering, or an active faith, he does it all with this vision in mind. He teaches us how the life of faith in all of its many dimensions coheres and reaches maturity through the wisdom from above that will bring forth a distinct fruit (James 3:13-18).

The writing of James also takes on a very persuasive character that may remind us of a mentorship or parent. We often look to others who are ahead of us and who have acquired a bit more knowledge to instruct our steps. People in these positions, who truly care for those looking for help, are ready to provide instruction and often go to great lengths to persuade us to make good choices. The book of James has much of that same character and tone, but with the weightiness of the revelation of God. Not only James but God himself, through the voice and writing of James, wants to persuade us to abandon selfish ambition, doubled mindedness, and boasting in favor of living according to the wisdom of the kingdom of God. James offers no space for split loyalties and demands that we offer our complete allegiance to King Jesus and the rule of God. It is this undivided faith and loyalty that will lead us into maturity and completion.

B. Missional Aim: Pioneering a Kingdom Way of Life

As you might have guessed, both James and Jesus are equipping the people of God to fulfill their calling to be a distinct, counter-cultural people. They are not seeking to persuade us to just any way of life. No, it is a way of life that stands out and whose aroma smells both sweetly and strangely of the kingdom. Sweet, because it is characterized by love, generosity, and mercy, which James proclaims as triumphant over judgment. Strange, because it prioritizes the will of God above all, renounces evils that are often overlooked, and not least for its elimination of status. For example, the poor and the destitute are those who are privileged in the kingdom, but the wealthy, those typically thought to be privileged in the world, are said to be disadvantaged by the entanglements that often accompany wealth. Another example is found in contrast with typical wisdom literature and the way it addresses its readers or hearers. Normally, the sage addresses the hearer or reader as son, but James addresses the men and women of the church as brothers and sisters. This descriptor of others doesn't imagine a rank and file among believers. Any supposed hierarchy has been removed and replaced with a familial language that assigns everybody, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, the same status. All are children of God.

The writings of both call the community of God to stand in sharp distinction to all other communities. It is a call to offer an attractive, alternative way of life that is made possible by King Jesus and the kingdom of God which he inaugurated. To borrow from Bauckham, we are called to pioneer the life of God's kingdom. We are those leading the way into a new future. A future that has broken into the here and now and that will finally and fully come when Jesus returns. It is this future destination that informs our current direction.

And it is destination, above all, that distinguishes various communities and individuals. In so far as the goal of our lives is not pleasure, power, success, comfort, or any other number of self-determined possibilities, we will stand in sharp distinction as those whose goal is a life with God and for God. The path to this destination has been patterned by our Savior and his distinct life of willing self-sacrifice, submission to God, love of neighbor, and humble service.

C. Key Theme: The Complete Disciple

This way of life is nothing short of the totality of the life of the disciple. In fact, this is the major theme of the book of James: the complete disciple. James longs for his readers to grow and mature in Christ, to reflect in every way a faithfulness to our calling as God's people. We are to conform to God's good rule as obedient servants of Christ. Our pre-eminent need for such a goal is wisdom in order that we may know the good and perfect will of the Father. Wisdom to both discern God's ways and to choose them above all other options. Our prayer is that through this series God would teach us, the Missio Dei family, how to live according to the wisdom of the kingdom of God. And that this understanding would lead us toward completion or maturity in Christ that captures the attention of our neighbors, who are also trying to find their way. May we be a distinctive people characterized by the sweet and strange aroma of the kingdom.

D. Reading James for All Its Worth: Practices and Principles

Understanding the literary character of the book of James and its missional aim helps us to read it for all its worth. If James is indeed wisdom literature, then this will help us identify what reading practices and principles will help us to best understand and embody the book of James. The goal of understanding is performance or to act out what God reveals to us through his word. James calls our attention to this very issue by reminding us that a faith without works is dead and that we are to be both hearers and doers of the word. He leaves no room for dodging obedience. So, what are some tips for growing in understanding so that we may also grow in obedience unto completion?

1. Do what it says. Much of what the Bible commands, including the book of James, is very straightforward. It just happens to be that it is very difficult to actually do. For example, James 1: 2 reads, “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.*” You can wrestle with God about how hard and unnatural this is, but we can’t wiggle away from the demand on the basis of whether or not we know what James, and for that matter what God, intends. This book is about living out your faith.

2. Read slowly and in small sections. Wisdom literature is meant to be read one complete thought or exhortation at a time. The smaller sections in James demand their own attention. After reading one of these units the intention is to pause and spend time reflecting on it. What are those sections and what are the topics addressed? See the table below (Fig. 1).

3. Pursue wisdom. In Greek thought, as well as much of traditional Jewish wisdom literature, to obtain wisdom was understood as only possible by a long quest. The key to this pursuit of wisdom was assumed to be the effort of an individual. To gain wisdom, one must develop discipline and seek wisdom wherever it may be found. James charts a slightly different course. He suggests that wisdom is a gift freely given by God to those who ask in faith. And while every good and perfect gift comes from above, wisdom is portrayed as the preeminent gift. Wisdom is what God's people need most to conform to the rule of God and the order that is established by Christ.

E. Outline of James:

A: Prescript (1:1)

B: Introduction (1:2-27)

C: Exposition (2-5)

Figure 1: Outline of James 2-5

James 2:1-13 Partiality and the law of love.

James 2:14-26 Faith and works.

James 3:1-12 The tongue.

James 3:13-18 True and false wisdom.

James 4:1-10 A call to the double minded to repent.

James 4:11-12 Against judging one another.

James 4:13-17 Denunciation of merchants.

James 5:1-6 Denunciation of landowners.

James 5:7-11 Holding out till the Parousia.

James 5:12 Speaking the whole truth.

James 5:13-18 Prayer.

James 5:19-20 Reclaiming those who err.

Figure 2: The Wisdom Spectrum



The wisdom spectrum provides an illustration that can help us ‘map’ wisdom according to its characteristic traits. So, what is the difference between wisdom that could be described as imminent and that which could be more aptly described as transcendent? Imminent wisdom is characteristically available to all; it could be called general wisdom. God has so created his world that through observation, study, and reflection humanity can get a sense of how things work. We are able to perceive the order or grain of creation and live along the grain rather than against it, usually with quite pleasing or successful results.

However, not all wisdom is available to everyone. Wisdom that must be revealed is what one might call transcendent wisdom. It is the wisdom of God that is made known to his faithful people. This type of wisdom is often more counter-cultural and contends for the contrast between this age and the age to come. On the other hand, imminent wisdom typically takes a more positive view of the present order and invites people to live accordingly. These two types are not antithetical, but instead show why our neighbors who do not know God often lead very wise lives. It simultaneously points to humanity’s need for God to reveal wisdom and in so doing reminds us of the responsibility we have to steward the good gift of wisdom. We are to lead a communal way of life that acknowledges and applauds the imminent wisdom with which our neighbors live, while at the same time providing a picture of contrast. Do our distinctions invite our neighbors to ask questions about the wisdom we have adopted and seek to embody?

III. STUDY GUIDE

In this study guide, we have tried to match the methodology of the study with the form of the literature of James. Maybe instead of a “Study Guide” we should call this a “Practice Guide.” James is about cultivating faithful, practicing disciples of Jesus. We hope this guide proves to be a tool in the process of becoming complete disciples of King Jesus.

How To Use This Guide

Each week will follow the sermon from the previous Sunday. Hence, after our gathering you will spend the entire week practicing. To make this a helpful practice-based guide, we are using the acronym LIFE. Use this guide as a missional community, a family, or as an individual.

Listen

Each week you will begin your practice of living the book of James by listening to what the passage has to say. Because this is a form of wisdom literature, we encourage you to read slowly and deeply, taking in each practical thing James has to say.

Imagine

After listening to the passage, we will invite you to imagine what this passage would look like in real life. Who are the people, places, and problems that this passage illuminates for us?

Feel

Next, we will invite you to place yourself into the feelings and emotions of the passage. We aren’t brains on a stick but rather relational, emotional, spiritual, and physical beings. We desire for the whole person to be transformed through the book of James.

Embody

Last, we desire to see how listening, imagining and feeling might lead us to embody this passage to our city and our community. To embody James is to declare and demonstrate the beauty of the kingdom in the everyday stuff of life. We have been empowered by the Spirit to become complete disciples of Jesus. Go and practice!

JAMES 1:1-27

THE DISCIPLE & WISDOM

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

2 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. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 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. 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.

9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. 10 But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wildflower. 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.

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.

13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. 19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Listen

The Letter of James has been divided into 5 chapters. Our text for this week is the first chapter. Biblical scholars point out that all the themes that are developed in Chapters 2-5 are presented by James in seed form in Chapter 1. As you read James 1, listen for themes that you want to learn more about.

What would you say are some of the main themes in James 1:2-27?

Is there one verse that the Spirit is bringing to your attention more than the others in the chapter? Which verse is it?

**Note: If you are doing this as a family or Missional Community, you can each have your own verse. Or, perhaps, you might all decide on one verse together for the study. It is up to you. Both will work.*

Imagine

Take that verse that is standing out to you. Draw a picture of what it would look like if this verse was true of your missional community. Not an artist? Perhaps you can describe it better with words. Paint a picture with words of a community held sway by this verse.

Feel

Many New Testament scholars believe that James 1:4 is the key verse for the entire letter. The theme is maturity, completeness. When you think about being a “mature disciple of Jesus” how does that make you feel? Circle two words that most apply.

Accomplished	Shameful	Guilty
Hopeless	Hopeful	Exhausted
Afraid	Joyful	Lonely
Sad	Happy	Invigorated
Disappointed		

Why do these strike you?

Embody

Memorize your verse this week. Spend 5 minutes each day looking at it in your Bible, saying it aloud, and tossing it over in your mind. Let this verse take root in your soul this week and for the next few months as we study James.

JAMES 2:1-13

THE DISCIPLE & FAVORITISM

1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Listen

As you read the text, listen to some insights from the commentators about this section of the structure of James' letter and argument:

"Having set the stage in his introduction, James now turns to discuss one of the major themes he has introduced, that of wealth and charity. This discussion expands the previous statements in 1:9–11 and 1:22–27 and forms the basis for the strong denunciations of chaps. 4 and 5. Chap. 2 itself breaks into two parts, 2:1–13, which begins with an illustration (2:1–4) and leads into a discussion based on OT precedent, and 2:14–26, which likewise begins with theme sentence and illustration (2:14–17) and ends with a discussion based on the precedent of Abraham and Rahab. The first part argues that one must honor the poor and the second that one ought to share with them." (Davids)

"James alerts us to the importance of the subject he is about to tackle: partiality or 'favouritism' (NIV), or treating 'people in different ways according to their outward appearance' (GNB) or their worldly advantages. To do so is not simply to fail to conform to a desired 'religious' pattern of behaviour. It is to deny our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." (Motyer)

"The command not to discriminate in v. 1 is therefore the main point of the section. In vv. 2–4, a specific example of such discrimination is offered and the conclusion that such action is, indeed, evil is drawn. James then gives three specific reasons why favoritism toward the rich and discrimination against the poor are evil. First, such an attitude stands in contradiction to God's own evaluation, who honors the poor (vv. 5–6a). Second, favoritism toward the rich betrays a fawning, servile mentality—for rich people are the very ones who are persecuting the Christian community (vv. 6b–7). And, third, discrimination against the poor violates the demand of love for the neighbor, the centerpiece of Jesus' reinterpretation of the law of God (vv. 8–13)." (Moo)

“James is a practical book. James, unlike Paul, doesn’t so much break the gospel apart to show you what it is; James assumes the gospel and shows you what your life will look like if you believe it. In this passage, we’re going to see in this passage he says here’s what kind of community you ought to be, why you ought to be it, and how we can become that kind of community.” (Keller)

Imagine

Imagine you somehow became addicted to drugs, lost your job, your house, and (just go with it) all your friends and family. You have sobered up over the last month, but still find yourself without a home. Some kind person gave you a bottle of water and a granola bar on Saturday afternoon and said, “God bless you.” You asked them if they were a Christian. They said yes and told you about this church with a weird name called “Missio Dei”. You decide to show up the next day for the gathering.

From your time getting off the bus and walking to the building, until the moment when you leave the community, what would it be like?

What would you hope people say and do?

What would you be afraid people would say and do?

What would you be most self-conscious about?

Feel

Talk about how the previous exercise made you feel.

Embody

Each of our Missional Communities is intentionally orienting life rhythms around blessing and serving some people group that are on the margins of our society, or as Kit Danley says, “the least, the lonely, and the left out.” Now, let’s say that ten people from the community you are blessing all decide they want to start attending the gathering on Sunday.

If you had a chance to send an email to everyone in your congregation giving them a heads up, what are 3 bullet points of wisdom you would give them to ensure that they show hospitality to them?

-
-
-

What are three things you would want to talk to the leadership of your congregation about needing to change or think about due to these folks coming? (For example, how would music need to change? Location? Time? Feel?)

-
-
-

JAMES 2:14-26

THE DISCIPLE & WORKS

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Listen

Before you read the passage today, we need to make a note about this passage and the book of James that could help us hear these words afresh. Most us who have spent any considerable amount of time in the Bible have undoubtedly worn in the pages of Paul's epistles. Paul's writing style and message has been greatly received by many evangelical churches throughout America and for good reasons!

However, instead of reading each book of the New Testament in the context of the entire True Story, we read each book in the New testament in the context of Pauline theology. This is a problem and prevents us from seeing James, and specifically this passage, as congruent with the rest of the New Testament. Most of us are all too familiar with Paul's justification through faith and the reformer's cry of "by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!" Hence, we get to this passage and feel as if it doesn't belong in the New Testament through our unconscious Pauline lens.

But, from the beginning of the True Story (notice passage's reference to Abraham), to be a follower of Yahweh and ultimately of King Jesus our beliefs and lives should always reflect one another. Yes, it is through faith in Christ Jesus as the hero of the Story who defeated our sin in which we find salvation, but because of this incredible grace our lives should reflect Jesus to the world. James is not arguing in this passage about the theology of salvation but rather exhorting Christians everywhere to live as mature, complete disciples of Jesus. To do this, the Holy Spirit is empowering us to live lives of deep integrity, wholistic health, and to embrace our missionary identity. Now in light of all of this, please read these verses and may they encourage you to faithfully take up your role in the Missio Dei.

Imagine

The current crisis in the church is of an untransformed people who believe the right things (2:19) but whose lives are producing destructive fruit that creates a culture of hypocrisy. For a moment, I want you to imagine what it would look like to live a completely integrated life. When I say integrated I mean that our beliefs about God and our identity are completely congruent with how we see ourselves and how we live. Make a list about what your life would look like if you were to truly live out your sure identity of being a Family of Missionary Servants. A life where faith and works always went hand in hand.

Feel

Depending on your personality, there is a good chance that this passage could produce quite a bit of performance anxiety in you. You might look at your life and see the huge discrepancy between what you think you believe and what you are actually practicing. This could produce despair in many of us.

So the question is: What do we do with that feeling and experience?

What is Jesus wanting to say to us through that feeling?

For the past 5 years, the NBA basketball team the Philadelphia 76ers used a phrase to describe their rebuilding efforts saying: “Trust the Process”. What this meant was that although the team could struggle for a few years, they were embracing the slow, meticulous process of becoming an excellent team. We could learn a lot from the 76ers as Jesus followers.

Instead of despair, what if when we looked at incongruence between our beliefs and lives, we were reminded of our sure identity as an adopted, redeemed, chosen, and blessed child of God (*Eph 1*)? Then, from this place of a sure identity, we might trust the process of orienting our lives around Jesus and His kingdom, celebrating with joy the small moments each day. We might more faithfully participate in God's story, so that ten years from now we might experience being completely changed and become more complete disciples of Jesus. So how do we embody this type of living?

Embody

Using these three questions: "Who is God?", "What has God Done?", "Who are We?", make a list showcasing what you know to be true, what you believe from the True Story.

Now, in light of these three questions, what if you used the BLESS rhythms (Bless, Listen, Eat, Speak, Sabbath) to plan five intentional things, one for each rhythm, you can do this week to develop as a complete disciple of Jesus.

Bless:

Listen:

Eat:

Speak:

Sabbath:

JAMES 3:1-12

THE DISCIPLE & WORDS

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Listen

Read with the end in mind. James 3:1-8 reads as an extended warning on how we use our tongues. The first section addresses leaders and the additional danger they face because they are given more opportunities to use their tongues to either build up or tear down their communities. However, all of the imagery about how a small object demands such control of a larger object and of the enormous destructive force of tiny objects is indicative of every person's relationship to their tongue. The cutting edge of James' entire argument is found in the last four verses. Therein he wields a scalpel and, making a small incision upon our hearts, reveals the source of the evil found upon our tongues.

How does a tongue that speaks both blessing and curses indicate a disconnect to the word of truth (see James 1:18-21), which has been planted in us, a word that should shape and inform our words or speech? Write out why this is inconsistent and points to a hypocritical faith rather than true faith, which is a major concern for James.

What are current forms of inconsistent speech you and I participate in? I think one prominent form is spin. We are apt tell the story in a way that puts me in a more favorable light or in a manner that lessens any negative perception. Discuss spin and other inconsistent speech with your MC.

“James regards speech as the index of a person’s whole moral being...” (Bauckham, 101)

Imagine

How would consistent, controlled speech change the landscape of the world of social media? For, it is a place where the destructive force of the tongue seems to operate in an almost unchecked manner. It is the perfect means by which to say ‘nice’ things to people in person only to turn to the safety of anonymity and wish evil upon them. Psalm 12:2 – “Everyone lies to their neighbor; they flatter with their lips but harbor deception in their hearts”. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are all now convenient platforms for using our tongues to bless men one moment and curse them the next.

What would it look like to pioneer a new way of speaking to one another in this virtual world so full of malice and envy in its speech? A way that operates out of a love of one’s neighbor. A way of using words that reflects the character of the Word made flesh.

Feel

How do you feel when you learn that someone who speaks kindly to your face is actually slandering you behind your back? How do you feel when someone you trust has deceived you? Perhaps a family member who manipulates you by claiming that they are in real need when they actually just need more access to a destructive addiction or use your funds to head to the casino. Deceitful speech can be very frustrating and even disconcerting. How do you know who to trust when people use their tongues to deceive and promote themselves at your expense?

How do immigrants, legal or illegal, feel when people speak of them as a problem and nuisance to be rid of? What would it be like to live with the threats and ugly thoughts of others that are spoken and left hanging ominously overhead?

Embody

James emphasizes the power of the tongue in this little passage and by doing so alerts us to its immense potential. The tongue has the potential to be incredibly damaging and destructive or to be incredibly healing and constructive. We can tear others down or build them up. We can bless or we can curse. Knowing what we know, how can we commit to using this power in a way that is consistent with the character and speech of our God?

1. **Slow to speak, quick to listen.** I probably don't need to do much work to persuade you of mankind's propensity to think and talk about oneself. Like Toby Keith, we want to talk about me, want to talk about I, want talk about number one, oh my me my. But, in accords with Scripture we must learn to control our tongues and take a posture of listening first and speaking second. We should consider others more important than ourselves, not least in our conversations.
2. **Resist boasting.** James says the tongue is small, but boasts of great things (James 3:5). There is a temptation to make much of ourselves with our tongues. This is inconsistent with biblical wisdom, which prioritizes humility and disposes of selfish ambition.
3. **Choose blessing.** In wisdom literature there are often two paths or two potential choices. In the book of James, for example, one can either be a friend of God or a friend of the world. This week we can set before ourselves the choice of blessing or cursing others with our tongues. We can chart a path towards blessing others through our speech. We can choose to intentionally use our power to build up. We often fail to recognize the power of words and therefore do not consider the impact created by either the careful or careless use of our tongues. You have the power to bring dignity, to encourage, to honor, to celebrate, to warn, and to welcome... use it!

JAMES 3:13-18

THE DISCIPLE & WISDOM

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Listen

Reflect on the link made here between wisdom and deeds and the preceding link between faith and deeds. What connects the two? What is different?

How does James define or identify wisdom? Compare with the definition in Proverbs 1:7. How is humility connected to the fear of the Lord? Commit to memorizing James 3:13.

The wisdom that comes from above is first **pure!** (James 3:17a) Where have you seen that before in James and what might that say about the role of wisdom in the religious life?

“James radical rejection of status and the competitive, self-seeking, avaricious and arrogant ethos that goes with it make it wholly necessary that he reflect none of the wisdom tradition’s frequent concern with fitting well into, using advantageously, or even behaving modestly and charitably within established social structures. In this sense, like Jesus’ wisdom, his is a ‘wisdom of counter-order’...” (Bauckham, 103)

Imagine

In the world of politics, a campaign or debate can become a platform for claiming and declaring the wisdom that will inform one’s action as a potential servant of the city, state, or nation. As people jockey for these positions they seek to prove that their wisdom is superior to the wisdom of their opponents. Yet, what often happens is that the actual action or service of those candidates fails to match the wisdom that was being touted just weeks or months before. People realize that those claims were just a means of engendering support and winning votes. It can be seen that selfish ambition leads people, not only those in politics, to work the system to their advantage, even at the expense of others.

My thought was to imagine how integrity between the claim of wisdom and acting on that wisdom would reshape the political landscape. Then to push you further afield by imagining that the wisdom of most of the candidates was wisdom from above. Imagine a world in which government officials were, more often than not, truly humble servants of their cities, states, and nations. What would that be like?

However, that is still a pretty general picture, so I also want you to narrow it down. Imagine how wisdom from above would reshape and inform the work of a city planner. What fruit would result? Use the list in 3:17 to imagine specific examples of a harvest of peace, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity within the work and role of a city planner. What might be different within the particular city you live in?

Feel

How does it feel to be the sacrificial springboard that advances the agendas of the selfish ambitions of others at your expense?

Does this text make you feel self-conscious about the motives of your heart?

James makes a strong statement about the disconnect between our claims and deeds. If we claim to have the wisdom from above but act with selfish ambition or harbor bitter envy, then we put a lie to the truth. I'm reminded here of the story of Nathan confronting David about his sin. David doesn't even recognize his inconsistency until someone exposes it for him, but he is instantly broken and repentant in response. How does the process of exposure feel, whether you recognize your error on your own or through the voice of another?

Embody

Repent and Return. The Spirit does the work of convicting inconsistency in our lives. Sometimes he does this within our own hearts and at times he sends others to correct us. In whatever way the exposure comes, the heavy feeling of guilt, remorse, and brokenness is not the end of the process. The Spirit wants to lead us to repentance. He wants us to turn from sin and return to God for forgiveness and the strength to live differently. He wants us to believe that the wisdom from above is truly better and to live accordingly.

Sow in Peace. The encouragement to sow in peace is connected to the anticipated result, which is a harvest of righteousness. Anyone who lives according to the wisdom from above and acts on this invitation will reap benefits, even now. Imagine what it might look like for you to sow in peace this week and act on this vision. One example might be to embrace ‘blow back’ at work for the sake of a co-worker. If someone on your team makes a mistake, it can be easy to report to the boss or customer that so-and-so is responsible. What if, instead of pointing fingers, you embraced the mistake collectively and the response was more along the lines of, “we made an error”?

We sow in peace when we bear the wounds, hurts, or consequences others might face alone. We dramatize the gospel and the action of our Savior who endured the wrath of God for our sakes. What if we endured the ‘wrath’ of an irritated customer or an impatient boss for the sake of our co-workers?

JAMES 4:1-10 THE DISCIPLE & REPENTANCE

1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

*"God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble.*

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Listen

Read this passage out loud.

No really, read it out loud.

Read it with a strong voice. Read out with a loud voice.

James is past the pleasantries by the time he gets to chapter 4. He is calling for repentance. Read it like you think James would have read it if he showed up to one of the churches with this letter.

Imagine

The seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher Spinoza observed: *“I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion—namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men—should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.”* Unfortunately in some regards, the Christians that Spinoza observed in Europe over 300 years ago are not much different than we Christians today in America.

As you look around at the Church in America, your local congregation, and even your Missional Community, what are the “fights and quarrels among you”?

What would it take to get from Spinoza's observation and our reality to Jesus' prayer?

John 17:20–21 (NIV): My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Feel

Much of our prayers are essentially asking for happiness, health, and ease of life. How would living into verses 7-10 make you feel?

Embody

Think about a fight or argument you are in with someone right now.

Instead of focusing on them, take a piece of paper and draw a tree with bad fruit. Draw a sun above. The other person is heat from the sun. You are responsible for your bad fruit. That is the over-desires that wage war inside you. Now draw some roots on your tree.

What's going on in the root system of your heart?

What does repentance look like that you might be able to bear good fruit even if the heat keeps beating down?

JAMES 4:11-12

THE DISCIPLE & JUDGEMENT

11 Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

Listen

What is slander? “The word rendered ‘slander’ is commonly used in the LXX (Septuagint or Greek translation of the OT), as well as in other Second Temple Jewish literature to describe both public false accusation or disparagement and more private or covert grumbling.” (McCartney, 220)

How is this warning being offered by James connected to his big concern with sins of speech? How do false accusations promote disorder and other evil practices? (James 3:16b)

List possible motives for speaking about others slanderously or in judgment. Draw on the rest of the book of James as you consider potential motives.

These false accusations of others once again signal the disconnect that James is concerned with throughout the letter. True faith results in action. Wisdom from above produces godly fruit. A double minded man lacks faith. A double tongued man speaks blessing one moment and utters slander or false accusations the next. Slander and judgment cannot be true of those who not only know the command to love your neighbor, but also obey it.

Practice makes perfect or brings the life of the faithful disciple to maturity, especially the practice of controlling our tongues. Is James eliminating any opportunity and responsibility to correct others? Read James 5:19-20 and wrestle with how to marry the two.

Imagine

Imagine how destructive the power of a false accusation is that leads to imprisonment. There are cases in which people have been falsely accused and condemned. How hard would it be to recover from such an evil and injustice? How liberating would it feel to have the sentence reversed and punishment undone? I mention this extreme example to remind us of the amount of harm false accusations have and conversely how great the liberating power of truth is.

The example above is certainly hyperbolic, but if we apply the reality of the forces behind false accusations and true speech then we are much more likely to take our words more seriously.

When we disparage others and consider it our role to let others know the evil they have done. We implicitly invite others in the community to exclude them and join our judgment game, which may not be rooted in the truth. Even if the accusation is true, it does not build up and is therefore inconsistent with the command to love.

To plant this in the context of the church, I want to imagine how the elimination of slander would promote unity within a local congregation. How many friendships and small groups would have stayed intact? Then I want you to expand this to the big 'C' Church and imagine what the elimination of slander and a judgmental spirit would have changed the history of splits in the Church. How many divisions could or would have been avoided?

Feel

If slander and judgmental speech doesn't bring you back to high school, then I don't know what will. This form of speech was one of the most important tools for avenging grievances and excluding people from 'your' group. It was and is a savage world in this respect. Were you ever impaled by the sharp spear of false accusation? How did it make you feel?

This will be an exercise in navigating the memory banks, but if we can recall an experience of this kind the feeling is likely to be vivid. As adults we have improved our coping mechanisms, so to remember our younger, more vulnerable self, provides a more potent reminder of the painful power of slander.

How much do you long for inclusion? We were made for it. Moreover, we were intended to find it in the family of God. It is to be a safe place to belong. But, the church is often guilty of talking poorly about one another. This adds another layer to the pain we experience through malevolent speech. Have you ever experienced exclusion in the church? Has it ever been on the basis of false accusations? How did this make you feel?

Embody

Keep it closed. Yes, that is in reference to your mouth. Whenever a critical, hateful, or judgmental thought arises do not let it be voiced by your lips. You probably remember when your mom would admonish you along these lines. She might say something like, “if you don’t have anything nice to say, then don’t say anything at all”. This is a good policy, but it only addresses the fruit and we need to get to the root.

Repent. We keep our lips sealed, because we know it is not right to talk this way about others. While this desire to slander or speak poorly of others manifests itself on the tongue, it actually springs up from the heart. Our hearts are twisted and desire evil. Our hearts are jealous, selfish, and envious. Therefore, we must repent whenever foul speech about another comes into our heads or out of our lips. We must lay an axe to the root of our sin. We are either killing sin or being killed by it.

Gospel affirmation, not hateful accusation. We can and ought to replace polluted speech with pure speech for God our Father accepts pure religion (1:27). This is our opportunity to speak the truth of the gospel to one another instead of speaking lies.

JAMES 4:13-5:6

THE DISCIPLE & BUSINESS

13 Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. 17 If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.

5 Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. 2 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. 4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

Listen

Before reading this section of James, begin by offering a short prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to illuminate the words on the page so that we might align our lives more faithfully in the True Story & become complete disciples of Jesus. Your prayer could be something like this:

Holy Spirit, we know you are active and desiring to speak to us. You help put Jesus on display so that our lives might better reflect Him. Would you help us hear from this text and repent of the ways we have not faithfully been your people, so that with joy we may serve you until King Jesus returns.

Notice how in verses 4:13 and 5:1, James is trying to really get the listener's attention. Like Jesus, who would often begin his teaching by saying: "*Truly, truly, I say to you*" (*John 3:3 ESV*), James is signifying to us the listeners that we need to hear this wisdom as disciples of Jesus.

So who and what does James want to address in this section? James is turning his attention in this section to the wealthy and their exploited laborers. In 4:13-17, the words "wealthy" or "rich" are not used and yet this text indicates that James is talking to this group of people because of their assumed mobility to travel to any city and make business however they would like. Mobility and viable business resources are key tenets of wealth. Secondly, 5:1-6 explores the ramifications of the wealthy's lifestyle and its effect on the laborer and poor in their midst. To exclaimate this section, James ends with a visceral image of the wealthy being fattened for the day of slaughter like an animal would be. Hopefully, with this illustration, he has gotten the reader's attention.

But the question you might ask is: What does this passage have to do with me? I am part of a middle-class family, working a ordinary 9-5pm job, living in a meek neighborhood and holding to a tight budget. Our hope in this week's learning is that we would explore the ways we may contribute to systems of injustice unknowingly and how the complete disciple of Jesus leverages their resources and privilege for the sake of the marginalized.

Imagine

Leading justice advocate Bryan Stevenson says: “The opposite of poverty is not wealth - the opposite of poverty is justice.” I want you to imagine the overwhelmingly reality facing the world of wealthy & poverty and how injustice is the river that runs between them.

Statistically, the richest one percent of the world own more than half of the world’s wealth (oxfam.org). How does this happen and have laborers been exploited as a means to this end? The answer is a resounding yes.

As we think about how we might resonate and repent of the ways we have been complicit in acquiring wealth at the expense of the exploited worker, we want to take you through a short history of wealth and injustice in America.

In the United States of America, we have a history of white privilege and slavery. However, often lacking in our conversation about slavery is how it is so intricately tied to economics and wealth. On the shores of the Ivory Coast, merchants and businessmen otherwise known as slave traders, began an economic system of capturing, enslaving and transporting Africans like goods across the Atlantic Ocean known as the Middle Passage. Once arriving on the East Coast, those who survived the journey would be analyzed, evaluated, priced, and then auctioned to the plantation owners. Often separated from their other family members, these Africans would spend the rest of their lives working the fields of America from sun up to sun down every day of their life. Even after slavery ended, these exploited workers were not given an opportunity to buy land and begin acquiring wealth for themselves. They were stuck in vicious cycle of poverty.

Even in the early 1900's when the North piously looked down upon the South's segregation, they could enjoy their orange juice each morning because of an exploited worker in the South working the same fields for the same owner as when slavery ruled the land. This whole system of exploitation was what created the American economy and a system of white landowners acquiring wealth at the expense of the laborers.

We might believe ourselves to be removed from this system of injustice and exploitation but the reality of our world and economy is that many of the same exploitative practices continue today to meet the demand of the buyers and the greed of the suppliers. For example, much of our produce is picked and harvested by underpaid migrant workers around the world, that t-shirt you bought from H&M has a good chance of being made by a underaged worker in East Asia, your retirement investment account could be silently holding a high stake of stock in a private prison corporation, and the land and neighborhood that you currently live in could have a housing clause from the 1960's that prevented a person of color to moving into your neighborhood in fear of the housing value dropping (which is statistically and scientifically unfounded). All of this history demands our attention and an appropriate emotional response. Hence, the third part of our LIFE framework: "Feel".

Feel

If you are a person of privilege, which would entail being white and economically secure (*i.e. you don't have to worry about your next meal or where you are going to sleep tonight*), would you for a moment put yourself in the shoes of a marginalized person in your midst.

What kind of anxiety, hopelessness, despair, and anger would be present in being stuck in a system of exploitation with no way out? What would it be like to be a young migrant worker in the fields, a single-mother with two kids working three part-time jobs, a foster kid who aged out of the system and never received a home to belong to, or a person of color who is followed in a store by a worker thinking you will steal something?

It might be easy to quickly assess how your current economic situation and life setting was by your own hard work and effort, but within the scenarios listed above, the equation isn't quite that simple. As Dr. King says so beautifully, *"It's alright to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps."*

If you are a person of color or economic insecurity, feel and hear the weight of the Father's words to His people facing oppression in the True Story:

"The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians..." (Exodus 3:7-8a)

Embody

Our first response to this passage could be shame and resulting anger that this isn't true about us and that we are decent people who are not exploiting anybody with our business practices. However, what would it look like in the safety of the Father's embrace to look at some of the ugly parts of our country's history and also our implicit contribution to injustice in our world today? Yahweh is the God of justice all throughout

His Scripture calling the oppressor to repentance and hearing the cries of the oppressed (Exodus 2:23-25). May we also, because of the good news of Jesus' victory over our sin and oppression, walk in Yahweh's way. Here are some practical ways we can EMBODY this passage in James to become complete disciples:

1. **Lament:** What would it look like for your MC, your family, or for you as an individual to lament the ways throughout history people have been exploited for economic gain? Maybe specific moments in history or stories come to mind that you can allow your heart to be broken by without rushing too fast to fix it.
2. **Examine:** What would it look like for you and your family to think about your relationship with wealth? Note the ways our routines, rhythms, and emotions are often fixated by budgets, savings accounts, and investments. What would it look like to think of one sacrificial way you could use your money this month?
3. **See & Hear:** What would it look like for you and your family to see the marginalized and exploited worker in your midst? Who is somebody you pass everyday that could be a person victimized by injustice and exploitation at the gain of the wealthy? How might you see and hear their story like Yahweh does in the True Story?
4. **Goods & Services:** What would it look like for you to resist businesses and companies known for exploiting workers? What if you refused to buy clothes from a certain company, refused to invest your money in companies known for exploiting others, or thought about how a product's "cheapness" could be a signifier of exploitation somewhere along the production line?

JAMES 5:7-12

THE DISCIPLE & TRIALS

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

12 Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.

Listen

The command of this passage begins with to “be patient”. All throughout the Psalms, God’s people are called to be “wait” on Yahweh for his deliverance and presence. To practice patience in the midst of this passage we will do two things:

- (1) Read the passage slowly.
- (2) Set a timer on your phone for 10 minutes and sit still in a posture of receiving before God.

From James's condemnation of the exploitive business leaders, he now turns his attention to those who are suffering from the oppression. In more broad terms, James is encouraging his listeners to see that their suffering and injustice will not be forever and that Jesus is coming to make all things right.

To communicate this point and hope, James uses the imagery of a farmer waiting for rain. Incredibly, the idea of rain is a theme that runs all throughout the Scripture showcasing God's faithfulness and presence (*Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24; Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23; Zech. 10:1*). As possibly a modern Arizona parallel, it is like us waiting until Thanksgiving where the temperatures finally surrender. But the question for us in this parallel is how will we embrace the three-digit temperatures from May through October? Additionally, James gives us the example of Job as what it looks like to embrace unbearable suffering.

Imagine

If we are to read this passage as linked with last week's study, we realize that James is trying to encourage the church community to stand firm in this midst of being exploited by merchants and the wealthy because the Judge is coming to make all things right. However, for many of us, we might not completely experience obvious oppression from the wealthy around us. In fact, we might more identify with the wealthy and oppressor than the oppressed. So what do we do with all of this?

We should feel compelled to identify in relationship with the oppressed in our midst and those who are suffering and imagine their lived experience and share in their hurt with them. We need to have friendship with those at the margins. The Apostle Paul encouraged us to identify and empathize with people of the body who are rejoicing but also suffering: *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”* (1 Cor 12:26).

For a moment, I want you to imagine the scenario of faithful brothers and sisters around the world who face systemic, government directed persecution because of their allegiance to Jesus. Imagine the reality of living in fear each day for your own life and the family members in your care.

How would you encourage them to be “patient” in their suffering and encourage them in their faithfulness as we know the King is returning?

Feel

For most of us as Western Christians, we might not face exploitation or persecution like many brothers and sisters do around the world. However, we do experience suffering like Job that seems unexplainable. We could have the experience of developing a disease, losing a family member, battling a crippling, unannounced depression, losing our job, growing up in an abusive home, experiencing domestic violence, etc. Where does your suffering reveal itself? All of us have suffering in some form or way because of the brokenness of God’s good creation.

Now, with your suffering in mind, how might God desire to meet you in that suffering? Often, God's presence in our suffering is not simply to cure but to show deep care. Would you allow the Father to be with you in your hurt?

Embody

Henri Nouwen says, “Cure without care makes us preoccupied with quick changes, impatient and unwilling to share each other’s burden. And so cure can often become offending instead of liberating” (*A Spirituality of Living*).

Identify the person in your life experiencing deep suffering. What might it look like for you to embody care not just cure for that person suffering? What if that person’s desire in their suffering is not simply for you to alleviate and fix but to show compassion, understanding, and a listening ear?

JAMES 5:13-18

THE DISCIPLE & PRAYER

13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Listen

Today for your reading, we are going to practice an ancient technique to listen to God's address to us through this passage. The practice is called: *Lectio Divina (Divine Reading)*. We believe the relational God of the Scripture desires to make himself known to His people and two of the primary ways He does that is through Scripture and prayer. *Lectio Divina* masterfully combines prayer and reading Scripture together. So as you listen to God today, follow these simple steps with this passage:

1. Reading: Read James 5:13-18 slowly. Once you finish reading through it one time, read it a second time. As you read, reflect on what word, phrase, or verse is brought to your attention.

2. Reflection: What was the word, phrase, or verse that God fixed your attention on? What do you think God is trying to say to you through where your attention has been captured? Give yourself space to ponder and reflect.
3. Response: Offer in prayer the word, phrase, or verse that came to mind. Ask the Father, Son & Spirit to reveal to you how you might be called to respond with faithful living in the True Story.
4. Rest: Leave this time of reading and prayer refreshed, knowing you have been adopted by the Father, affirmed by the Son, and empowered by the Spirit to be everything God has made you to be.

Writer and leader Parker Palmer says, “Christians are often ‘functional atheists’ who believe ‘that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me’”. The reality of this statement can be so clearly seen in our often sporadic practice of prayer, only speaking to God in times of crisis, despair, or neediness. Hence, prayer is one of the hardest practices for those wanting to become *complete disciples*.

As James begins to close his letter, he reminds us that prayer should permeate our entire lives. As this passage displays, prayer is how we partner with God to see ourselves, our communities, and our world transformed. Master disciple Dallas Willard says, “Prayer is talking with God about what we are doing together”.

However, as Westerners, we often see prayer as simply a nuisance to our work and even God's work in the world. Richard Bauckham says about the practice of prayer in the West, "Prayer has always been difficult, but the difficulty of prayer in the modern western world has its own specific profile. The fundamental reason why prayer became difficult in the modern period was humanity's modern self-image as those who, especially through technology, have gained control over the world. Rather like affluence, this assumed position of mastery over the world has deluded modern people into trusting their own capacity to achieve all human ends and has promoted a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency to which prayer is alien. Whereas petitionary prayer is recognition of the limits of human abilities, the modern age has encouraged the sense that all problems have human solutions and that all human desires may in the end be realizable by human means, especially through the unlimited potentialities of technology."

For us to become complete disciples we need to drink deeply from these words of James and be transformed as faithful True Story participants. And through prayer, the troubled brought shalom (5:13), the sick were made well (5:14-15), the confessed sinner was forgiven (5:15) and the heavens opened (5:17-18).

Imagine

For a moment think about all of the Jesus-followers of in your life. Which of them create space for you with a non-anxious presence that helps you leave refreshed and encouraged? Would it be safe to say the reason you experience this presence from them is that they have been rooted deeply in a posture of prayer? Are not the most transformed among us the ones who have deeply communed with God through prayer so that they may be a blessing to the world?

Now, with this all in mind, use your imagination to write out a picture of what your life might look like if you were deeply saturated in prayer.

How would you describe your presence, your relationships, your home, and even your city if this was true?

Feel

Often there is an emotion or feeling embedded behind our lack of prayer. What might that emotion be for you?

Could it be that you are afraid of what God might say to you thinking he is only wanting to condemn or punish? Could it be that you don't believe you are even worthy of talking to Him because of your own shame? Could it be that you are angry with God for the circumstances of your life? Could it be that you are unsure if He actually even exists or desires to hear from you? Could it be simply that you are indifferent and don't really care to talk to Him?

Take a moment to reflect on what emotion or feeling is attached to your lack of desire or practice or prayer. Now, bring that emotion before the Father and ask him to speak into that feeling.

How might God want to speak into that emotion and for you to share His warm embrace?

Embody

To embody a life saturated with prayer, here are four practices you could begin this week:

1. Daily Office

Throughout church history, the people of God have practiced regular and rhythmic times of prayer, called the Daily Office. What would it look like for you to set aside three specific moments in your day for prayer and reflection with God?

Here is what it could practically look like:

Morning - Spend 30 minutes reading a few Psalms slowly and sitting in silence before God

Lunch - During your lunch break, take 10 minutes to reflect on the morning and how you have seen evidence of God's presence in your life

Night - Before you go to sleep, sit again for 5 minutes reflecting on your day and asking the Spirit to reveal any thoughts, words, or deeds that you need to repent of

This practice could radically change our lives and our postures toward one another.

2. Prayer for the troubled (5:13)

Who in your midst is troubled? Maybe they are distraught or in despair because of circumstances. When that person is brought to mind, pray for them.

3. Prayer for the sick and healing (5:14-16a)

Who in your midst is sick, either physically, or struggling with an addiction or destructive behavior? How might you gather around that person asking for our good Father to make them whole?

4. Prayer for the unbelievable (5:16b-18)

What is something that you believe could never happen? Could it be for someone who is in active rebellion against God to be reconciled and restored? Could it be a sickness or disease that cannot be shaken? Could it be for the city to be filled with the beauty and goodness of God so that all people may flourish? Petition Yahweh to act in restoring His broken creation and creatures, because in partnership with God, prayer changes reality.

JAMES 5:19-20

THE DISCIPLE & COMMUNITY

19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Listen

At first glance, James seems to end his letter quite abruptly. No farewell, no blessings, just some more of the same it would seem. But there is more going on. First, notice that James ends with “brothers and sisters” (*just brothers in the Greek*). This is how he began the book in 1:2 and he has addressed his hearers this way several times. Here, one last time, he addresses them. Second, in these two verses, James is essentially saying, “What I have been trying to do for you for the last 5 chapters of a letter, you do for each other in real life”.

1 John ends with, “*Dear Children, keep yourselves from idols*” (1 John 5:21). In what ways are John and James’ ending similar? What differences do you discern?

Imagine

Sally had been noticing something different about her best friend Claire for some time. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but for the last few weeks, something just didn’t seem quite right. She had asked her a few times at Missional Community gatherings if she was okay. Claire would smile and nod and disarm Sally, then change the subject. One night, their missional community was meeting at Claire’s house.

They were doing a Mexican fiesta for food and then talking through the four questions with a Psalm. As they sat down to study the Psalm together, Sally had the sudden and quite urgent need to use the restroom. She should have known better than to eat those enchiladas and the nachos with jalapeños! As she raced down the hall to the bathroom, she found the door locked and the sweet voice of a child saying, “I’ll be out in a second!” Without a second thought, Sally darted for Claire’s bedroom so she could use the master bathroom. As she sat there thanking God for homes with two working bathrooms, she noticed something on the counter. Once she finished doing her business, she went over to the counter, washed her hands, and picked up the pill bottle. Two years earlier, Claire had thrown her back out and needed some pain killers. But she had just taken them for a couple weeks until the flare up went away, or so Claire had said. Without realizing what she was doing, Sally opened the medicine cabinet to her right and was stunned to see several bottles of pain killers all with the letters “oxy” in the name.

In light of James 5:19-20, what should Sally do?

Feel

What does it feel like when someone calls you out on sin?

What is the experience like of going through repentance?

Embody

How could you obey this passage this week?

CONCLUSION

Colossians 1:28 says, “*He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*” This has been our goal for this guide, for the people of Missio Dei to be presented before King Jesus as complete disciples, lacking nothing (*James 1:4*).

Our hope is that this guide has created a group of pilgrims journeying together with the wisdom of Christ, in the face of a culture settling for Jesus’ tourism. Would this guide only be the beginning of lifelong apprenticeship to Jesus where no part of our lives remain untouched by the True Story. Be sent out with this benediction:

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you:

wherever he may send you;

may he guide you through the wilderness:

protect you through the storm;

may he bring you home rejoicing:

at the wonders he has shown you;

may he bring you home rejoicing:

once again into our doors.



MISSIO DEI
COMMUNITIES