

This message begins a new series, which will be a verse by verse expository study of the epistle or letter from James to the church. We've titled this series "Pure Religion." James is a small book nestled between Hebrews and Peter.

Although James is a short letter, it is full of pronouncements. In fact, 50 percent of the verses in James contain an imperative statement. I read about a pastor who wanted to take his church through James and was informed by an attendee of his church that he didn't like James because it was "too bossy." James has something to say to everyone. And one particular imperative statement stood out to me this week. In chapter three, James says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." That's not the most comforting imperative statement in this book for me, who is beginning this preaching series.

Out of all the profound insights we will learn over the next several weeks, there is one that for many of us who have read James before will recognize. In fact, if I were to ask you out on the patio after the service to boil down what you know about James' letter, I think some of you might say that James is where it says faith without good works is dead. And you would be right. The last verse of James chapter two says, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

Some readers of this letter over the centuries are critical because James rarely mentions His Savior Jesus Christ, and he doesn't seem to clearly lay out the message of salvation through Jesus Christ in his letter the way that the Apostle Paul does so clearly in his letters. But James complements Paul in this way.

James, in his letter, answers the question, "How is this true and saving faith recognized?" It is recognized by its fruits shown through good works.

One major theme we will unpack in James is, what should be our response to trials and suffering in our lives? Our natural response when someone is suffering is something like, "Hang in there," or "You poor thing." James has nothing to do with that. He gives practical help to those suffering. Another major theme is what should be our response to poverty and riches in our own lives and in this broken world in which we live? Another theme, how do we manage our speech to edify and not tear down? Another theme is how do we access true wisdom because we will need wisdom when going through suffering. James is essentially a training manual on how to practice our faith in daily life.

I read this week and confirmed with someone in our Higher Power Ministry that Dale Allison, who came up with the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous based his principles on this letter we are studying together. In fact, Allison thought seriously about naming Alcoholics Anonymous the James Club instead.

Another overarching theme is revealed when James answers the question, "What is pure religion?" James says this with clarity, and it should convict every one of us.

**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. James 1:27**

So let's gear up because we are about to study the words of a leader who understood the essence of pure religion. Let's get equipped to embrace pure religion. Here are James' first words to us.

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, (James 1:1a)**

So what do we know about this James? James was a common name in the first century as it is today. His letter opens in a common style with a traditional reference to the sender. The general belief for a letter to open like this means that the audience already knows who this James is. So this James was well-known, even famous, to his audience and easily identified from all the other people named James they knew.

To narrow down who wrote this book, we can narrow it down to three well-known men named James. Was it James, the Son of Zebedee, the brother of the Apostle John? Not likely, James, the brother of John, was murdered by Herod Agrippa, recorded in Acts chapter 12. He was actually the first apostle of the long string of apostles that would be martyred. Then there was a James known as James the Less. How would you like that title? Sometimes I feel like Dan the Less? Do you ever feel less? Well, James the Less was one of the original 12 disciples chosen by Jesus, but there is no strong evidence that James the Less wrote this letter.

The strongest evidence is that the James who wrote this letter was actually Jesus' little brother. Well, his half-brother, biological offspring from his father Joseph and mother, Mary. Imagine what it must have been like to grow up in the shadow of his big brother?

Talk about pressure, talk about competitive juices, talk about a need for attention. I wonder how many times growing up, James

heard his parents or his school teachers or coaches, "How come you can't be more like Jesus?" He was just James. He wasn't James Christ. Then you think about those times when a son goes to his parents with a problem. I picture James going to his mom and dad for advice. And you wonder what would his parents, Mary and Joseph, say to him? I think they would look at each other and kind of shrug and say, "James, what would Jesus do?" I imagine that counsel had to get old.

So if you would give me liberty, instead of asking, "WWJD - What Would Jesus Do?" Let's ask a fellow servant of Jesus, "WWJD - What would James do?" And the answer is James would practice pure religion. In fact, that's our big idea this morning.

## **We Practice Pure Religion When We Identify as Servants**

And in the one verse, we will unpack in this introduction we see as a primer on practicing pure religion. Because at the heart of pure religion is being a servant.

### **James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, (James 1:1a)**

James' self-awareness gives us insight into the heart of the man. What is most telling about the heart of James is what he doesn't say about himself. As the brother of Jesus, James could have said, "You all know me by my name. I am James, but lately, I'm being called James the Just because of my leadership decisions in the church. Please refer to me as James the Just because after all, it was I who came from the sacred womb of Mary. It was I who is the congenital sibling of Christ, and it is I who is his brother. I was his number one confidant. James doesn't play the nepotism card. James doesn't give himself some fancy highfalutin title like James the Just. He refers to himself as just James. A fellow servant just like his readers.

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..." In the first century, the word "servant" was most often translated slave. When I hear the term slave two images come to my mind, 19th-century plantations in the American South and 21st-century Sex Trafficking on our Peninsula. And in the same way in James' world, there is more than one image that came to people's minds when they heard the term slave.

In James' day, there were slaves who lived very well under emperors and kings, but they were still under their authority. This is an image of a slave who was granted authority by their lord and master, like Joseph, who was under Pharaoh. James saw himself as a slave who was granted authority from his master to serve his master's kingdom from a high and influential place through his gifts of leadership and through his commission from His master to compose and deliver a perfectly written letter to his master's kingdom citizens.

But another image of slave comes to mind. After studying this man, I think James also identified himself as a slave in the lowliest,

least important form as well. In James, we see a humble and surrendered person. How ironic that on pedigree, you couldn't get any higher than to be the brother of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But James saw himself as conquered. He saw himself as one compelled to relinquish his will, his life, his control over his destiny in complete dependence on his master.

There was another form of slavery in the first century. This was very common in James' world. It's the image of an indentured servant. The idea is that James, the servant, voluntarily comes under the authority to serve in harsh circumstances and all the while looking forward to a promised future blessing. To serve for a season, in this place awaiting a promised freedom, a bright future, a heavenly home that his brother and Savior has prepared in advance for him. So a heavenly-minded James served.

So who did James serve? James identifies as a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. James' word choice in the Greek tells us that he sees that he is under the equal authority of both His Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is an early reference in Scripture to separate but equal persons, both Father and Son, separate persons but of one essence, one God in two persons. What an amazing declaration to be coming from the little brother of Jesus.

So what can we learn from James about how to practice pure religion? Our answer from verse one is that James was purely religious because he identified above all as a servant. A servant of God and Jesus Christ.

## **The Purely Religious Serve God and Jesus**

When we think about the word religious, we need to cut through all the peripheral stuff that comes to our minds and zero in on what does it look like to serve God. We need to think deeply and think about our fears of what we risk, and what we will be called to sacrifice in order to serve.

When we think about what it means for each of us practice pure religion by serving God and Jesus Christ, we have fears. Even the most devout and mature have fears. Maybe it's a fear of failure, or a fear of humiliation if others see us fail, or a fear of losing out on "me time." It could be a fear of losing control. Or a fear of being challenged. Do I really want God to have control over me and make real change in me? Fear of what God might remove from my life to make space for me to serve.

So how do we overcome these fears? Trust. Look for the opportunities God provides. Step up, see the opportunity God provides in your sphere of influence, step forward, and take action to serve God and Jesus. Remember the question James answers in his letter, "How is true saving faith recognized?" Answer: By its fruits shown in good works.

So we know James' words are for us today, but we can better understand James' letter when we understand who his first-century audience was.

**To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:  
(James 1:1b)**

Well, his first-century audience understood who the 12 tribes were. James is making a reference to the 12 tribes of Israel that Joshua led into the Promised land. The land God gave to their ancestors, land that was conquered and divided among the 12 tribes. That's the clue to his audience. James' first-century audience was made up primarily of ethnic Jews who had become Christians. His audience was people like himself. James, like his brother, was from the tribe of Judah.

James' audience understood the word scattered. Their ancestors had been scattered by invasions from foreign armies, and his audience was scattered. Their lives were hard. Their world was tough and cruel. They felt the weight of life's pressures. They felt the lure of the world's temptations to conform to the pagan cultures around them.

His heart to serve God and Jesus led him to serve people. James knew that they needed something to unite them, to connect them, to equip them, and to let them know they are loved. They were waiting for heaven, but they needed encouragement in the here and now. So, if we really want to be Purely Religious, we serve people.

**The Purely Religious Serve the People**

The purely religious serve orphans and widows and anyone else who is scattered. God's word unites those who are scattered. The good news of Christ is that through his sacrifice, we are united. I love the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:5 that no matter where we are scattered, Christ and His Word unites us.

**There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4-6**

James saw his letter as a way to unite those who are scattered, to connect those who feel alone, and to equip those who need help. I think there is a great application for us who desire to be purely religious this morning. What step can each of us take to unite the scattered around you? What step can each of us take to show them pure religion?

What step can you make to connect those who feel alone?

What step can you make to resource those who are lacking?

What step can you make to show love to those who are discouraged?

This past week, I visited a CPCer in the hospital, recovering from major surgery. Her surgery doesn't get more major than that. I saw her in the ICU, and she said, God must have something more for me to let me live through this. Right before her surgery, she said to me, "Pastor, I've got good reliable people lined up in my ministry to serve my people out on the streets while I recover."

Through this woman, the most scattered are seeing pure religion. She has a ministry to unite, connect, and equip and love the most scattered. God's not done using his servant yet. And you know what, now CPC can show her pure religion in her long recovery.

And there is one more word in this verse, this introduction to pure religion. The word is Greetings.

Greetings (James 1:1c): A simple word in English, but one that is full of rich meaning in Greek. It means to be joyful or be of good cheer. Or we might translate it as cheer up. It's a pastoral word for those who are scattered.

James' audience is people in places of crisis; weighed down by the pressures of life. His audience would know that when James says, "Greetings," he is saying, "buck up" or "cheer up." Let James' letter and all his commands shape your imaginations regarding your trials, your speech, and your money.

If you are poor, be set free from the driven and obsessive pursuit of money and power on earth. Set your eyes on heaven. For the rich watch out for the sins of pride and self-sufficiency. Don't imitate the wealthy in the world around you, but hear these words in a posture of humility. So as we study, be of good cheer.

I'll speak a little more about James and his own faith journey. He served God. He served people, and he served the church. It seems these days it's fashionable for some to be negative about the church as an institution. Some feel we can even practice pure religion better outside the organized church.

In Acts 12, we see that James had become a leader in the church. When Peter had miraculously escaped from prison, and he went to his friends, one of the first things he said was, "Go to tell James and the brothers what God has done."

In Galatians, the Apostle Paul said James was a pillar of the church. James served as an elder in the church in Jerusalem.

**Follow James' example.**

**The Purely Religious Serve the Church**

James is a man who loved the church. He saw the church as the hope of the world. He got in and rolled up his sleeves and jumped into messes, solved problems, and led alongside other leaders. Historians tell us that as the church struggled with complacency, James began living in the temple courts.

Historians record that James prayed continually for the church. He prayed for repentance, repentance from a complacent faith. He got the name camel knees because of the callouses he grew from kneeling in prayer. He saw the church with all of its faults as the Bride of Christ. And he served the Bride.

I want to read from Acts chapter 15 about something called the Council at Jerusalem. The church had a problem, and the leaders needed to meet to hear what was going on, and pray, and listen

and figure out how to align with Jesus on the issue. The council took place in 48 AD about 20 years after Jesus' resurrection.

Here was the problem James and the elders were facing. There was one group of Ethnic Jews who became Christians and they said that all Christians must follow all the external laws of Moses, including circumcision. And there were Gentile Christians who had converted out of paganism and no ties with Judaism or its traditions. The question was this: Should Gentile converts be forced to take on Jewish traditions like circumcision to follow Christ? I think a lot of uncircumcised Gentile Christian men were pretty interested in the outcome of this issue. I'll bet they were praying for the elders.

So, in Acts 15, we read that Paul and Barnabas were out on the mission field, sharing about Jesus and Gentiles are being saved. They came back to Jerusalem because they wanted the elders to direct them on whether these new believers should become Jewish.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up.

**"Brothers," he said, "listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this..." (Acts 15: 12-15)**

James knew the Scriptures. He applies Scripture to the problem. He quotes from the Old Testament prophet, Amos, who prophesied about the future that at the second coming of Jesus, the temple would be rebuilt and in the days leading up to his second coming, God would gather Gentiles who seek the Lord, and they would come to faith and build up the church.

"After this I will return

and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,

and I will restore it,

that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,

even all the Gentiles who bear my name,

says the Lord, who does these things'—

things known from long ago." (Acts 15: 16-18)

So with the authority of a servant of God and Jesus Christ, and with a heart to engage and build up His Church, James came to a

decision that he could defend with scripture that set the strategy for all missionary work from that day forward and even today.

**"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. (Acts 15: 19)**

And I thank God that the church didn't make it difficult for me to turn to God.

Those who practice pure religion love their church. They serve at their church. They don't back away from Jesus' church even when it gets messy, and it always does.

**So what would James want us to do?**

Celebrate Pure Religion – praise pure religion when you see it. Display it for others to see. Thank God for it.

Practice Pure Religion – For many of us here who identify today as servants who seek to practice pure religion. Don't be discouraged. Keep on, keeping on. Even if no one else sees it, God sees it. Even if no one else seems to value it, God values it. Even when if no one thanks you for it, God rewards pure religion.

Serving is hard. Serving is messy. Serving is a sacrifice. But serving is a living sacrifice. Serving is beautiful. Serving is our worship.

Take Your Next Step to Practice Pure Religion by Serving.

If you feel conviction today about practicing pure religion, explore some of those options right in front of you - those in your sphere of influence out in the community and those options right here at CPC.

On June 7, 1891, British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, gave his final sermon. This was the last of 3600 sermons Spurgeon preached in his career.

**"Every [person] must serve somebody: we have no choice as to that fact. Those who have no master are slaves to themselves. Depend upon it, you will either serve Satan or Christ. Either self or the Savior. You will find sin, self, Satan, and the world to be hard masters; but if you wear the uniform of Christ, you will find him so meek and lowly of heart that you will find rest unto your souls .... If you could see our Captain (our Jesus), you would go down on your knees and beg him to let you enter the ranks of those who follow him. It is heaven to serve Jesus."**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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