

James: Faith That Works – Part 1

Faith That Holds Fast – James 1:1-12

Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – January 11, 2025

Introduction

- This morning, we are starting our new series in the book of James, a book that is short, direct, and intensely practical. James doesn't beat around the bush. He doesn't ease into topics. He goes straight for the jugular and to the heart of what it looks like to follow Jesus in real life.
- James is not looking for a faith that merely *sounds right*. He is looking for faith that *shows up*. That's why we're calling this series *Faith That Works*.
- Before we jump into the text, it's helpful, especially in week one, to understand who James is and what this book is really about, because that shapes our understanding and helps us to clearly hear everything he says.
- James is the half-brother of Jesus. Joseph was his father, and Mary was his mother. He grew up in the same household as Jesus. He watched Him live. He heard Him teach. And yet, during Jesus's earthly ministry, James did *not* believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The Gospels are honest about that. Even Jesus's own family struggled to understand who He really was (see Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Mark 3:20-21, 31-35; John 7:5; 1 Cor 15:7).
- Everything changed for James after the resurrection. The risen Christ appeared personally to James, and from that moment on, James became a believer, a leader, and eventually the recognized lead elder of the church in Jerusalem.
- He was known for wisdom, integrity, and deep concern for how *believers actually lived out their faith*. Church history tells us James was so devoted to prayer that his knees were calloused from kneeling.
- That matters, because James does not write like a distant theologian. He writes like a pastor. This letter is not abstract theology. It is pastoral instruction for people he loves and feels responsible for.
- James writes to believers who were scattered because of persecution. They were displaced, pressured, and unsettled. Many had lost stability, community, and security. They were trying to live faithfully in circumstances they did not choose and that were difficult.
- So this is not a book written to comfortable Christians. It is written to believers under pressure. That's why James feels so practical. He assumes his readers already know the basics of the gospel. What he's concerned about is whether that faith is actually shaping their lives.
- So, as we move through this book, you'll notice the book of James sounds a lot like the book of Proverbs, and a lot like the teachings of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. He jumps from topic to topic, applying truth to lives. James is no-nonsense; he dives in and addresses one subject after another, hitting us with truth in rapid-fire succession. So get comfortable and buckle in, we are going on a powerful and pointed ride that will land us closer to Christ and prepare us to be powerful and persevering, faith-in-action type of Christians.
- Over and over again, James presses one central question: **Is your faith real, and if it is, does it show up in how you live?**
- And James will not let us separate what we say we believe from how we actually live. So here's a sentence I want us to come back to again and again in this series:

Real faith doesn't just believe the truth—it lives the truth.

- That's the lens we'll use as we walk through this book together. And James begins right where many of us live, in the middle of pressure, uncertainty, and hardship, by teaching us how real faith responds when life is hard.
- So, let's open our Bibles to James chapter one (page 1043). Today, I am going to break it down, part by part, and give us one thing from each section to ponder, focus on, and put into practice. The book starts this way:

James 1:1 NIV

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

Submit Your Life Fully to Christ

- James introduces himself simply as *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. That word *servant* is important. It literally means slave. Someone who belongs entirely to another. Someone who has surrendered control.
- Now this is incredible when you remember who James is. He is the half-brother of Jesus. He is the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church. If anyone had credentials to lean on, it was James. But he does not introduce himself as “the brother of Jesus” or “the leader of the church.” He introduces himself as a servant. James teaches us something right away: **real faith begins with surrender and service, not status or rank.**
- Then he tells us who he is writing to—believers who are *scattered*. These are people who have fled for their lives because of persecution that came from claiming that Jesus is God, Lord, and King of all kings. They have lost community. They have lost homes, possessions, status, and stability. They are living as aliens and strangers in a world of darkness, difficulty, and uncertainty in circumstances they did not choose.
- This letter is not written to comfortable Christians. It is written for people asking, “How do I keep trusting God when life feels uncertain?” or “Are Jesus and Christianity worth the cost?” James begins by saying: faith that works starts with submitting your whole life to Christ, even when you don’t understand what He is doing. Jesus is Lord, He is God, and He is worthy and worth it all.
- The foundational mindset of a Christian is one who has wholly submitted their lives to Christ, no matter the circumstances, and come what may. This is the mindset that will help you to persevere regardless of trials and tribulations. James goes on to write:

James 1:2-4 NIV

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.

Choose Joy by Trusting God's Purpose

- This is a tall order that smacks us in the face right out of the chute. James says something that immediately challenges us: *Consider it joy when you face trials of many kinds.* What!?!? Now, to understand this, let's be clear about what James is **not** saying. He is **not** telling us to enjoy pain. He is **not** telling us to deny grief. He is **not** telling us to pretend suffering doesn't hurt.

- He uses the word *consider*. That is a thinking word. James is calling us to evaluate our trials through a different lens than our immediate pain and hardship. This joy is not an emotion. It is a *settled perspective* rooted in trust, trust that God is doing *something meaningful* even when circumstances are painful. That's real faith.
- James is realistic. Notice that he says *trials of many kinds*. Trials do come in many flavors. There are external trials like loss, conflict, or opposition. There are internal trials like anxiety, doubt, and temptation. Some trials come suddenly. Others linger for years, and years, and years, and years.
- James *assumes* something crucial: *Faith will be tested. Christian faith is not sheltered from hardship; it is shaped by it.* It is tested by it to prove that it is genuine (see also 1 Peter 1:6-7).
- James says these trials *test* our faith and that testing produces perseverance. Perseverance is not a dramatic burst of strength. It is steady endurance. It is faith that keeps going when quitting would be easier. It is obedience that continues when emotions run dry, and faith is not sight.
- Then James says something very important: *Let perseverance finish its work.* That tells us something about ourselves. We often want the trial to end before the work is complete. We pray for relief when God is aiming for maturity. We ask for deliverance when God is forming character. Perseverance does work in us to make us more like Jesus. And in order for there to be perseverance, there must be trials.
- James reminds us that God's goal is not simply to get us out of trials; it is to grow us through them. When perseverance is allowed to finish its work, the result is maturity and completeness—not perfection, but spiritual wholeness. God is not wasting your suffering. He is forming you.
- Real faith submits itself fully to Christ, and mature faith chooses joy by trusting God's wisdom, heart, and purpose in and through all things. Next, James instructs us that mature faith trusts God to give us His perspective and wisdom.

James 1:5-8 NIV

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.

Ask God for Wisdom with Undivided Trust

- James knows what we're thinking: *Okay, but what do I do right now?* His answer is simple and gracious: Ask God for wisdom. Wisdom is not information. It is knowing how to live faithfully in real situations. Wisdom answers questions like:
 - How do I respond without becoming bitter?
 - How do I trust God when I don't understand?
 - How do I remain faithful when I feel overwhelmed?
- James tells us what kind of God we are praying to. God gives generously. He is not annoyed by our need. He does not shame us for asking. He does not grow tired of our weakness.
- But James also gives a warning. When we ask, we must believe and not be double-minded. This is not a rebuke of honest doubt. James is not condemning questions. He is *addressing divided loyalty*.

- Divided loyalty is wanting God's wisdom while still trusting ourselves as a backup plan. It is wanting God's guidance while reserving the right to ignore it if we don't like the answer. James says that kind of faith is unstable, like a wave driven by the wind. It is like a beach ball in a wave pool, continually being bounced in different directions. Real faith is not perfect faith. It is an *undivided faith*. Faith that works chooses to trust God fully, firmly planted in the fact that God will give wisdom, even when the outcome is uncertain.
- Next, James addresses our mindset about our circumstances, both bad and good, difficult or easy, and helps us correctly understand them in the light of eternal realities.

James 1:9-11 NIV

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 wild flower. 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.

Hold Your Circumstances Lightly

- James now applies these truths to everyday realities, poverty, and wealth. To believers in humble circumstances, James reminds them of their *high position in Christ*. They may feel overlooked or insignificant, but they are known by God and are heirs of eternal life. Your present possessions or position do not determine your eternal possessions or position. Your faith is what is more important than anything and everything you can possess on this planet. And often the poor of this world are the richest in faith.
- To believers with wealth or security, James gives a warning. Do not anchor your identity in what will fade. Wealth, comfort, and stability are fragile. James uses vivid imagery of the passing flowers to remind us how quickly life can change.
- James is not condemning wealth. He is confronting *misplaced value and security*. Trials have a way of leveling the playing field. They strip away illusions of control and permanence. They remind both rich and poor of the same truth: This world is not our home. Faith that works does not cling tightly to circumstances, good or bad, because they can and will change. Mature faith, real faith, clings to Who and what matters most. It clings to Christ and the promises we have in and through Him.
- Most of us live with a quiet assumption that if we do the right things, life will stay relatively predictable. We plan. We budget. We schedule. We make responsible decisions. And none of those things is wrong.
- But every person who has paid attention has watched how quickly that sense of security can disappear. A job that felt stable suddenly ends. A diagnosis comes out of nowhere. A relationship changes unexpectedly. A financial cushion disappears faster than anyone imagined. What's striking is that these moments don't just disrupt our plans; they expose what we were trusting in and what we truly believe.
- James is not saying that money, stability, or success are sinful. He's saying they *are fragile and temporal*. They are good gifts, but terrible foundations. When life goes smoothly, it's easy to confuse God's blessings with guarantees. Trials remind us they never were.
- James is teaching us that faith that works holds circumstances loosely, not because they don't matter, *but because they don't last*. Real faith doesn't collapse when life changes, because it was never anchored to circumstances in the first place. James isn't asking us to stop planning;

he's asking us to stop pretending our plans are permanent and that we are ultimately in control.

- James hinges and anchors this passage in this profound verse, which should be on our short list for memorization:

James 1:12 NIV

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.

Persevere Because God Has Promised Life

- James brings this opening section to its pinnacle with a promise. Those who persevere under trial *will receive the crown of life*. This is not a reward for toughness. It is not payment for endurance. It is the gracious promise God gives to those who love him and remain faithful.
- James does not promise ease. He does not promise explanations. He promises *life*. Perseverance is not sustained by grit alone. It is sustained by love and hope and faith. We keep going not because we are strong, but because God is enough and He is faithful.
- There are parts of the Christian life that feel dramatic—big decisions, powerful moments, and clear answers to prayer. But most of perseverance looks very ordinary. It looks like showing up when you're tired. It looks like praying when you don't feel much like it. It looks like staying faithful when no one is applauding. It looks like continuing to trust God when the outcome is still unclear.
- James promises a *crown of life* not to the flashiest believer, but to the one who *keeps going*. Most of the people who finish well are not extraordinary in the world's eyes. They are people who kept taking the next faithful step, often quietly, often imperfectly, trusting that God was at work even when they couldn't see it.
- James reminds us that perseverance is not fueled by sheer willpower. It's fueled by a *promise*. We keep going not because we are strong, but because God has promised life, *and God keeps His promises*. Grab a promise, grab this promise, that those who have stood the test, those who love Him, will receive the crown of life, and don't stop believing.

Conclusion

- James has not asked us to deny our pain. He has taught us how to live faithfully within it. Real faith: *submits fully to Christ, chooses joy rooted in trust, asks God for wisdom, refuses divided loyalty, holds circumstances lightly, and perseveres with hope*.
- And beneath all of it is this quiet but powerful truth: **Our perseverance is not ultimately secured by how tightly we hold on to God, but by how faithfully he holds on to us.**
- That truth is especially fitting today, as we have dedicated a child with family acknowledging from the very beginning that faith is not sustained by human strength alone, but by God's faithfulness.
- James calls us to persevere, and he reminds us that we don't persevere alone. The God who promises the crown of life is the same God who holds us fast along the way. So as the choir sings, let this be our strength and our song: *When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast.*

Our prayer team is available to pray with you after the service, near the “prayer” sign at the front of the sanctuary, and in the prayer room next to the offices. Also, you can send your prayer request to prayer@crosspointrockford.com

Questions for Growth Groups

1. James introduces himself as a “servant” and writes to believers who are “scattered.”
How does knowing who James is and who he’s writing to shape the way we hear this passage?
Where do you feel pressure or instability in your life right now?
2. James tells believers to “consider it joy” when they face trials.
How is this different from pretending everything is fine or enjoying suffering? What does choosing this kind of perspective actually look like in real life?
3. James says trials test our faith and produce perseverance.
Looking back, can you see ways a difficult season shaped you spiritually? What did God form in you that you might not have chosen on your own?
4. James encourages us to ask God for wisdom rather than immediate relief.
What’s the difference between asking God to change our circumstances and asking him for wisdom within them? Which do you tend to pray for first?
5. James warns against being “double-minded” and later addresses wealth and poverty.
How do trials expose where we place our security? What are some circumstances, roles, or resources we’re most tempted to hold too tightly?
6. James promises the “crown of life” to those who persevere.
How does the promise of future life shape the way we endure present hardship? How does knowing that God “holds us fast” encourage you when your faith feels weak?
7. What is one area where you sense God calling you to persevere rather than give up right now, and how can this group pray for you this week?