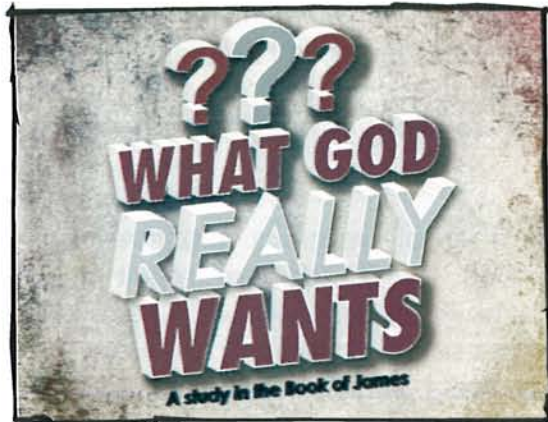


James

The Book of Practical Religion



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General Information

Author: Most probably James the brother of Jesus, who became ruler of the Jerusalem council of apostles and elders.

Time Period: After the stoning of Stephen that caused believers to flee Judea, yet before the incorporation of masses of Gentile converts.

Type of Literature: a collection of instructions on authentic religion.

The writings of the apostles generally echo or amplify the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Book of James is a perfect example of this. One of the main themes of Jesus' teachings was the need for authentic religion. Jesus constantly condemned the religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and called his own disciples to a religion that could be demonstrated by a genuine change in how one lives. The Book of James interprets Jesus' call for authenticity for the unique situations the church faced in the first century.

There are five themes of authentic religion that are scattered through the book. The trick to reading to book is to identify which verses relate to which theme. Once this is done, each theme can be explored in its entirety.

Religion God Values - 1/8

The overarching theme of The Book of James is found in the following verses:

“Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 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 1:26-27)

Questions: Is there a disconnect between what you believe and how you act? What can you do differently to bring authenticity to your life?

Here we see that all religious practices are worthless to God if they do not result in a noticeable change in the way we live. These key verses should cause us to carefully evaluate the manner of our living to see if our lives are in harmony with our religious professions. Yet we can also be greatly encouraged to see that when faith is put into action, the result is a religion that God deeply values.

Enduring Trials - 1/15

James 1:1-26 and 4:10-11

Shortly after Jesus' resurrection, the church was persecuted by the religious authorities in Jerusalem. After the stoning of Stephen (see Acts 7), many believers fled to other parts of the world. This is why James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” This persecution came as a surprise to new converts, who assumed that because they believed in Jesus, their lives would only improve.

Today, Christians around the world face similar circumstances. When we are persecuted, we often doubt whether God is with us. But trouble and persecution are the very means by which God strengthens the church. When we endure, we come out on the other side stronger than we were before.

Questions:

Have you ever faced a trial because of your faith? How did it change you? How can you see God's hand at work in it?

Controlling the Tongue - 2/5

James 1:19-21 and 3:1-18 and 4:11-12 and 5:12

A sign of Christian maturity is harmony between head, heart and hands. That what we feel in our heart, what we believe in our brain and what we say and do are all aligned with each other. Feel kindness, think kind thoughts, speak kind words, do kind acts. Conversely if you want to know what someone

Questions: Listen to what you say about yourself and about others both in your inner dialogue and out loud. Are your words full of bitterness or humility and mercy? Are you willing to change your automatic responses to the righteousness that comes from God?

(including yourself) really feels and believes look at his or her actions. The tongue, or our speech, most honestly betrays our true thoughts and feelings and is the most powerful tool in the drawer to either buildup or tear down. James tells us that thinking before you speak is not just simple advice but actually can chart the path of your entire life, and build up rather than tear down your family and community!

The Purity of Motive - 2/12

James 4:1-10 and 4:13-17

Following Jesus means that we devote ourselves to him both externally by the things we do, and internally by our motive. Jesus taught that the condition of our heart is of the utmost importance. Actions flow out of our motives. If our motives are genuine and pure, our actions will be pleasing to God. If our motives are corrupted, our actions will fall short of what God requires.

James challenges the worldly ambitions that cause us to boast of our human achievements. In the place of such boasting, James instructs us to humble ourselves before God in sorrow for our arrogance, and challenges us to take great care in how we speak. Instead of boasting in our own plans, we should temper our speech with the phrase, "If it is the Lord's will..."

Questions: Take stock of your core motives. Are you carrying worldly ambitions with you? What God-centered motives can you put in their place?

The Equality of Believers - 1/22

James 1:9-1 and 2:1-13 and 5:1-9

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for rich and poor alike, but sometimes worldly values creep into our thought patterns. We tend to favor those who are talented, rich, and beautiful, while paying less attention to those who are not. The early church was no different, and James writes in no uncertain terms of the need for equality among believers. The rich are to understand that all their wealth comes from God and will soon pass away. The poor are to see the wealth of their spiritual blessings and give God thanks. This attitude of equality leads James to his next topic, the harmony of faith and works whereby believers can care for each other's needs.

Questions:

Have you ever given preferential treatment to someone who is wealthy? Have you ever been a victim of discrimination? Who are the people you need to treat differently now that you know God shows no favoritism?

The Harmony of Faith and Works - 1/29

James 1:22-25 and 2:14-26 and 5:13-18

Christianity is not a religion of speculation; it is a religion of action. In the same way Jesus Christ gave himself as a servant to the world, so his disciples are to follow in his footsteps. One of the most powerful ways we can witness to our faith is to put it into daily action. Opportunities for demonstrating our faith are always around us. In every relationship we can find some way to serve.

Oftentimes when Christians think of service, they think of work that is done in the administration of the church, the teaching of a Bible study, or work done on a mission trip. In truth, the most profound acts of service are those in which we demonstrate our love for the people around us in simple ways. The harmony of faith and works opens our minds to see the opportunities God sets before us each day, and enables us to experience joy in serving God in tangible and meaningful ways.

Questions:

What are the ways in which God presenting you with an opportunity to serve those around you?