

James on Christian Living

James ends his letter without a blessing. No greetings, no benediction, no formal close. He just stops. The last thing he says is about going after someone who has wandered from the truth.

I have always found that interesting. Most letters of that era close warmly. James just keeps going until he runs out of things that need saying, and then he stops.

It tells you something about what kind of letter this is. It is not trying to be complete. It is trying to be useful. And the question it has been asking, from the first chapter to the last, is the same question I want to spend some time with today.

What does a person actually look like when they have let James do its work?

I do not think James is describing a religious type. He is not sketching a particularly devout personality or a certain kind of church-goer. What he is describing is something more integrated than that. He is describing a person whose inner life and outer life have started to agree with each other.

That is harder than it sounds. Most of us are good at managing the gap between who we are in private and who we are in public.

We know the right language. We can speak the right things in the right settings. But James is not interested in that person. He has no patience for a faith that exists only in a register.

So let me try to sketch the portrait that James is drawing across the whole of his letter. Not in the abstract, but in the concrete. What does this person actually look like, day to day?

The person James is forming knows the difference between endurance and just getting through something. They have learned, often at real cost, that there is a kind of hardness that comes from suffering alone. You survive. You come out the other side. But you come out tighter, more self-reliant, more closed off. James is not describing that person.

What James is describing is someone who is softer toward God because of what they have walked through. Someone who has learned to turn toward God in the middle of difficulty rather than waiting until it is over.

They are not more impressive for their trials. They are more open. More dependent. And they know the difference between those two outcomes, because they have felt the pull of both.

This is the person from James 1. Not stoic. Not performance. Just genuinely honest about what they need, and genuinely willing to ask God for it.

You can tell what this person actually believes by how they treat people. That is James 2 in a sentence. The way you respond to the person who walks into the room without the right clothes, without the right status, without the kind of life that impresses anyone, that tells you what you actually believe about human dignity. Not what you say you believe. What you actually believe.

The person James is forming does not have a divided heart here. They do not reserve their warmth for the people who can give them something in return. They are the kind of person who shows up. Who goes to the bedside. Who covers the debt when no one is watching. Who notices that the widow in the third row has been quiet for three weeks, and who does something about it.

James 1:27 puts it plainly:

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

Pure and undefiled. James does not use those words casually. He is describing a faith that has not been hollowed out by selective application. A faith that looks like something.

The person shaped by James has learned something about their tongue. Not just to be polite, not just to avoid certain words, but to understand that what comes out of their mouth reveals what is actually happening inside them.

James 3 is one of the most unflinching things in the New Testament. Fresh water and salt water do not come from the same spring. Blessings and curses should not come from the same mouth. The tongue is small and it sets fires that are very difficult to put out.

The person James has formed is not yet perfect in this. Nobody is. But they are patient with the process. They are aware. They have stopped pretending that words do not cost anything, that gossip is harmless, that what they say about someone in the car on the way home does not matter. It matters. James says so. So they are careful. Not anxious, not fearful, just careful. They have learned to be slow to speak, and they understand why.

Here is the thing James will not let go of. From the very first chapter to the very last, his argument is the same. Hearing is not enough. Knowing is not enough. Having the right information, having sat through the right sessions, having said yes to the right things in the right moments, that is not enough on its own.

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” James 1:22:

That word, deceiving, is doing serious work in that sentence. James is not saying that hearers-only are misguided or mistaken. He is saying they are self-deceived.

They have genuinely convinced themselves that knowing is the same thing as doing. And it is not.

Think about it this way. Someone can describe in detail what a healthy diet looks like, cite the research, understand the reasoning, and still not change what they eat. The knowledge is real. The understanding is genuine. But something in the gap between understanding and action has not been crossed.

James is writing to people who have that same gap in their faith. They have heard. They have nodded. They have agreed. But the word has not made it all the way into their hands and their feet and their wallets and their calendars.

And that is the gap James is trying to close.

A person who has genuinely heard James has not just updated their information. They have been interrupted. Their life has been asked a question, and they have begun to answer it with how they actually live.

James does something unusual at the very end of his letter. He does not close with greetings. He does not close with a blessing. He closes with a picture of a community looking out for each other.

James 5:19-20:

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

There is something quietly hopeful about this. James knows that some people who started the journey will drift. He knows that life is long and pressure is real and the faith that was alive three years ago can become something hollow and habitual if nobody pays attention. So he puts the community on alert.

The person shaped by James is not only managing their own spiritual life. They are invested in each other. They

notice when someone has gone quiet. They are willing to walk toward the hard conversation, not because they have it all together themselves, but because they understand that this is what it looks like to love someone.

A church that has genuinely heard James together looks like this. People who are honest enough to notice, and courageous enough to act. Not with judgment. With the same grace they hope someone would show them.

The mirror does not cost anything to look into. What costs something is staying long enough to be changed by what you see.

James is not asking for a particular personality type. He is not asking for people who are naturally gifted at mercy or naturally disciplined in their speech or naturally steady under pressure. He is asking for people who keep coming back. Who bring their actual lives, with all of the gaps and inconsistencies, back to the same God. Who do not pretend the gap is not there. Who do not paper over it with religious activity.

James 4:17 says it plainly, in a way that is worth sitting with:

“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

That is not written to condemn. It is written to close the exit.

Because one of the things we are very good at is telling ourselves that we would do the right thing if conditions were different. If we had more time. If we had more energy. If the situation were clearer. James collapses that argument. You know. That is enough.

So the invitation at the end of all of this is not to finish something. It is to continue something. To keep reading this letter. To go back to the section that made you uncomfortable the first time. To sit with it long enough to let it do something.

James is not a course to complete. It is a life to live.

My hope and prayer is that somewhere across everything we have covered together, something got through. Not just into your thinking, but into your doing. Into the actual texture of how you move through your days. Into how you talk to people, how you handle your money, how you respond when things are hard, how you pray.

That is what James is after. That is what he has always been after.

And I think, if you have stayed with it this long, you already know that.

For Discussion

1. Of the three qualities described (being honest about your inner life, having a faith with a face, watching your mouth) which one would the people who know you best say is most evident in you right now? Which would they say still has the furthest to go?
2. James closes his letter by putting the community on alert for one another rather than offering a private form of devotion. What would it look like for our group to actually notice when someone has gone quiet, and to go after them with grace rather than judgment?
3. Think about the gap between knowing the right thing and doing it, the gap James names directly in James 4:17. Where is that gap most visible in your life at the moment, and what is the actual cost of letting it stay open?

For Private Reflection

1. If you are honest with yourself, where have you been a hearer of James rather than a doer? What has kept you from crossing the gap between hearing and doing in that area?
2. Which part of this series unsettled you the most when you first heard it? Have you gone back to sit with it since, or did you let it pass?