

Week 1 - The Mirror

Series: What is a Follower of the Way?

Preacher: Phil EuBank

Date: August 16, 2026

Primary Scripture: James 1:1–8, 22–25

| You Are Graduating from a Class You Never Knew You Enrolled In

Something happens around here in August. I can feel it more than I can name it. The days start getting shorter, the emails get faster, somebody sends a calendar invite for September, and you realize it's way closer than you thought. The tides come in, and they come in whether you are ready or not.

I grew up in the Midwest where summer went all the way through Labor Day. Because winter kept everyone inside, you soaked up every last drop of summer before you were willing to admit that it was fall, and everyone fought for that actual date to be the starting line. Out here it doesn't work that way; summer doesn't really end, it kind of gets absorbed. The calendar flips to August, and mentally at least, we are all already in fall. You might squeeze in one more week somewhere, but you're already shifting into fall rhythms.

I have lived here for a little while now, and I'm still not totally used to it. We can talk about things like this in culture like they're the weather, like we are powerless to them, but we aren't; we have more choice than we want to admit.

Nobody made you say yes to all of what is on your calendar. The full schedule we live is a series of decisions. The commute is a decision, the activities, leagues, and the third thing on a Tuesday night—you made each one, but together they became a life that nobody actually chose. They all came with tradeoffs and promises and usually a picture. Every yes was attached to a picture of a happier you, a closer family, or a life that finally feels fulfilled. But unless this is your first fall on earth, you know how this turns out: none of it can deliver on those implicit promises.

That's what's strange about it; we aren't naive. We've gotten to the end of a full season, looked around, and felt the same way or even worse than when we started. My own predictable response to this, and maybe yours, is to simply try the same approach harder.

So we get a better system. We tell ourselves it's the promotion, and when that lands, the pressure will come off and the peace will show up. We tell ourselves that the acceptance letter will make all of this pace worth it, and we can slow down and enjoy it. Spoiler alert: we won't.

Promotions aren't bad, schools aren't bad, but none of it was built to carry what we are asking it to carry, and that's not going to change simply because we really want it to this time. So we get going in August, commit to everything, hoping the next thing pays for the last thing.

So we're going to talk about that today and what we might do about it, but before we do, let's pray.

Scattered. That word kind of sounds like a preemptive apology for being behind on email or tasks, but it isn't. It's a description of what all of this is doing to our souls.

I took more time off in July than I ever have in ministry, and what did I get for all that restoring and restful time? Hundreds and hundreds of emails to respond to and work that was waiting for me. It drew me to a false need to make up for all of that time in the first few days back.

Can you relate to that?

If you're a follower of Jesus, you didn't wake up one day and decide you weren't. Nobody put church or spiritual practices on a visual list of fall priorities and crossed it out; it got crowded out. And that reveals something bigger about the Bay Area.

Nobody in the Bay Area is unformed. Everybody is being taught something, and that education is working. It's diligent, consistent, and it shows up every day and never misses a week; heck, it doesn't miss a nanosecond. Your calendar is a curriculum. Your schedule is the syllabus.

And for a lot of you, in that system, you're getting results. If there was a letter grade for this scattered pursuit of excellence, you're getting an A. But that should scare us—not that we are failing at something, but that we are succeeding at something we never intentionally agreed to.

Here's what we're going to talk about this week, and to a certain extent for the whole year: You are graduating from a class you never knew you enrolled in.

| Who Is Doing the Teaching?

So the question is not whether or not you are being formed and shaped; that question has been answered. The question is who is doing the teaching and whether or not you want your life shaped into the image of that teacher.

The Apostle Paul saw this two thousand years ago when he wrote these words in Ephesians 5:15–16: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil." Paul isn't saying that the days are wicked; he means harmful. Something that does damage. Paul isn't saying your days are uniquely immoral. He is saying that days are like thieves; you set your life down in whatever culture you find yourself in and assume that it will sit still, or if it moves, it's headed in the direction you intended.

Which is why he says we should make the best use of it. The word underneath it is *redeem*: purchase it back from the thief of a broken world that is trying to rob you of it. To Paul, you don't manage your time; you buy it back from someone or something already claiming it.

So that is our work together this year. Today we are starting a year focused on Reclaiming the Way of Jesus. *Reclaim* isn't a soft or passive word. You can't reclaim what you simply misplaced; you reclaim something that was taken from you, even if you didn't notice at first.

We are not retreating from the Bay Area. We live here, work here, are raising our families here, and we are going to reclaim our humanity in the middle of it as a testimony to our communities, our families, ourselves, and even God, that the Way of Jesus offers a better way of life.

At Menlo, we have a way of talking about this specifically. We believe that God is shaping us into what we call the Kingdom Qualities: Undivided Follower, Unhurried Friend, Thoughtful Witness, and Sacrificial Developer. Over the next four weeks, we'll look at one of them a week.

We are starting with Undivided Follower because the other three are not really available to someone trying to live a divided and fragmented life. You can't be unhurried with people when your attention is already getting pulled in a thousand different directions. You can't be a thoughtful witness when you are a different you based on the room you're in. Undivided is the first domino that needs to fall in our lives in order to start pushing the others forward.

To look more closely at this, we are going to examine portions of the book of James in the New Testament.

James 1:1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

This letter is different from much of the New Testament because it is believed to have been written to the broader early church on purpose, not one narrowly defined local church. These were the Jewish believers who became followers of the Way, living in places hostile to their faith.

These were scattered people, literally. James doesn't ever try to un-scatter them either; he never says to come back home, move to Idaho, or go where it's safe. He chases an internal scattering instead.

He knew what we know: you can be geographically settled and internally scattered... divided. You can feel settled at work, at home, even in this room, and still scattered where it counts. Since this letter isn't to a church, it's named after the author, which is important.

This is Jesus' little brother. He shared decades of relationship, tradition, and time with Jesus. And James never believed his brother could be his Lord. Someone with the best access, someone who was closer than just about anyone, still missed it.

That's an important starting place for this letter because James is very direct. James doesn't lean on his familial relationship; he describes Jesus as his Lord and himself as a servant.

It was only after Jesus was resurrected from the dead and appeared to James that he believed Jesus was who He said He was. And to be fair, that's just about what it would take for one of my brothers to convince me, too.

By the time James is writing this, he has become a pillar in the early church, leading and living like he's making up for lost time. So let's look and see what Jesus' baby brother, who now knows Jesus as his Lord, says an Undivided Follower does.

Count the Interruption as the Assignment

James 1:2–4

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I know that some of you hate this passage. If someone handed you this in a hospital waiting room, leading up to a painful funeral, or the afternoon you were laid off when you really just needed a friend to sit in the suffering and say nothing, then I get why this one stings.

James isn't trying to say what we think he is saying. He isn't telling you to feel good about bad things in your life. He isn't telling you to simply choose a different "altitude for your attitude." That is a poster in a breakroom; it might be culturally convenient, but it's not what the text says.

The word we translate as "count" is actually an accounting word. Something you do with a ledger. He isn't asking you to change how you feel; it's basically moving the experience to a different column in the ledger of your mind.

Because when we file interruption under loss or waste or the year that didn't go the way I wanted... James says to move it; it belongs under work being done or faith being developed.

Think about the life story that James lived. He watched his big brother in the years we have no record of. And then he watched and heard stories about how He responded to interruptions in His public ministry that were probably not surprising at all in how He showed up.

Interruptions can't be assignments when we are moving at a sprinting speed. You can't love people in a hurry. Love takes a minimum amount of time, and there isn't a version of it that gets faster; actually, the best love we experience is when we experience it as getting even slower.

Which brings us back to the calendar. A full calendar isn't a scheduling problem; it's a formation problem. It teaches you that people who are not on it are in the way of it. So the first thing we have to reclaim is pace. Not because being slow is the goal; being late isn't a virtue.

Slow is just the only speed at which we can stop for somebody, somebody that God put in our path to notice.

What have you been filing away as an interruption that God intends as an assignment?

Ask Without a Backup Plan

James 1:5–8

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Look where James just took us, from lacking nothing in verse 4 to "if anyone lacks" in verse 5. That isn't a contradiction; it's the process he's showing us God uses in our life. God is making a person in you who lacks nothing, and He's doing it by walking you through seasons where you lack almost everything, and He's the only person you can imagine asking. God's agenda is not to make you a strong, independent anything; God wants us dependent on Him; that's the real strength anyway.

The easiest reminder for us is to simply ask, and then James affirms something about God that many of us aren't sure if we believe: "He gives generously to all, without reproach." That means God isn't trying to find fault or assess blame; no sigh or eye roll involved.

You know the sigh: you asked for help and got it, but you also got an editorial about it. The reminder of how many times you've needed this help and a tone that you know came with a price of judgment, and there was a counter on how many times it would be available.

Jesus doesn't work like that. You can ask Him for the same thing for the rest of your life, and there is no tally, and He isn't going to make you feel small for asking again. But some of us stopped asking a long time ago.

Not because we don't believe in God, but because somewhere along the way we picked up on the idea that capable and mature people stop asking for help, especially about the same things. But listen to the verse: God isn't sighing at you, and James makes the point by going from describing God to describing us.

The one who doubts is like a wave, driven and tossed. Verse 8 uses a word that, as far as anyone has found, didn't exist before he wrote it down. It doesn't appear in Greek before James wrote it in any literature we have; it's a unique construction that seems like he invented it.

The word is *dipsychos*, which is literally "two-souled," and we translate it as double-minded.

If you are here today and still working out whether or not any of this is true, I'm so glad you're here, and this verse actually isn't aimed at you. Ask hard questions; dig deep into the propositional claims of the Gospel. We just spent the last seven weeks doing that very thing.

He's talking about the person who makes the ask while making plans. They're working out their own plan to handle it on their own while they assume God won't answer or presume their answer onto God immediately... and we are really good at this.

Where are you hedging your bets while you ask God but don't really count on Him to come through?

Why do we do this?

I think part of the reason for me is that I assume God might be generous when I'm doing great, but generous in my weakness—that feels harder to believe.

Whatever we have, we earned, and if we are offered something we didn't earn, we're suspicious. Wisdom is the one thing in this passage that is given instead of earned. It gets handed to you by the grace of God. You can't work for it, optimize it, or earn it in advance.

In the moment of need, God is waiting for you to ask so He can give it generously. Asking without a backup plan isn't something we restrict to prayer or wisdom either; it's why a community like ours exists. We want to create better rhythms for this over this year, too.

Part of our work this year looks like coming to church ready for an encounter with God in community, which will require changing how we think about and prepare for the day so we can arrive in time to connect with people and experience the full service.

Part of our work this year involves engaging in community; next weekend you'll hear more about taking meaningful steps either back into or into community for the first time at Menlo through group environments at all of our campuses.

| Stay at the Mirror Long Enough to Change

James 1:22–25

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Here we get a profile of two different people looking in two different mirrors. The same information and insight are available, but it delivers the opposite outcome for each. The difference isn't sincerity, intelligence, or effort... it's about prolonged attention.

The first man looks, just a quick glance, and walks off. He forgets what he looked like in the first place. James isn't saying he didn't see it; he got an accurate assessment of himself, but that assessment didn't stick around long enough for him to do anything with it.

The second person does something else. The word behind "looks" in verse 25 carries the idea of bending down and peering in; it's about a posture of getting closer and staying there. It's the same word for when Peter and John looked into Jesus' empty tomb.

Glanced versus gazed is a very different posture. There isn't a screen on stage with me today, just a table, a book, and my best attempts at handwriting with a camera pointed at it. We did this on purpose; in a small way, it may help us to do this kind of gazing into the verses.

My own spiritual practices generally don't revolve around technology. I use a printed Bible and a blank journal. So to get you started, we have made these journals for all of you to take home. Put your name on them and use them throughout the year for notes and time with God.

Inside you'll find core spiritual practices and a section for every message series we have planned for the next nine months. You can grab them at the table at your campus today.

Now, James uses this word "doer" on purpose; in that time and culture, it connected to professions like poets... it was about making. A doer of the word is someone who takes what they heard and makes something with it or builds something in their life from it.

That's why we're focusing on reclaiming the way of Jesus this year together. Don't just research it; we spent seven weeks researching, and it was really valuable, but data isn't the same thing as discipleship, and many of us are already far more spiritually educated than we are activated.

So grab one of those journals today; it's not a freebie keepsake; it's a mirror on every page. Try finishing each day with two questions you write, and don't type:

Where did my actions match my words today?

Where was I double-minded?

Some days this practice will seem boring, but try it for a few weeks and then look back on the first page; you'll see God moving you to be more undivided than you realized along the way. It'll also show you what curriculum you are really trying to learn and graduate from in life.

| Strangely Warmed

Nearly three hundred years ago, there was a man named John Wesley, and he had done everything correctly. He had the credentials and experience to be an effective preacher and missionary; his group was even mockingly called the Holy Club... he even traveled across the world to share Jesus.

The trip didn't go well; he came back in failure, and he wrote in his journal that he had gone on this journey to convert others but wondered who would convert him. Later, he would write about an evening when someone shared a portion of a reading from Martin Luther about Romans.

Wesley shared that his heart was strangely warmed. He would later describe everything before that night as the faith of a servant and not the faith of a son. Not a stranger or an enemy, but a servant. Real and employed, doing the work, but missing the relationship.

That was James. He had so much context and information about Jesus that he got used to Him and missed Him at the same time. There's no story about a day when James walks away because that wasn't how it worked. He just kept going through the motions and missing the moments.

That's what I'm afraid of for us. Not that we would turn hostile to Jesus, but that our comfort with all of this would shield us from the calling to something so much more. The days are evil, and they will take our attention whether we mean to give it or not.

Time is running short. You are graduating from something; do you know what it is?

Will you like who walks across the stage to congratulate you at your life's graduation?

Let's ask God to show us in the year ahead. Let's pray.