

Pastor's Corner – 1-5-2019 – Consider it Pure Joy

This week we begin a new sermon series on the book of James. I decided to focus on James because I wanted a book that dealt with the theme of practical Christian living. I figured it was time to move away from the abstract and back towards the tangible. What kind of people should we be if we take the name of Christ? How should we act? What virtues should we pursue?

In the back of my mind I have always thought of James as being a very practical kind of book. Some have even thought of James as being a bit legalistic because it talks so much about what we should be *doing* as Christians. Martin Luther it a “book of straw” because he felt it contradicted the principles of salvation by faith laid out by the apostle Paul by focusing too much on works.

When I opened up the book this time around to begin studying for this series I was confronted with something I hadn't really expected: James is difficult to sermonize.

There's no complicated theology that needs to be unpacked, no symbols that need to be decoded. James doesn't delve into doctrine. It doesn't touch on things like the substitutionary death of Jesus, or His high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. James isn't about the atonement or spiritual gifts or the organization of the church. In fact, when you read through the book you quickly realize that there's isn't any kind of systematic theology at all. James is really just a listing of character traits, behaviors, and attitudes that should be present in the Christian life. It reads very much the way the Proverbs do: as independent phrases of council that aren't tied to a larger narrative. How do you make a sermon out of that??

I found this to be a bit of a challenge because there just isn't all that much that needs expounding on. When James says, “consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds because the testing of your faith produces perseverance” – well, it's pretty straightforward what he means and there's just not much more to add. This created a bit of a conundrum for me because I feel there is great value in exploring practical Christianity but (let's be honest) I also need material for a sermon.

To make a long story short I decided I still wanted to explore the book of James but I want to do it in a little different format than a traditional sermon series. Because James is such a practical book it has its greatest value when we take the time to digest each morsel of council and apply it directly to our own life. This is a book where we can benefit from the insight of other believers. It's a book that begs to be discussed in practical terms.

So, for the next – however long – we will be exploring James not as a sermon series, per se, but as a guided discussion. Each week we'll have a brief introduction and I'll share a few thoughts on the text. Then we'll move into a bit of discussion time where you will have the opportunity to share thoughts and seek personal application of the text. I will also include discussion questions here in the Pastor's Corner so you can continue the discussion at home (if you so desire).

The passage for this week comes from James 1:1-18. You aren't limited by just these questions, but they should serve as a great place to start.

Discussion Questions:

1. According to James, what should be a Christian's attitude when facing trials? How often is this attitude present in your own hard times?
2. Why is perseverance important? What reward comes with persevering in the faith?
3. What does it mean to be a "double-minded" person? How can one avoid being double-minded?
4. How does James turn the assumed status of the rich and poor upside down?
5. What is a trial you have faced in your life? What helped you through it?
6. What reward will a person receive who "perseveres under trial" and loves God?
7. In this passage, what do we learn about the origin of temptation?
8. What stages does temptation progress through to become "full-grown" sin?
9. What have you found helpful in dealing with temptation?
10. What trial or test are you currently facing?
11. When have you prayed for and received God's wisdom?
12. What do you do when you pray but still have doubts?
13. What are two good gifts God has given you this past year?

Happy Sabbath,
Pastor Tyler