

Original - 10am

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father grant that as we turn our minds and our hearts to your word, so your word may engrave our minds and hearts with your truth and shape our lives according to your purpose.

We ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. You're to look at the epistle of James and it's on page 212 in your pew Bible and we're looking at the first 11 verses of chapter 1 and if you look at the directory in your bulletin, you see that you will be looking at James from now till past the middle of March at the 10 o'clock service.

So this is the introduction to that letter. This Sunday is also the introduction to this year of our Lord, 1999.

And I would like just to remind you at the beginning of this year that you will spend seven and a half weeks in church and I hope it will do great good to you.

The epistle to James, or it's of James, is the first of the seven Catholic epistles or general epistles.

[1 : 40] That is, they're written to everybody. They don't have a specified destination like Rome or Corinth or Ephesus. These are the epistles of James and Peter and John and Jude and they are written to everybody.

St. James, the writer, is reckoned to be the Lord's brother. That's how he is. He's not one of the apostles. He's not of the brothers who are the sons of thunder, James and John.

He is another person who seems to have been in a very high position in the early church. So much so that when Paul's ministry began and was very much blessed of God, even though it was primarily to Gentiles, the predicament was taken to the council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts and the situation was put before the elders of the church there.

And James spoke for them in instructing the Gentiles how they were to receive the gospel and how they were to respond and primarily that they didn't have to become Jewish.

So James is that kind of an important person whom Paul refers to with John and Peter as one of the pillars of the church.

[3 : 22] That's just a general introduction. And I hope that you will, during these weeks, read this book because it's a very disturbing book, particularly for a parish like this.

I bet you're thinking what I mean by that. Well, what I mean by it is that St. John's has got a reputation for being very clear about Christian doctrine and the doctrines of justification by faith and all the doctrines that are taught to us.

And that the assumption is that if you get the doctrines straight, then you will behave yourself properly. James' epistle is to tell you or to remind you that having got the doctrines straight, there are still expectations of you in order to live out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And so James tells you not so much what to believe as how to behave and how the ordering and structuring of your life should go.

And so if you look at it, you will see all those provisions that are made for you by the wonderful opportunity you have in belonging to a congregation of people that are not going to be able to live out.

[5 : 03] That minister to one another and who are a blessing and a resource to one another. Because what James tells you here is some of the things that you will lack if you try and go it alone.

We live in a highly individualistic society and lots of people might think that they can go the Christian life alone. Well, you can't. Well, you can't. And when one of the correspondents in the Vancouver Sun made the confession with some pride, because this puts him right in the midst of where it's at in our society, I can no longer say the Apostles' Creed.

He is quoted as saying. Well, the reason he can no longer say the Apostles' Creed is that he no longer belongs to the apostolic community.

Because none of us are smart enough to say the Apostles' Creed with full and complete understanding. We say it one with another, as you have just done.

And the deficiencies which you suffer in understanding it are made up by the fact that there are others around you who understand what you don't understand.

[6 : 24] And I've got to go on from there. And you understand what they don't understand. So that's why we need one another. And this epistle tells us a lot about it.

But the first, and the word that I think would be most helpful to you in looking at these verses is a kind of New Year's inventory of what you lack.

Not what you have, but what you lack. In the first verse of the passage, James 1, verse 1, you may find that you lack identity.

And so James tells you what your identity is as he writes this to all Christians across space and time and says, you are the 12 tribes of the dispersion.

And the Jews at that time were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. Remember those Priscilla and Aquila who were in Corinth because they'd been kicked out of Rome for their Jewishness.

[7 : 36] And the Jews were scattered. And so the Christian church, when the gospel started to be preached, went first to the synagogues.

And so by the time James is writing this letter, the Christians are scattered too. And they have continued to be scattered from that time until this.

Wonderful to read in terms of understanding what it is to be a member of the dispersion. Wonderful to read in yesterday's son about the 2% of the 690 million people in India, that 2% of them are dispersed Christians who are struggling to hold together in company and in fellowship with one another as a tiny minority.

There's a letter, a Christmas letter from Bishop Colin Baisley in northern Chile, where he talks about the little congregations he has in Antipha-Gasto, where in four different cities there are four different congregations which are lay-led and which meet together.

And they are part of this process of dispersion. Now, you may think by being at St. John's that we're not dispersed, but by this time tomorrow we will be very dispersed in a whole lot of amazing and different places.

[9 : 16] And in the dispersion you are to be, James gives you your identity which you lack, otherwise James gives you your identity, you are to be like him, a servant of God and of Jesus Christ.

And that's what your identity is. And that's your primary identity. That's your main identity. And this is a hard thing because we live in a world where we change identities the way you change hats.

This is who you are, a servant of God and of Jesus Christ in the dispersion throughout the world because it is God's purpose to bring the gospel to the world.

Well, then it, in verse 2, it tells you what you won't lack. You will have an abundance of, in verse 2, various trials.

And those trials will be, the source of those trials will be, in the first instance, because you're a sinful person and you are subject to temptations and you will have to fight with your temptations, the problems that come out of you, the desire to be, as Titus describes it, willful and disobedient, serving diverse lusts and passions, living in malice and envy.

[10 : 47] Those are the problems that come out of you. Miserable soul that you are. And, but then there are other trials that you will be subject to and those are the ones that are imposed on you from outside.

The source of them is not in yourself in this instance, it's outside. So, you will not lack for trials, but what you will find you lack is joy in those trials.

And so, James says in verse 2, you counted all joy when you can identify all the trials that afflict you. And that joy you will lack unless you find a source for it.

Now, the source for it, remember in that lovely story from Joshua chapter 4, the lovely story of the members of each of the 12 tribes of Israel picking up a stone from the bottom of the river Jordan, which they were crossing dry shod and carrying it to the other side, and Joshua setting up in Gilgal a pile of stones.

And that pile of stones was continued, was, was, to, was to represent for them the crossing dry shot over the Jordan.

[12:18] And generation after generation of children would come along to this little pile of stones and say, what do these stones mean? And they would be told, and you and I come week by week to church, and we are confronted with the cross, and we might be inclined to say, what does that cross mean?

That cross means that you have a more than ample source of joy with which to meet all the trials and all the difficulties of your life.

Because that cross represents the death of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the ascension of Jesus Christ, and that is to be the source of your joy, which you are to claim by faith as being the final and fulfilling reality of your life, and you are to make it a part of your everyday trials and tribulations.

So you bring that joy into the trials and tribulations of your life. The next thing that you will find that you lack is steadfastness, staying power.

and he says, in the midst of these trials, with this joy, you are to, the purpose of this is to produce steadfastness in you.

[13:51] And you might not want to know where the source of that steadfastness is to be. You are to derive it, you see, because what happens is that you have chosen who you are, you have the resource of joy, you find yourselves caught up in trials and afflictions, and in that, what's going to happen?

Well, you're going to be destroyed. I mean, that's what we would assume. But no, James says, you are to, that those trials will produce in you steadfastness.

Now, Jesus himself, you see, sets the example. Remember what it says? Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, endured the ultimate testing, the ultimate trial, as he stood on behalf of our humanity before the judgment of the world and submitted to their condemnation and crucifixion.

Through the things which he suffered, he counted it all joy because of obedience to the Father. So that in the trials, you are to be obedient in the strength which God supplies and by which God produces in you steadfastness.

Now, then you see, what else is it you like? Go on and look. You need the steadfastness because the steadfastness then has its full effect in verse 4.

[15:34] And the full effect of that steadfastness is that you will come to maturity, you will come to perfection, you will come to completion, you will lack nothing because of this process.

The trials, the forbearance or a steadfastness and that produces in you maturity. You see, God has this purpose for us all that we should not try and grab hold of something like a miser grabs hold of money and hold on to it with both fists.

God has for us a dynamic relationship to one another who are together caught up in the trials and afflictions and temptations of this world that we should support one another and encourage one another that we may by steadfastness come to maturity, come to perfection.

God has a goal and in case you don't know it, you ain't there yet. And let me remind you that if you're a little unsure of that, ask the people who are close to you and they will help you realize that you ain't there yet.

There still has to be continuing trials, continuing testing and a steadfastness by which you will then come to maturity, to perfection.

[17:14] Well then, if you go on from there, you'll see the next thing that you lack is wisdom. You don't have the wisdom to cope with the various trials because your trials aren't the same as other people's.

Yours are yours. And other people have their own trials. And you need wisdom. And so you are told to ask God and he will give you that wisdom.

And how does he give you that wisdom? He gives it to you by the ministry of Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit. He gives it to you through the instruction of the Word of God.

He gives it to you through the fellowship of Christians, the company of the faithful, the congregation to which you belong. That's why in a congregation like this, there's a whole lot of people involved in prayer groups and Bible studies of all things.

What on earth are they doing and wasting their time at that? What they are doing is putting themselves in the place where acknowledging their lack of wisdom to meet the trials and difficulties of their life, they are drawing on the wisdom of God, whom, if you look at it carefully, is generous with this wisdom and without reproach.

[18 : 44] That without reproach means that when you ask God for wisdom, you might suspect, humanly speaking, that he would say, well, what did you do with the last wisdom I gave you?

And what this says is that God doesn't ask that question. He just keeps giving generously, to you, the wisdom you need for the situation you are in and you thereby acquire that wisdom.

Well, there is a condition to that, though, that is described in verse 6. In verse 6, you're told that you have to ask for this wisdom in faith, nothing doubting.

In other words, you have to have decided where you're going. You have to have made your commitment about what your life is all about. You have to, in a sense, have accepted in faith that what your life is all about is that you are, like James has described, a servant of God and of Jesus Christ.

You know that's where you're going. And as long as you know that and you know the course you're on, then you can ask wisdom and it will be available. James says, most people are characterized by doubts and afflicted by doubts and that's why we need one another.

[20 : 16] There is an analogy here which is somewhat awkward for me at this moment because it says the person who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.

And in my imagination the rector of this parish on this very day which in Australia is tomorrow is probably sitting with his surfboard waiting for the next wind to come along to carry it in one direction or another.

Well, the fact is that that's probably an acceptable form of surfing. But the kind of surfing that most of us do between various spiritualities, various religions, various philosophies, various intellectual games that we play and we're moving all over the place all the time.

We're convinced in this way one day and this way another and we're moving in all directions and what James says is when that's your condition you ain't going nowhere and there are no resources to help you do it.

So, that's why it says you're not to be that kind of a doubting person. And then he says one of the things that some people in church will lack is exaltation.

[21 : 47] In other words, you'll be so beaten, so whipped, so lonely, so poor, so hungry, so inadequate to meet the challenges of the world in which you live that you need to come to church to be reminded that you are an object of the love of God chosen and redeemed by Jesus Christ and called to belong to God through all eternity.

That belongs to you. No matter if you are at the very bottom of the heap, you need to be reminded of that. And there are no doubt some here in this congregation who need that kind of reminding. According to the reputation of St. John's, however, whether it's true or not, the other alternative is also available to you in church.

That is, if you are rich and wealthy and well provided for and think that you ride above the trials and temptations that beset other people, well, the great blessing that is for you in church is to be reminded is to experience humiliation.

Really sort of profound humiliation. And the rest of these verses are taken up with how that humiliation is to come.

[23 : 24] You are to remind it that you're at the pinnacle of power in your business. You happen to be youthful and healthy and beautiful and all those things.

You're up there and you have it all. James says, flowers bloom too, but then they fade.

And the very sun which drew life and brought you to that place will now turn on you and scorch you so that you will dry up and wither.

and the scorching heat will wither the grass and the flowers will fail and beauty perishes. And so he says the rich person will pass away in that process.

He will be caught up in that process and think he is outside the process of trials and temptations and the suffering with joy that he's outside, that he isn't one who lacks wisdom or lacks maturity or lacks forbearance or lacks steadfastness.

[24 : 36] He's not one of those people. Oh, says St. James, indeed you are. And what a grace it is that you should be reminded of it regularly and how diligent I want to be, James says, in reminding

you of it.

Well, that's the first 11 verses. of the epistle of James. And it goes on for five chapters. Well, just starting there, let me tell you, a joke I heard this week because I can't resist.

I mean, I guess it's a joke. It's a quotation of Samuel Goldwyn, I think that's his name, the big movie man. And he said, in acting, honesty is everything.

once you can fake that, you've got it made. Well, I think that tends to apply to religion as well.

You know, that religion is a dreadful disease to get involved with, particularly because you can fake it so easily. but what James is trying to point at is what is at the heart of it.

[25 : 57] What the lack is in your life and mine, and how that lack is met by God's grace and generosity towards us in Christ.

When David short wrote the paragraph on the front of the leaflet on Christmas Eve, it ended with these words.

He said, receiving the Christ child means more than celebration. It means a profound change for each of us at the level of how we understand ourselves.

Well, that seems to me a good summary of what James 1, 1 to 11 is talking about. It's talking about the basis of that change, recognizing the things you lack, recognizing that if you are powerful and rich, you need to be, you lack humility and it's available for you.

If you're poor and downtrodden, you lack exaltation and it's available to you. If you lack wisdom, it's available to you. If you lack steadfastness, it's available to you.

[27 : 24] All those things are there and God, James is telling us, I think, that God's purpose is to effect that change on a continuing basis through the whole of your life in order to bring you to the place where he wants you to be, the place which Jesus describes when he says in Matthew chapter five, be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect.

Lord. And if that is what Jesus has commanded us, then he's got to do a lot of work on us to bring us to that place that we can be what he desires us to be.

And that's the wonderful reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ as we begin this new year. Just bow your heads.

Our God, grant that we may hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest those things which are written for us in your word. In Jesus' name, amen.