

Faith Clarifies

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[0 : 00] So we're turning for the last time in our Sunday mornings to the book of James. And just take one minute to share with your neighbor what has been the big theme of James as we've gone through.

If you're visiting for the first time, then the person sitting next to you has a great responsibility to get you up to speed. And if they get it wrong, then tell me afterwards and we'll put them under church discipline.

Just take one minute to do that. Okay, that's great. I would invite answers from the floor, but I'm nervous about getting lots of different answers.

I want to show you a clip from a German sitcom. It's one of my favorites. I'm afraid the quality is not very good. But I put some subtitles in it for you. So watch this.

Okay, just in case your eyesight wasn't as sharp as it used to be. The daughter asked her dad, how are you getting on with the iPad? And he says, fine. And then she says, what apps have you got?

[1 : 04] And he says, what do you mean by apps? And he's been using the iPad as a chopping board. And I think, in some kind of roundabout way, that is like James.

Because James, two weeks ago when Graham took us through the first bit of chapter 4, James gave us the stunning solution to the double-mindedness of his people.

But he wants to make sure before they close the letter and put it on the shelf, that they know exactly what to do with the instructions that he's given them.

As we come to the end of James, James kind of spent the first three chapters of the letter kind of sparring with his readers. He tells them things like, don't waste your trials, but ask the Lord for wisdom that you might persevere in a way that brings glory to God.

He says, don't give in to your temptations. Don't use, when hard times come, an excuse to sin. Don't give up or don't give in to your temptations.

[2 : 14] And then in chapter 3, he told them two things. He says, hear and do God's words. Don't be like a guy who looks in a mirror and then walks away and forgets what he looks like unchanged.

He says, don't show favoritism. Don't give good seats to rich people and bad seats to poor people. But show equity, show love to all.

He says, don't retreat to easy believism. Make sure that your faith is working out in good work. He says, faith without deeds is debt.

So make sure that your faith is working in your life. And then that really uncomfortable passage in chapter 3. Keep control of your tongue.

It's a very small organ, but it does a great amount of damage. For the first three chapters, James has been sparring with his readers. But in chapter 4, the gloves come off.

[3 : 18] In chapter 4, James addresses them. As Graham so helpfully said, it's like he's gone from the hug to the headlock. And he calls them out.

He says in chapter 4, verse 4, Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity with God. Therefore anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

That is our big theme of the book. Two-timing God. Being two-faced, double-souled.

Doing one thing on Sunday and something else, Monday through to Saturday. Singing Jesus, all for Jesus, all I am and have and ever want to be at the top of your voice.

But living life Monday to Saturday, thinking that it is all about you. These people are leading double lives.

[4 : 20] Going to church, singing all the right songs, listening to all the right sermons, believing all the right things. But there is no fruit in their lives. No faithfulness to their faith.

And no import from Sunday into the working week. They are saying, God we love you, but at the same time sneaking all sorts of lovers up the stairs.

And you know, people are people are people, aren't they? That James' audience are kind of like us. That we can so easily retreat into a veneer of respectability on a Sunday, but look just like the world the rest of the time.

And so James gives the proper medicine to their double-mindedness. Submit yourselves to God. That is living total submission to God.

Let him call the shots, drive the ship. Let him be the captain. Resist the devil who would love to trip and ensnare and distract and deflect us from single-minded devotion to Jesus.

[5 : 30] Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. That is what we're to do when we're caught in this trap.

And so what he wants to do is he wants to flesh that out for us. In all sorts of areas of life. He wants to talk about double-mindedness in our speech, in our diaries, in the way that we use our wealth, in our prayer lives, in our persistence.

And so let me read chapter 4, verse 11, to chapter 5, verse 6, and we'll see this picked up. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.

Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it but sitting in judgment on it.

There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? Now listen, you who say today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.

[6 : 49] Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil, is if anyone there knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded.

Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

[7 : 58] You have condemned and murdered the innocent one who was not opposing you. It's quite strong words, isn't it?

And what he's saying in essence is, make your life not about you. Make your life not about you because at the center of those three distinct passages is the idea that you're at the center of your universe and you're calling the shots.

You're sitting in judgment. You're in control of your diary. You're the one who's worth all the money that you earn. And he's prodding them.

And he's illustrating for them what this pride-filled, self-centered life looks like. And he's already quoted Proverbs 3 verse 34. God opposes the proud.

But shows grace, gives grace to the humble. And that's what he's calling on each of us today. To not be pride-filled, puffed up, big-headed, full of our own importance.

[9 : 08] But to become less so Jesus can become more. The first thing he talks about is speaking slanderously. James warns them not to speak against one another.

Not to tear strips off their brothers and sisters in Christ. Not to retreat to the quiet, dark corners of the church and dish the dirt that you've come to find out.

James has taken a great deal of time in chapter 2 to elevate the royal law in our lives and say, the royal law is summed up, love your neighbor as yourself. And when you're behind closed doors to chastise and criticize and tear down, it's not loving your neighbor as yourself.

In fact, you've got the law here. And you say, well, Jesus, you said that, but I think this is better. I think feeding people tasty morsels of this and that is a better idea.

When your tongue goes feral and you lose control, why is this pride in action? Well, because gossip is tasty, isn't it? Getting actually angry at someone kind of vents your anger quite quickly.

[10:28] But why do we really do it? So we can push people down in order that we might rise up. Pride, isn't it? He said, didn't he, in chapter 4, why do you get angry with people?

Because of what's going on in here. And not what's going on out there. Don't be pride-filled. Control your tongue. He humbles them.

He says, who are you to judge your neighbor? There is one lawgiver and judge. And he would have every right to tear shreds off each of us. And yet he doesn't.

He speaks grace and life and hope and joy. So whenever we think actually criticism is a good thing, let's remember Jesus could criticize each of us but doesn't.

Then he talks to them. Make your life not about you. Don't plan presumptuously. He turns to a different case study and points out how pride can turn up in our diary.

[11:35] He illustrates using the businessman who plans well in advance without any reference to God. But the person who plans like they are the center of the universe, they know everything that's to happen.

And even a year ahead, they say we're going to emigrate here. We're going to open a shop. We're going to have a nice business. We're going to make some money. It's going to be great. And James wants to say that's a ridiculous state of affairs.

Now I don't think James is condemning planning. He's not saying planning is evil and spontaneity is good. That's not what he's saying.

Nor is he saying we need to follow every sentence we ever say with the kind of mantra, God willing. We don't have to finish every Christmas card we ever write with DV.

Although that might be helpful in reminding us that we are not the center of the universe. What he's saying is don't plan your diary. Don't fill your diary with stuff.

[12:43] And fail to consult God. Don't fill your diary in a self-reliant way. That says actually I can spend my time how I want on what I want in ways that make me feel important and good.

Verse 17 is a real warning. Or verse 14 brings us to the very problem of life, isn't it? We are a mist. We appear and we go.

Here one minute gone the next. Whenever we think we're at the center of the universe, let's remind ourselves of our own mortality.

We don't know what tomorrow holds. But James is saying make sure you're in a relationship and consulting the one who does. And the one who controls.

Verse 17 says, if anyone then knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

That seems like a little strange add-on. But what he's referring to is having a diary that's so jammed full of activity and stuff that it means when you see something that needs doing, you go, I don't have time.

[14:00] I don't have time to go to the prayer meeting. There's no space in my diary for an evening service. I don't have time to go to the prayer meeting.

anything that's of eternal importance. We are mist. And so our only hope is to have a dependence and on a real reliance on the one who is eternally permanent, who never changes.

And then he wants to talk about indulging indiscriminately. Lots of commentators think that when we get to chapter 5, verses 1 to 6, that he's referring to a different group outside the church.

Well, that seems ridiculous to me. How many times have you got a letter that says, Dear John, well, I bet not many of you have had that, because you'd be reading my post. Dear John, I'd now like to finish this letter by writing to your brother Edward.

Please pass it across to him. You know, some of my relatives are quite tight. But I'm sure they could afford two stamps if it was really that important. James is writing to people in the church.

[15:43] He confronts his hearers with the real litmus test of pride and counsels them about their checkbook. About how they're using their resources.

Now listen, you rich people. We would all be in this category in James' church. He warns them about stockpiling their riches.

That in the light of eternity, it will just prove to be corroded vanity. They've got lots of wealth.

They've got wardrobes that are bursting at the seams with clothes that they never wear.

They've spent their money on themselves. For themselves. In order to make themselves look good.

They stored it away.

It became their security and the focus of their lives. And with the end in mind, which is all the way through this passage. It proves to be worthless.

[16 : 45] It's just rotted and corroded. And become nothing. James doesn't just criticize their accumulation. He confronts their acquisition.

Because it seems they've made themselves rich on the backs of others. They've prospered at the expense of diddling their workers.

That check they forgot to write. That contract they failed to honor. That corner they cut. And it says, The cries of the oppressed have reached the ears of God.

Verse 5 hits them square in the face. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. Self-indulgence with you at the center.

Because you thought you were worth it. Chapter 5, the end of verse 5 is grotesque, isn't it? You've fattened yourself in the day of slaughter.

[17 : 50] All that stuff you consumed and bought. All that stuff that you thought you were worth. Just proved to be crackling in the end. You've fattened yourself as on the day of slaughter.

And verse 6 humbles us. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one. A reference explicitly to the Lord Jesus.

The one who really did deserve it all. The one who had countless riches, eternal wealth. And yet he gave it up to come down for us.

And we, out of our self-centered pride, murdered him. But in the glory of God, though we murdered and condemned the Lord Jesus, he died to save us.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. That though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.

[19 : 05] So that through his poverty you might become rich. James shows us and his readers what pride looks like. He says it's not necessarily going around with the t-shirt that says, I am the greatest.

He says, actually, pride can turn up in our speech, in our diaries, and in our wallets. And he gives us that great verse, God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

I wonder, is double-mindedness something that's now affecting us? As we look at our burgeoning eye count, as we look at the bills on our desk, as we look at the desires of our hearts, and the way that we speak about others.

Have we made our life about us? Or are we committed, as we've sung, to say, Jesus, be the center. Be the wind in these sails.

Be the fire in this heart. Be the reason that I live. He then goes on to talk about patience. He says, Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's return.

[20 : 20] See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

Don't crumble against one another. Brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The judge is standing at the door. Brothers and sisters, and as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

As you know, we count blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance, and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, not by heaven, or by earth, or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple yes or no.

Otherwise, you will be condemned. James has already spoken about trials at the very beginning. And he's telling us now that in the midst of trials, don't get distracted. Patiently persevere.

[21 : 26] It's a common theme in the Bible that waiting time is testing time. Actually, when life is really good, or when life is really bad, we find our relationship with God good.

But what about in the humdrum mediocrity of life? Waiting time is testing time. James knows that when people are waiting, the temptation is to either get distracted, or become economical with the truth.

He says, be patient, be consistent, be wholehearted in your waiting. Israel were never good at waiting. While Moses is up the mountain, and Sinai, they're down building the golden calf.

When we get to the judges, there is this cycle where it gets good, and then it gets bad. Even Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, when the people are back, and things are going great, they neglect the Lord, because waiting time is testing time.

And James sees this as a clear and present danger. Are you going to persevere? Is your Christian faith just going to be a season of your life?

[22 : 42] James says it can't be so. Patiently endure. Patiently suffer. Patiently keep on keeping on. And he gives them three encouragements.

He says, think of the farmer, who come rain or shine, come gale or calm. He's out there, long days, tirelessly, toiling, tilling, drilling, sowing, fertilizing, harvesting, doing it in every season, through every weather, without distraction, or deviation.

And why does he do it? Because he has harvest day in mind. The day where he cuts it down, and brings it in, and it's a happy day. James says to his farmers, be like the farmer.

Work and toil. Don't be distracted. Because there's an eternal harvest coming. And unless you have your eye on that day, then you'll get lost this day.

Then he talks about the Old Testament prophets. These people that God appointed to speak up for him, amidst great persecution. The likes of Jeremiah, and Elijah, and Elisha, and Ezekiel, and Hosea, and Micah, and Malachi, and Obadiah.

[24 : 01] And even though it was unpopular, and they were imprisoned, and they were hurt, they were thrown in wells, they were cut in half. They didn't get distracted, because they knew God was worth it.

And then we think of Job. Job, who for 42 long chapters, is utterly despairing. It couldn't have gone any worse.

His wife says to him, curse God and die. That's the kind of wife you're looking for. But for 42 chapters, at the very end, God commends him, because he's spoken what is right of the Lord.

That even amidst great suffering and persecution, he's not become despairing or distrusting of God. And so, don't be double-minded.

When it gets tough and difficult, when it's hard and tiring, patiently endure. Patiently endure. Don't retreat to just a functional relationship with the Lord.

[25 : 12] Satisfactory working relationship. Look, I'll do the Sunday thing, but you know you've let me down. It's too tough. I want to go it my own way.

And then I think we get to the most confusing parts of the letter. I think it's a passage that we take greatly out of context.

Like 1 Corinthians 13. Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you ill?

Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise them up.

If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

[26 : 08] Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

And he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops. My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wonder from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

As we've seen, at first glance, James looks like a bit of a pick and mix letter where he's kind of put loads of blog posts together. And it would be so easy, wouldn't it, to think, oh, James thinks, oh, I'm getting to the end.

Oh, I'm nearly finished. I should probably put something in about prayer. Just like drop it in, make sure they're praying. But I think this whole thing is specifically to a group of people and he's still addressing double-mindedness.

And I think the absolute key is verses 17 and 18. Look at them with me. Elijah was a human being and he's talking about the prayer he prayed and there was no rain.

[27 : 22] I don't think many of us in Scotland have ever prayed a prayer like that. But I think that's not a thing. There was no rain. Now, if he was really talking about answered prayer and healing, if he was really talking about the prayer of prayer, why would he talk about that?

Surely, if we were talking about people being ill and praying for them and them getting well, we'd be better going a few verses, a few chapters later to maybe Elisha and the healing of Naaman.

Or the raising of the dead son of the widow of Zarephath. That would make more sense. But what is it about this prayer? Well, Elijah is praying at a time when Israel is at its most double-minded.

The whole of Israel is worshipping Baal and Yahweh. Israel is kind of two-timing God and it's the whole nation.

And therefore, Elijah prays and says, God, let it not rain. And then at the end of that, what do they do? Well, they go up a mountain and have a bonfire competition. And what does Elijah pray?

[28 : 39] Say to the people, how long will you waver between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, worship him. If Baal is God, worship him. The God who answers by fire, he is God.

And so James still has in mind this double-mindedness. And he finishes with the greatest example of Israel being double-minded. Israel has a foot in two camps.

James' readers have a foot in two camps. And it seems that some of James' readers have so committed adultery against the Lord, they're becoming ill.

There's a present judgment falling on them because of their adultery, because of their idolatry. Like Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit and were cut down dead.

Or like the people in 1 Corinthians 11 who were selfishly indulging at the Lord's Supper. And therefore, James is talking to the church and saying, if you're double-minded, pray.

[29 : 54] And more than pray, call the elders to anoint you with oil. Why do you anoint someone with oil? Well, you always do it to consecrate someone. To bring them back, to set them apart for God.

That would be a great remedy for people that have been caught in this double-mindedness. Anoint them with oil draw a line under all of that and bring them back.

These people are wandering from the truth and James says, bring them back. Don't let them go off on a tangent. Let them be gods and gods alone.

Confess your sins to one another. We're all to look out for each other. Looking out for where we've got distracted and deflected, for where we've started devoting ourselves to other things.

I don't know, but James is decidedly an uncomfortable letter. So many people have said, I love James. I used to love James before we looked at him this week and last week and the week before.

[31 : 03] because when we really get him, he makes us wiggle and sweat and look at our lives and think, am I just playing at this?

Is this just Sunday respectability? Is God at work in every area of my life? Am I consulting him in every area of my life?

God is calling us through the letter of James to lay it all down for God, to resist the devil and keep on persevering and to have clean hands and a pure heart.

But a word to you if you're not trusting Jesus this morning. There's a real warning here, isn't there, about what life is all about. It's not about people speaking well of you.

It's not about accumulating as much as you can well you can for yourself because James is clear it's all going to rust away. It's just going to be iron oxide and good for nothing.

[32 : 10] It's not about making extravagant plans because we are a mist. And he's saying the only hope, the only certainty, the only way life has meaning and purpose and value and hope is if we will humble ourselves and come to the Lord Jesus and say I don't deserve it I could not earn it but you give it anyway.

Because God opposes the proud the people that make it all about themselves. But he gives grace and eternal grace to the humble.

can I say in closing that over our eight sessions in James I have felt the prompting of God in a way I have seldom felt before. I've been burdened by my life and our life as a fellowship and I worry just how compromised we've become.

I've been convicted by the Holy Spirit of areas in my life that I have become far too comfortable in sharing with God. And God is saying give it all give it all so would you stand with me and let me pray for us.

Let's pray. Father God as we have sat under your living and active word over this last season as a church we confess that it has searched us and found us wanting.

[33 : 47] Our infatuation with the world has been uncovered our heart-heartedness has been laid bare and our double-mindedness has been diagnosed.

Father God purify our hearts that we may draw near to you once again. Father God bring us low that you might lift us up.

Father God tame our tongues give us wisdom banish favoritism unleash your word to work in our lives and give us more grace.

Father let us be yours and yours alone and we pray all this in and through the Lord Jesus Christ who loved us fully and gave himself for us totally.
Amen. Let's . Amen.