



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 51
JAMES**

DECEMBER 17-21, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Hebrews 7-10, Psalm 101	Acts 15:1-21; 21:17-25, Ps 101
Tuesday	Hebrews 11-13, Psalm 102	James 1:1 – 2:13, Psalm 102
Wednesday	James, Psalm 103	James 2:14 – 3:18, Psalm 103
Thursday	1-2 Peter, Psalm 104	James 4:1 – 5:6, Psalm 104
Friday	1-2-3 John, Jude, Psalm 105	James 5:7-20, Psalm 105

READ

Acts 15:1-21; 21:17-25

Psalm 101

REFLECT**The General Letter**

James, you say? Which one? Not the son of Zebedee, the older brother of John the Evangelist. Not the son of Alphaeus, James “the less,” one of the 12 disciples. But, yes, “our James” was the son of Joseph and Mary, half-brother of our Lord. Quite clearly, the name James figures prominently in the formative years of the Christian church.

During the brief years of Jesus’ ministry, “our James” was not a believer (John 7:3-10). But something happened to his heart and mind during the last hours of his Brother’s travail; he overcame his skepticism, and became a believer. We find him post-Ascension, meeting in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost with the other disciples. His participation in the formative years of the Christian movement led to a prominent place of leadership, the undisputed head of the church, and convener of the first Jerusalem Council in AD 44 (Acts 15:13, 19), which led to the acceptance of Gentiles into the Christian community. He died a martyr’s death at the hands of the Jewish priestly authorities in AD 62.

It will help our understanding of the content of the “General (or catholic) Epistle of James,” to consider the context in which he penned this earliest of letters. James was not a traveler, like Paul; so his communication is not directed either to a person or a location, but “to the twelve tribes who are disbursed abroad.” Initially, this letter was directed to the Jewish Christians living outside Palestine, forced out by persecution, and carried into slavery throughout the Roman Empire – “The Diaspora.” In other words, it’s for everybody who receives it.

This letter is the most “Jewish” of all the books in the New Testament, probably because James appears to have remained loyal to his orthodox

Jewish understanding of the Law. But the wide circulation of this Epistle, and its emphasis on living faithfully the Christian life, contributed greatly to the rapid spread of Christianity through the Roman world.

The aim of James is clearly an appeal to leave worldliness behind, and press forward to the practical expressions of Christian faith. The letter contains 108 verses; 60 of them are imperatives! Can you get the weight of the message? For new Christians, scattered to the four winds, needing encouragement and counsel, James offers clear instruction about “living out” life in Christ. For most of the listeners, what James provided was not new information, but rather a “wake up” call to translate knowledge into action, and thus give full expression to the godly life.

In the following days of this week, we will give attention to the multiple dimensions of Christian faith and practice that James wrote about, and which speak today in early twenty-first century, just as they did in the ancient world. Scripture is always current. And especially in this season of Advent, there are pointed instructions about how to express our faith in Christ through right living.

RESPOND

Consider how James progressed from being a non-believing brother of our Lord, to becoming the leader of the Jerusalem community of faith; to writing a letter to a group of Christians about whom he cared deeply and identified with closely; to his desire to provide encouragement for endurance and persistence in their faith life. Each of us needs to hear the word of encouragement. But we can also follow the pattern of James to be the encourager of others in our circles of influence.

PRAY

Lord, in my busy days of this Advent season, let me echo the words of the Psalmist who wrote: “I’m finding my way down the road of right living” (101:2) TM.

- D.E.E.

READ

James 1:1 – 2:13

Psalm 102

REFLECT**“Tough Time” Requirements**

Imagine yourself a Jewish person in a strange city in the Roman Empire, rooted out of your comfort zone by persecution of Christians in Jerusalem, and by the violence of the Roman imperialists who enslaved and displaced countless Jews at their command. It was not a pleasant scene. In the early years of the Jesus people, only later called Christians, there was evangelism taking place in widening circles; then building up of the converts in the developing cells of believers; then intense persecution after the stoning of Stephen; and then gradually the scattering of the Jerusalem congregation throughout Judea, Samaria, and even into remote regions of Caesarea, Damascus, Antioch, and the island of Cyprus.

James, as leader of the church in Jerusalem, had deep concern for his growing parish, shared with them their Jewish loyalties to the law, but also their new conviction that Jesus was their Messiah. As circumstances began to force many of those disciples to move beyond “home base,” James followed the direction of the Spirit to help sustain their faith by addressing their need for continuing instruction. So what we have today is a short compendium of clear guidelines that both instruct and encourage. Here are some.

Be joyful when you “encounter various trials.” That’s just not what we tend to feel when the pressures of life pummel us. We associate “joy” with the happy times, when everything seems to be going very well for us. But for those Jewish Christians on the run, life was not going well. James counsels them in their trials to “consider it all joy,” think constructively; because how you *perceive* your difficulties will determine the extent of your endurance – for whatever comes. Remember: Martyrs died singing.

Wisdom is a gift from God. Ask for it. There are conditions. First, there must be faith that God can guide. Second, there must be an absence of doubt that God will indeed respond to our request for wisdom. Prayer is the vehicle that leads into wisdom. This is a very practical thing, because it enables sound thinking, and leads to proper conduct. We need both.

There is an old Gospel song that echoes the word from James: *Yield Not To Temptation*. It is not God’s tactic to tempt us. We choose when and how we will allow sin to infect our lives. But when we “persevere under trial,” there is a handsome payoff: the Crown of Life, the bestowment of God’s blessings.

Clean up your life, remove the junk, and cultivate a teachable spirit. In the process, we will find challenges to do more than “know about” our faith in Christ. We will be learning how to translate that knowledge into behavior patterns that reflect the life of our Lord. As the saying goes, we must “walk the talk.”

James certainly addresses snobbery in the church. It’s not how many rings one wears, or how many fingers. It’s not the expression of wealth through one’s wardrobe, or the position one holds in corporation or society. Rather, when we practice the “Royal Law” – loving our neighbor as ourselves – we keep all outward appearances in perspective, and avoid the temptation to classify people into the “OK’s” and the “Ugh’s.”

RESPOND

We’re not short on “growth” challenges as we seek to become fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ. Consider how one or several of the words of counsel from James can shape your agenda for living in and through this Advent Season.

PRAY

Loving Lord, be patient with me as I increase my “doing” of the faith, and let me know the reality of Your promise that “. . . year after year you’re as good as new” (Psalm 102.27 TM).

- D.E.E.

READ

James 2:14 – 3:18
Psalm 103

REFLECT**“Genuine” Ingredients**

Very early in the formative years of the Christian community, there emerged a tension that still exists among those who profess Jesus as Lord. That struggle is between the primacy of “faith,” and the performance of “works.” For James, the issue arose among his Jewish converts to Christ, whose life-long adherence to the Law of Moses was so deeply engrained that all the Ceremonial Laws demanded strict observance. For Paul, whose missionary ministry was largely among Gentiles, those Ceremonial Laws made no demand for observance by non-Jewish converts to Christ.

What’s a Jerusalem church leader to do?, especially when rumor had it that Paul was telling his converts to “shine off” all that Jewish ritual stuff, especially circumcision. What James had to do was build a bridge between the two factions, and center on the basic and essential commitment to Jesus, as Lord and Savior. In the second half of Chapter 2, James welds the seam between faith and works by pointing out – with illustrations – that when the mouth professes faith, there must be demonstrations of how that faith impacts the way we live, the manner in which we deal with the people in our lives, and the acts of mercy that reflect the Spirit of our Lord. Under the leadership of James, the first Jerusalem Council determined that Gentiles were liberated from observance of most Jewish Ceremonial Law, and were fully admitted to the Christian community (Acts 15).

We must remember that there is an ethical dimension to our Christian life. While the Ceremonial Law of Moses is not part of our equation, the Moral Law has not been superseded. “By their fruits you will know them.” Faith and works are not opposites; rather, they are inseparable parts of the whole package of Christian living. We are saved “for” works of righteousness, not “by” them.

There is a natural flow from James’ discussion about faith and works, to consideration of the human capacity to speak. The tongue articulates thought. Teachers are an example of the awesome responsibility of speech. What we say must be true, genuine, important. What we say can either bless or curse. “How” we convey our thoughts can determine the emotional content that prompts a response. No major undertaking can take place without first an exchange of words. There are “hot” words, and “comfort” words. There are slips of the tongue that can damage reputations, emotions, relationships.

So . . . seek genuine wisdom “which comes from above,” (3:17) that produces pure communication, peace, gentleness, reason, mercy, good fruits, steady, and straight talk. Healthy speaking habits flow out of the imparted wisdom from the Holy Spirit, impact in immeasurable ways our interpersonal relationships, and contribute to the unity of the body of Christ gathered in communities of faith – the church. We dare not ruin God’s day by stirring up the dust of wagging tongues and jealous, spiteful feelings within the multiple interfaces that exist in and through the church. “Real wisdom, God’s wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others” (3:15 TM).

RESPOND

Between the challenge of aligning our professed faith with our life patterns of behavior in work and relationships, and the disciplining of our speech with Godly wisdom, there is a lot of work to be done on a daily basis. During this Advent Season, when our focus is on the greatest gift – Jesus – consider bringing into closer alignment your profession of faith and your expressions of the Royal Law.

PRAY

Gracious God, you have already given so much to the world, and to me. Grant me the sensitivity and the resolve to faithfully exhibit what it means to be Christ’s disciple, remembering that “God’s love is ever and always, eternally present to all who fear him” (Psalm 103:17 TM).

- D.E.E.

READ

James 4:1 – 5:6

Psalm 104

REFLECT**Qualities in Relationships**

Virtually everyone has at least two sets of relationships to deal with on a daily basis: persons, and things. James is not timid about weighing in on dysfunction in relationships that erupt into “quarrels and conflicts.” Right to the point, he fingers our tendency to slip into the pleasure-driven life, where “what I want, when I want it,” is the basis of our action plan. When “our way” is the driving force, we tend to set people against each other, and to crave things that clutter our lives with needless baggage. Not only that, the craving of pleasure can shut the door on our conversations with the Master, Jesus.

It’s really quite simple. Our God is a jealous God, who requires fidelity in our relationship with Him. It is He who gives grace in abundance. It is He who seeks to welcome us, coming with our hands clean, and our hearts pure. It is He who longs for us to come to terms with an undivided allegiance to Him. We cannot serve two masters. My son has played the lead role in a French farce, *Servant to Two Masters*. While it is a hilarious comedy, there is an underlying tragedy conveyed by the absolute impossibility and overpowering frustration in trying to keep both masters served and happy. If the playwright can capture the truth, why can’t we learn to choose absolutely our Master Jesus, and live for Him truly?

More specifically, James counsels us, not only to hold “things” lightly, but to treat our brothers and sisters fairly, especially with reference to matters of the common law of the land. In many ways, this counsel is an extension of the issue of selfish indulgence noted above. James in effect says, “Clean it up,” in your manner of relating to others, and cut out the judgmentalism.

Then there is the issue of social justice. With James, “richness” does not cut it. He points out that no matter the quality of one’s wardrobe, the extent of one’s wealth, or the size of one’s properties, you can’t avoid the obligation to pay the laborer a fair wage. It all will decay anyway, some day – although James didn’t account for the fact that gold and silver don’t rust, they just tarnish. Nowhere in the Scriptures can it be found that a man can be in right relationship with God if he is acting unjustly toward his fellows.

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) wrote a valuable instruction: “I know that God has given us the use of goods, but only as far as is necessary. . . . It is absurd and disgraceful for one to live magnificently and luxuriously when so many are hungry.” I believe my mother had read this quote. I got the message.

This part of the Christian’s life can, in our generally affluent national environment, provide challenges to our self-satisfying tendencies. After all, can we withstand the onslaught of glitzy advertising? We had better be very careful in our responses.

RESPOND

This is the Advent/Christmas season, a time when our “wants” are highlighted by the gifting we embrace so readily. Then there are the “wants” that appear on the gift lists from spouses, children, grandchildren (especially), and get caught up in the frenzy of it all. Perhaps this is the year when we put into perspective the multiple areas of counsel we find in the Epistle of James, and commit to a careful, while fully loving, expression of our primary allegiance to the Christ Child, and give gifts out of spiritual sensitivity.

PRAY

My loving Lord, who continues to be the giver of all good things, “Let me sing to God all my life long, sing hymns to my God as long as I live!” (Psalm 104:33 TM).

- D.E.E.

READ

James 5:7-20

Psalm 105

REFLECT**Hang in There !**

Waiting for an expected event to happen over an extended lead time is extremely difficult for some of us. I don't even like to stand in line for a clerk to check my purchases, or buy a ticket, or wait for the doors to open at the concert hall or theater. Yet we spend a lot of time waiting; frustrations mount, negative feelings bubble up, and we're likely to say things, or express our anxieties in unhealthy ways. It is most true when the things we're waiting for are really, really important, at least to us. I know it for a fact.

When James winds up his letter to the Jewish Christians scattered abroad, he addressed an expectation for the soon return of their Lord. Dispersed around their world because of persecution, working at the business of living in strange territory, performing different tasks, sometimes as slaves, these disciples were longing for the Lord to return, and liberate them. He said He would come back. Where is He? Doesn't He know that life is hard for us?

James simply says "Be patient" (5:7). That's easy for him to say. And farmers do it every cycle. Plow the ground. Plant the seed. Wait for the harvest. Nothing to it. So, depend on it: the coming of the Lord is near. We don't quite know how to deal with the Second Coming in our time. We grasp the biblical counsel that we don't know *when* the Lord will return. We know it will happen *suddenly*. And we have heard that we should simply be patient, and make sure we are *prepared* for His coming. It is an active patience that believes His coming will be a reality, and we determine to be ready when He comes. We affirm it in the Creeds. We cherish the prospect of That Day.

The final nine verses in James' letter provide a powerful capsule of descriptors of what the Christian community should be. Beginning with a caution about the integrity of what we say to each other, let our words

carry a crystal clear meaning; no duplicity; no crooked words. When the faithful can depend on the veracity of everything that is said in the fellowship, then a host of other expressions of faith can flow freely.

For those who are suffering, there is a prayer circle that sustains them. There will be a singing church that reflects the exuberance of the redeemed. I have a leather bound Methodist hymnal that belonged to Bishop Amstutz of Singapore, who, during his years of incarceration by the Japanese in WW II, found his strength for survival in the Bible, and in the hymns that he sang daily. Though alone in his cell, he experienced the power of the singing church that kept him alive. Reminds us of Paul in a Roman jail cell.

The healthy church is a healing church, where the sick and wounded find sustaining grace and a path to wellness as the faithful pray for God's response to needs. Restoration takes place. Broken bodies become whole again. God-things happen. All because the healthy church is a praying church. In such an environment of a caring, loving community, even the "strays" can find restoration in the fellowship of believers.

Well, James has provided a wealth of counsel for Christians across the centuries. Even though his original audience was a scattered group of newly converted Jewish people, his straightforward clues for fulfilling, effective Christian living still hold true. We neglect them to our peril.

RESPOND

A quick review of the five brief chapters in the Epistle of James might suggest a valuable check list for our commitment to become a maturing, faithful follower of Jesus Christ. As a New Year comes around shortly, let James set us on an upward growth curve in our discipleship.

PRAY

Loving Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, send Your Spirit's guiding presence to lead me into new dimensions of my relationship with You, as I "Remember this! He led his people out singing for joy; his chosen people marched, singing their hearts out" (Psalm 105:43 TM). Let me sing!

- David E. Edwards

Walk Through The Bible Readings
MONTH AT A GLANCE

December 17-21 Week 51

Monday	Hebrews 7-10	Psalm 101
Tuesday	Hebrews 11-13	Psalm 102
Wednesday	James	Psalm 103
Thursday	1-2 Peter	Psalm 104
Friday	1-2-3 John, Jude	Psalm 105

December 24-28 Week 52

Monday	Revelation 1-5	Psalm 106
Tuesday	Revelation 6-9	Psalm 107
Wednesday	Revelation 10-14	Psalm 108
Thursday	Revelation 15-18	Psalm 109
Friday	Revelation 19-22	Psalm 110

PRAYER JOURNAL

This week I am praying for . . .

. . . the families and staff of Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in Denver, Colorado, as well as for physical and emotional healing of all who have been directly or indirectly affected by the shootings this past week.

. . . the two Homework Houses in Azusa as they prepare to launch their new Teen Program that will help local high school students as they chart their future courses.

And . . .
