

So that for the next five weeks, we are going to be spending the weeks in the book of James. And James is five chapters long. So for the next five weeks, every week, we're going to be talking about one of the chapters.

James. I encourage you always to read along. This is a great way to get into the world if you are not already. And there is this devotional that was put together. I was going to bring an example, and I forgot. But we have this devotional written by our very own DJ Hoc deejay loves to be in the word.

He loves to put devotionals together. So I asked him to write something for us. So there are little brochures out there. You can grab one on your way out, or it's also a link on our U-verse, the U version app under Horizons. So James is found in the New Testament. It's right after Philemon and Hebrews, and right away, verse chapter, verse one; it says that this letter is from James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, unfortunately, they didn't put last names on these documents, which would have been helpful, but they didn't even use last names at that time. And we know now that last names are important. They're important for us to identify who we're talking to or who we're communicating with. Now, I have an example of this, a couple of years ago, I was serving as pastor at the church in Omaha, and I got a phone call, and I had this person; it was a member of our church, and I had this person programmed into my phone, and it came up, I'm going to call her Tammy Starlin, and it came up as Tammy Starling.

And so here's the first confusion of the story. There were two Tammy starlings at the church. They happened to be sisters-in-law. So Tammy's married brothers and they both took on the last names. And so I got this phone call, and now I don't hear, I don't hear from either one of them very often. So I thought it was a little odd that they were calling.

And, of course, immediately, I thought maybe there was some sort of emergency. That's why people usually call their pastor. And so I answered the phone, not knowing which Tammy I was talking to. And so I answered the phone. I'm like, Hello? And she's like, Hey, Mandy, how's it going? And I was like, Fine, how are you? She's like, Good.

She's like, How is your family? And I was like, Good. How's your family? And at this point, I'm a little confused. Again, most people don't just call up their pastor and check in on their and how they're how they and their family are doing. And so I'm trying to decipher the voice, her personality. I'm trying to figure out which Tammy I'm talking to.

And just as I figure out which Tammy I'm talking to, she invites me and my family to join her for Thanksgiving. Now I'm even more confused because people don't usually call their pastor just to check in on them, and they don't usually invite them to Thanksgiving. It's not that, you know, we weren't new to the area. We weren't new to the church.

I had been at the church for a long time. People knew that I had family nearby. And so I respectfully declined. And I said, Well, thank you so much for thinking about us. But we already have plans for Thanksgiving. And that's why I said this. I realized maybe she is the one that's confused. And so I said, Hey, Tammy, this is Mandy, Pastor Mandy, And she just lost it.

She's like, Oh my gosh, I was trying to call my niece Mandy, and I called my pastor, and she laughed about that for so long, and she felt so embarrassed about that. Now, when I was talking to her, I was using her voice and her personality to figure out who she was. And she wasn't doing that with me.

She assumed she knew who she was calling. But that's what we've done with a lot of the books in the Bible. We've used the voice and the personality to figure out just who is writing this book or this letter. Now, it says right away that the author was James, but it might have been many of the James of the first generation.

There was James, Jesus's brother. There was James the lesser there was James, son of Zebedee. Now, scholars can say that they can pretty much rule out that it wasn't the Apostle James since he died before this was likely written. Other scholars question proficiency in Greek. This author was pretty proficient with Greek, and so they suggest that, well, maybe it wasn't Jesus, Jesus's brother then, but we don't know for sure now.

There's another possibility. It could have been a pseudonym writer, somebody someone writing in the name of James, which was a common practice back then. But we don't know for sure now. Scholars do not agree with this, but most of them think that it probably was James, Jesus's brother, or someone writing under the name of James, Jesus's brother. This is the brother of Jesus, who was the one who initially rejected Jesus and then became a key leader in the church.

So, James, the book of James is in the section of the Bible known as the General Letters, along with Hebrews and first and second Peter and first and second and third John and Jude. And these are general or universal letters as opposed to the Apostle Paul's letters, which were to specific churches, usually with specific problems. So this was to more of a general audience.

Now, for a long time, almost since the very beginning, when the Bible was being put together, canonized, we call it. People have questioned why the letter of James and some of the other general letters were even included in the Bible. Now, the book was labeled as the Epistle or the letter of the straw compared to some of the other books of the Bible.

Now, Martin Luther, who sparked the Reformation movement, is the one who called this book The Letter of Straw. Martin Luther was an important person in our faith history. Martin Luther at the time, there was this Catholic Church, Catholic Church, and Martin Luther questioned some of the things that were happening in the church. He looked at the church, and he said, The church, how it looks today, seems like it's a little far from the teachings of Jesus.

It's kind of straying from the good news message of Jesus, and Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church, and we from that, we have the Catholic Church, and then from that, we have the Protestant churches, which are Methodists and Presbyterians and Lutherans after Martin Luther Baptist and so on. So if we think, why would such an important person in our faith story disregard one of the books of the Bible?

Now, James does only mention Jesus twice, and Martin Luther, in his arguments against the Book of James, claims that it has no gospel character. Now, Luther's point is that it was a good book, but it was more of a secular book with just good moral teachings that it doesn't really tell the story of the good news of Jesus.

Now, Cathar says that Martin Luther's time was very hyper-focused on the value of works or actions or deeds. And Luther pointed out that over and over in Scripture, it says that all we need is to have faith in Jesus. We don't have to do anything to earn this salvation. And Martin Luther pointed out that the Apostle Paul's letters are all about salvation, about faith in Jesus.

So one example Paul writes in Galatians chapter two. Paul says, However, we know that a person isn't made righteous by the works of the law, but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We ourselves believed in

Christ Jesus so that we could be made righteous by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law because no one will be made righteous by the works of the law.

Three times, Paul emphasizes The amazing truth of faith in Jesus is what matters, not what we do by following the law. So then James says in In chapter two, James says as the lifeless body is dead, faith without actions is dead. And some people find this. The statement from James is a little bit too intrusive like you're going to tell me what to do, and so some people disregard it.

And so we ask ourselves, which is it? Is it faith in Jesus that matters? Or do we need to have actions that back up our faith? It's very true that the core of the United Methodist values and beliefs systems, the tenets of one of what they believe, what we believe as followers of Christ, is that we believe in God's grace, that it is by the grace of God that we are saved.

And it is a free gift. And we don't have to do anything to earn it. That's why in the United Methodist Church, we have an open communion table. When we have the Lord's Supper here, we invite everyone to come to be a part. It's why we do infant baptisms in the United Methodist Church because we believe in the power of God's grace.

So if so many people question James, if there may be some controversy of why this letter was even included if Jesus is only mentioned twice in the whole letter, what do we do with it? Well, Jesus spent a lot of time with the Pharisees, and the Pharisees constantly challenged Jesus. And we often say that the Pharisees were being too legalistic, which is true in many of the cases.

Jesus is pointing out that relationships are more important than the laws. But more often, Jesus was pointing out to the Pharisees how they were being hypocrites. They were acting pious and righteous but lacked the motives that came from loving God and loving their neighbor. So it feels kind of like, well, maybe James is stepping into this Pharisee mindset.

So if James is stepping into this Pharisee mindset, why do we even care about what James has to say? Are we being misled by James? Well, I don't think so. And here is why. The Book of James is about speech and actions and what you should do because of your faith, James says. A verbal profession of faith that fails to be lived out with appropriate behaviors is really no faith at all.

So the truth is, the author, James, did only mention Jesus twice, and it's not even really about Jesus; just kind of mentioned Jesus twice. That's true. But what's also true is that James knows the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's very words on moral teachings, on how we should act and what we should say, and what we should do.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us examples of how to live a life as a follower, as a follower of Christ. In fact, there are more than 200 correlations between the Book of James to the Sermon on the Mount 20 times more than 20 times. What James is saying is Jesus is very words. So what James has to say is important.

They're important teachings that actually came from Jesus. So in chapter one of James, there are some great verses that come from chapter one. First of all, this one is a great verse, but it's also a challenging verse. It says, consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, verse 19 and 20 say, My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. And we'll talk more later in our sermon series about our words. And then, in verse 22, it says, Do not mirror, merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Now, James knows this. James understands this. The Apostle Paul understands this and knows that we are fractured and inconsistent humans. And as fractured and inconsistent humans, we need wisdom. We need wisdom in order to have faith in Jesus in the first place. We need wisdom to put our faith into action, and that is one of the central themes of the Book of James.

It's about wisdom. In chapter one, verse five, James says, But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask. Now, I think wisdom is a choice between life and death, and you can't have both. And in faith in Jesus.

We have a life now seven times in the book of James. Is this the word perfection or wholeness? Because our whole life should reflect, reflect Jesus. Now, this Christian perfection that we should be striving for is not the same as what we think about as perfection in our everyday life of being a perfectionist. Just because perfection without Jesus means keeping score.

We just read the verse that God doesn't keep score but perfection in our everyday life without Jesus means that we keep score. When we get things wrong. It means that we feel guilty when we mess up, or we feel guilty that we are not doing enough. And that's not so with Christian perfection. Christian perfection is more about a heart and life full of love and grace and forgiveness, and all the other attributes of God and Jesus.

And sometimes, we need wisdom in order to change our behavior. We need to seek out wisdom in order to learn about love and grace, and forgiveness. And sometimes we need training. We need reminders. We need things that help us. And that's what the Book of James is all about.

Another way that we gain wisdom is by serving others.

Now the reason it's so important that we gain this wisdom is so that we are not fake so that we are not two-faced. Now there are a bunch we could list off a lot of things reasons why non-Christians hate or dislike Christians. Non-Christians dislike Christians because they say sometimes they are too faked or judgmental. They say they follow Jesus, but they don't act like Jesus.

They say that they love God and their neighbor. But many, many churches are not welcoming. Many churches are closed-minded; non-Church non-Christians say about Christians that we have too many rules and that we are against more things than we are for that; they don't see a difference between how a Christian acts and how a non-Christian acts. So why would they want to be a part of something like that?

Sometimes they say that Christians pretend they don't have any problems because they are God.

Non-Christians will say about Christians that that was a cult that was full of full all goody-goodies, that we act one way in church and act another way outside of the church. And many of these things that I just listed sound an awful lot like the Pharisees. So how do we know if we're not being fake? Well, the very end of chapter one makes it pretty clear what we do is help others.

Chapter one, verse 27 says, True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God. The Father is this to care for orphans and widows and their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us. See what we say with our mouths. If we say I am a Christian, but we have no actions to back it up, it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to people outside of this church now.

God does not love us more if we do good things. God's love is unconditional regardless. But God delights when we do things that are in line with what he wants. Now, Martin Luther was not wrong. We do need to emphasize the good news about Jesus. The faith. Our faith in Jesus is what saves us and gives us a life that is free, free from the burdens of the law, free that we are free from feeling like failures all the time.

We are free from feeling like we're not doing enough, that we're not giving enough. We are free from that. But Jesus makes it pretty clear too. And James emphasizes exactly what Jesus taught, that we should be doing things to go on to this Christian perfection where love fills our hearts. Now, my vision for Horizons is to be a different kind of church.

And I've been here for just over a year, and I already see it. We already are a different kind of church. But imagine, imagine a church so on fire for loving Jesus and loving others that unchurched people want to be a part of what is happening here in our building. I want people who are done with hypocritical Christians to see Horizons as simply a church that is following Jesus.

That's James's message in this letter, and that's what Jesus said. He said that there is a simple way for others to know about him. And I want to leave you with these final words. This is what I want to close with. This is Jesus's words found in John chapter 13. Jesus said I give you a new commandment. Love each other just as I have loved you.

So you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples when you love each other. Let's pray. Gracious God, let us be more than just hearers of the word. But let us be doers. Let us understand that we are free from the bondage of our sins in our past.

That we are, we are changed when we have faith in you. But God also reminds us that you want us to love our neighbor and to love God. But you also understand that we are inconsistent humans, that we make mistakes, that we try our best, and you continue to just love us and allow us to be more than just hearers of the word.

Allow us to be doers. Allow us to work for this church, for Horizons community church to be a church that is so on fire, for loving Jesus and loving others that the people in our community who don't have a family say, I want to know what's going on in that church. I want to be a part of that church.

God, help us to find ways to be on fire for loving you and loving others. We say this all in Jesus' name. Amen.