

We're in the book of James in a series called "Pure Religion." And the title is kind of interesting to me because even when I think about this word, religion, all sorts of images come to my mind. I grew up going to church. My dad was in ministry long before I was alive. We always seemed to be around the church. So, when I think about religion, I think of that church building in which we spent so much time. And I think about the people who were a part of that community. I think about what it means to be a religious person. I think about people whose character was something that I desired to model. And I think about people who used religion as a power play or a facade to hide deeper issues. I hope that as we go through this letter of James, you'll see something new in this word, "religion." Maybe you have had experiences around religion that weren't positive. Maybe James could set out a new kind of course for you.

James set an example of a religious type person that I want to hear more about. And even before we get to his teaching, we get to see the motivation of James. The main idea for this message is that James points beyond himself to God, who gathers the scattered. James views his role as pointing people to God who gathers what has been scattered. My hope for you is that you could hear this about God and find ways to speak hope to the places that have been scattered. Maybe where you work, you feel a sense of scattered, of relationships and culture broke and separated.

My desire is that you would find a way to speak the hope of God who gathers. Maybe the sense of scattered is in your family. Maybe things have been broken for a while. My desire for you is that you would find a way to speak the hope of God, who gathers together what has been scattered. Maybe the scattered is in you. Perhaps the sense of scatteredness is in your soul, and you feel like something has been off for a while. My hope for you is that you would hear the voice of God who wants to redeem and bring together what is in you that has been scattered and bring it back together again.

About the Letter

But before we get to the text, a little bit of the context of this letter. This letter was written probably in the mid AD 40s. So about ten years or so after Jesus was on earth. James is writing to an audience that has a Jewish background. They're probably Jewish Christians. They don't live near James in Jerusalem, but they live out beyond that area.

The letter of James was acknowledged early on in church history to be authoritative. Early Christian leaders like Clement, Augustine, and Athanasius recognized the authority of this letter. The letter of James takes an interesting twist during the Reformation. Martin Luther had challenges with the teaching. He struggled to reconcile his understanding of faith, and the actions that James talks about that are connected to faith (as we'll see in chapter two). Though Luther's critique is important to work through, the letter has remained accepted from early on.

What's also interesting is the format of this letter. Often, the New Testament letters are written to specific people or certain places. This letter has no direct audience. One modern historian sees this letter as a sermon - a collection of teaching from James, sent out to different churches, meant for someone to stand up in their gathering and teach. There are vivid language, alliterations, and word-plays that would have best comes across in oration.

But we're going to focus on just the first verse. The first verse is the lens through which we see the posture of the author, James. I think this verse could have something important to say to each of us.

Three words will guide our discussion: James, servant, and scattered.

James

The first word is James. James was the leader of the early church at this time of this letter. He was based in Jerusalem, but he was well-known. He was renowned for his character and righteousness. He was called "James the Just" because he was viewed as someone who was the kind of religious person that you would want to be like. One of my favorite descriptions of James comes from an early church historian. He said that James had knees like a camel. The knees of a camel are large. What did the historian mean by that description? James spent much of his time in the temple on his knees in prayer for people. He spent so much time in prayer for people that his knees became calloused and looked like the knees of a camel. It's a beautiful picture of the heart and the character of James that this was someone whose righteousness was renowned in his day.

Even in his death, his character stands out. Tradition says James was martyred before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. They brought him to the top of the temple and threw him down. He didn't die despite the fall, so they picked up stones and began to stone him.

Tradition says that as they began to stone him, he kneeled and prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing." A Jewish leader standing nearby who heard him praying tried to stop the entire thing, saying, "Don't you see that he's praying for you?" Even in his death, James was a person of deep character and righteousness.

Servant

The second word is servant. James identifies himself as a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This idea of a servant in the ancient world was the idea of being bonded to someone. To put it another way, it means to point to someone beyond yourself. This is not merely his story and his righteousness, but James is pointing beyond himself to something else that's going on in the world. He is pointing beyond himself to someone else - to God and the Lord Jesus Christ,

In the gospel of John, there is a fascinating story about John the Baptizer. When John the Baptizer came along, he started a ministry, and he was hugely popular. People came from all over to hear John. He built a massive following. Then Jesus came on the scene. When Jesus came along, people left John's ministry to go over to Jesus' ministry. It was a crisis moment for the disciples of John, and the disciples of John asked him to do something about this exodus. But John tells them this work has never been about establishing his thing. This was always about Jesus. Jesus must increase - more attention needs to go to Jesus. That's a picture of what servanthood means here. When James said that he was a servant, his posture was not about getting his agenda across. His purpose was for people to turn their attention to what God was doing through Jesus.

What's also interesting about James as a servant of Jesus is that James already had a relationship connection with Jesus. James was the half-brother of Jesus. He didn't mention the part that he was related to Jesus. Instead, he said that he is the servant of Jesus.

If James was related to Jesus, why not lead with that? If he did, everyone would read his letter. Everyone would pay attention to it. If you can say you're related to Jesus, that's your platform. Instead, what mattered to James was not his family connections, but his personal relationship with the Father. He chose to see himself as a servant, as one pointing people to Jesus.

There's a deep humility in James that's not about his connections. It's not about who he knows. It's who is known by this heavenly Father. Two writers in the New Testament use servant as the sole descriptor of their role. Other writers used apostle and different things like that, but there are only two writers who use this word servant when they identify themselves. One is James, and the other person is Jude. What did James and Jude have in common? They were both half-brothers of Jesus. Isn't it interesting the two people who could have claimed authority,

power, and influence chose instead to point beyond themselves and point people to Jesus?

There's something powerful in their willingness to let go of power. There's a story of George Washington following the Revolutionary War that gives a similar picture of letting go of power. Washington had an opportunity in which everyone was offering him power. He could have set up a royalty or dictatorship. He could have taken charge of this nation in such a way in which he alone ruled. Instead, when everyone offered him power, he retired. He declined. Supposedly King George in England, upon hearing that Washington had the offer of power and declined, said that, if he declines power, Washington will become the greatest person in the world. One modern historian put it this way, "Washington became the supreme example of the leader who could be trusted with power because he was so ready to give it up" (Joseph Ellis).

You get that sense from James. You sense his intention is that your attention would be drawn to Jesus. There's humility, but there's also purpose in that. James sees something going on in the world that he longs for people to see. What is the story? I think it's our third word, scattered.

Scattered

The word, scattered, is this technical word, diaspora. It referred to the Jewish people after they had been taken into exile during the 6-8th centuries B.C. They were taken into exile by conquered nations and spread out over the known world. And so you had a tribe that God had designed for a land, and now they're no longer here. They're scattered among the nations.

But that's not the end of the story. In the midst of this scattering, the prophets came along, and they said that, though you are scattered, there will be a day when God will regather you as one. They were scattered as the result of sin, separated from God. But a day is coming when God would deal with the very thing that scattered them (sin), and they would be rejoined with him.

The prophets spoke of a Messiah figure who would regather God's people. How would the Messiah do that? He would deal with the very thing that sent them into exile in the first place, sin. Sin would be forgiven. Exile would be undone. God would do something in space and time to regather what had been separated.

This idea of exile and return was core to the biblical narrative. When Jesus arrived, He told stories and acts in such a way to bring up this theme about exile and return. One of his most famous parables is about a father who has two sons. One of the sons turns away from the Father, becomes separate from the Father, and goes to a foreign land. That's the story of exile. While in this foreign land, something happens to the son. There's a change, repentance, and he returns to the Father. That's return.

That's being scattered and gathered back together. Jesus is talking about what God is going to do one day in full.

I wonder if what James is saying is that part of his role is the vehicle through which God is gathering back that which has been scattered. He is pointing beyond himself for people to see Jesus. Why? Because in Jesus, God is gathering back that which has been scattered. His audience is scattered, but they have a common bond, and they have a common future in the person of Jesus. We can read James and all of the imperatives and particulars, but the danger is that you could lose the overarching piece that ties it all together. God is bringing back together that which has been scattered.

Maybe you need to hear that today. Perhaps you're here today, and you feel the scatteredness of life. Maybe you're in places where things seem in exile, maybe you are in environments that feel broken, and you've been wondering, "How can this be made whole?" Maybe you feel a separation in you, you feel lost and out of place. Here's the hope that James has for you: God gathers what has been scattered.

This is what Jesus did on the Cross. Jesus joined together that which has been scattered. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians [Eph. 2.13-14]. Life is no longer about being scattered. Everyone who says yes to Jesus is part of the same family. Everyone who says yes to Jesus is part of the same community that God is gathering together.

So, what do we do with this first sentence of the letter of James? What are the areas that have been scattered in your life? What do you walk into each day that feels off, that feels like it's an exile? Maybe it's a relationship you can't seem to turn the corner on. Perhaps it's something at work that seems off. Maybe your call today is to ask the question, "What does this environment need to be made whole?" Maybe God will use you as a vehicle of redemption right where you are.

Or maybe you read this and realize that the scatteredness is in you. Maybe there are ways in which you need to speak hope to yourself. Lately, I've been reading through the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk. It is a fascinating book. Habakkuk has a concern about how the world works, so he tells God about that concern. God says that He will deal with the issue - but in a way that Habakkuk won't like. At the end of the book, Habakkuk speaks a declaration of hope in the midst of an uncertain future.

Whatever the future will bring, Habakkuk has found words of hope. The very last verse of this passage, the very end of the letter of Habakkuk, is literally in parentheses "This is for the song leader to be accompanied with string instruments." Reading that, I realized that while I had been reading this book as a conversation confined to Habakkuk and God, this message of hope was meant to be sung. In other words, it wasn't only for Habakkuk,

but it was meant to be something that other people would need to sing to themselves.

Maybe for you today, you need to sing hope to yourself. Maybe God's regathering needs to start with you. You have that invitation because Jesus has made the way for you from the Cross.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2010 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1439-1SC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, October 20, 2019 at Central Peninsula Church South.

www.cpc.org