

JAMES

Have you ever bought a piece of furniture that needs assembly when you get home, perhaps say a bunk-bed for your kids? IKEA (not found in South Africa) is famous for flat-pack furniture where you buy for example cupboard or bookshelf at their warehouse, take it home and then assemble it yourself. Now there are two types of people in this world: One is where they don't need the instructions that come with the furniture as they can just visualise how the pieces fit together and within a few minutes they're standing back looking proudly at the new piece of furniture. But maybe you are like the other type of person who definitely needs the instructions that come with the pack and even then struggle to make sense of them. You read, "Using a T20 Torx wrench attach the vertical cross brace to the horizontal panel using the supplied M5 by 40mm bolts," – What! And then two weeks later and after a few YouTube videos you finally figure out how those bunk beds fit together, but then you read the instruction pamphlet, bold capitals "CAUTION - DO NOT OVER TIGHTEN." What does that mean? How tight is over-tight? And so for the rest of your life, there is a nagging doubt in the back your mind about that piece of furniture – you're never quite as ease wondering when that bunkbed will come crashing down in the middle of the night complete with your children.

Good sensible instructions are essential, but they must be instructions that are easy to understand and well-written instructions make a complicated topic look simple. We are starting a new series in the book of James and essentially James is a practical book of instructions that anybody can follow.

James gets straight to the point and is quite unique in its style. So who was James? James was Jesus' little brother, but we are not told, in scripture, a lot about Jesus' family. We do know Jesus had at least four other brothers (half-brothers) as mentioned in Matthew 13: James, Joses, Simon, Jude and it is probable that he had some sisters. The father of the household Joseph, we can assume, died sometime before Jesus started his ministry because there is no other mention of him in scripture.

James was a common name in those days, and this James is not the same James as one of Jesus' disciples. I can only guess, but it must have been difficult for James to grow up under the shadow of his big brother Jesus. Jesus never sinned – imagine bringing up a child who never did anything wrong! "Jesus, have you done your homework?"

"Yes, mom."

"Jesus, have you cleaned your room?"

"Yes mom, and can I wash the dishes tonight?"

But for James and his brothers things were very different – they were, like all little boys – hmm, let's say less than perfect. Maybe he heard more than once; "Why can't you be like your brother, Jesus."

By all accounts it appears that the brothers weren't that close and certainly by the time Jesus started his ministry they all thought he was a bit crazy – after all, they were all simple Galileans, carpenters and fishermen but now this brother of theirs was claiming to be the Messiah.

However, it was at the cross that everything changed, where James believed, changed his mind and attitude and from that time on referred to himself, not as the brother of Jesus but the servant of God and Jesus Christ – (older translations refer to him as a "bondslave" of Jesus.) James, his brothers and Mary were in the upper room at Pentecost where the power of the Holy Spirit fell upon them. We next see James in the book of Acts chapter 15 where he is identified as the Senior Pastor at Jerusalem where he got the title "James the Just." This pastor was wise, practical and had a shepherding, father's heart.

The book of James, not very doctrinal as you would find within the writings of Paul or John, and it is also somewhat unstructured, jumping randomly from one topic to another.

It is important to remember that as we go through this book over the next few weeks is that although it is a book of practical doing, it is not a book of rules and regulations. When this book was written, there were tons of rules and regulations set out by the religious leaders of the time, but James is not like that, but is a book written from a pastor's heart who wanted his readers to grow in love and faith towards God. It is very important to read this book with this understanding because it is easy to get caught up in the bondage of legalism and many have taken offence at this book and rejected it. In fact, the great Reformer Martin Luther (exactly 500 years ago) would have been happy to remove this book from the Bible – he called it an Epistle of straw. Martin Luther coming out of a dark and oppressive time in history discovered the truth that we are saved by faith and by faith alone, and so as he read the book of James, there was a great conflict in his mind because he interpreted the message of James as being saved by doing good things and obeying the rules and regulations. (We will take a closer look at this issue in chapter 4.)

We within the Evangelical Church wholeheartedly believe the truth of God's grace and salvation by faith alone. Consequently studying the book of James it is essential not to fall into a sense of guilt and condemnation because James was not written for people to get saved, but was written to already saved people, who love God passionately, to manage their lives well. Let me explain it this way: There is a popular range of books under the titles of ___ for Dummies. There is an endless list: Computers for Dummies, Cooking for Dummies, Painting of Dummies, Accounting for Dummies and so on. There is even one with the title "Neurosurgery for Dummies," please don't buy that book. However, I guess, in the day, James could have given the title to his book as "Managing Your Christian Life for Dummies," because it is just such a practical book dealing with the managing of everyday issues we encounter in our Christian lives – it's easy to read, easy to understand and very practical.

That was quite a lengthy introduction, but it is important to understand these management principles:

James 1

***1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:
Greetings.***

James was the senior pastor in Jerusalem, but here we see him writing to Jews converted to Christianity who are dispersed among the Gentile communities of Turkey, Greece and in Rome, and he immediately gets to the point:

Management Principle No. 1. Perseverance requires perseverance.

Here we link verse 2 with verse 12 because they deal with the same issue.

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Here James says to consider it pure joy whenever you go through a hard time - this is so counterintuitive. James doesn't say be happy when you face trials but to be joyful – joy and happiness are two different things – joy is a deep sense of wellbeing knowing with confidence God is in control. As pastors, we get to hear a lot of people's trials and struggles. Imagine if someone came into my office and said, "Pastor Alan, I've lost my job, my wife wants to leave me, and my doctor has diagnosed a terrible disease." Imagine if my response was, "What wonderful news, congratulations, I'm so happy for you!" I think retirement would be a lot sooner than expected. But James steps back and tell us that something else is going on – your trials have a purpose in that they are producing perseverance – it's a test and passing that test carries a reward, a crown of life.

No one likes to go through trials; trials are painful, hard and discouraging but we often fall into the trap of wanting to avoid the pain by-passing or short-circuiting what God is doing.

Management Principle No. 2. Wisdom requires wisdom.

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

We all need wisdom, insight and discernment in managing our lives for Christ. In facing the many decisions in a complicated and frustrating world, we need input from an external source beyond ourselves. If you are anything like me, I can't rely on my own knowledge, education or experience in dealing with the many situations I face daily. But God has promised to generously give us all the wisdom we need – but there is a catch – we have to be wise to get wisdom. The unwise person is someone who is double-minded, continually doubting and second-guessing themselves. James uses the image of a wave on a stormy sea being tossed about never sure, always hesitant and undecided.

So here is the point, when we need insight and discernment beyond ourselves, we need to trust in the source of that discernment (God) without doubt that it is reliable.

Verse 16 clarifies this point:

16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created

Management Principle No. 3. Action requires action

19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Hmm – Quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry; easier said than done. James says to take note of this – bold, italics and underlined, this is important because good intentions and wishful thinking will never stop you from anger and speaking angry, hurtful words – it requires intentional action - action requires action.

Of course, not all anger is bad anger because even Jesus got angry when he entered the Temple courts and overturned the merchants' tables. Jesus was angry at exploitation and injustice, so it's ok

to be angry at the right things, but our problem is we get angry at the wrong things. Our other problem is not that we get angry it's the speed at which we get angry – we can go from calm to raging fury in a split second, and worse speak words of poison with the intention to hurt and inflict injury. Luke 6:45 says, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." Then when we calm down we feel guilty and can't believe we said such hurtful things, we feel remorse, ask forgiveness, repent; that is until anger flares up again, and the cycle repeats itself over and over again.

Anger is contagious – if someone in your home is angry, the whole household is angry, if someone in your work office is angry the entire office is angry. I believe when we continue in anger we fall under an authority or stronghold of anger that is very difficult to break out of.

Think of the last time you got really angry – maybe a month ago, or a week ago, this morning (maybe you're angry right now,) what was it that made you angry? Maybe someone cut you off in traffic; your boss treated you unfairly, someone stole something from you - there may be a thousand reasons that made you angry. But think for a moment what the underlying feeling behind that anger was, and in every case, you will see that there was a choice – in other words, we get angry with the feeling. There is no person or situation that can make you angry; you can only make yourself angry. For example: Let's say someone steals something from you – it's the feeling of violation that makes you angry. Or you lose your job – it's the emotion of fear you respond to. Or all your friends were invited to a braai, but you weren't – it's the feeling of neglect that makes you angry. Or you discover people have been talking badly about you behind your back – it's the feeling of shame you respond to, consequently, we can take control over our feeling by actively choosing a Godly, Biblical response - action requires action.

I am not talking about sweeping every offence under the carpet or just pretending it didn't hurt because there are times that issues that need to be dealt with but in every case, we can make a choice not to allow that blind rage and anger to take control. But here the action required is to listen first – not just hear words but to really listen to what the other person is saying, to read their heart and emotions before you say a word yourself. When your wife says, "We need to talk" you know that it is going to be difficult and uncomfortable – "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds....." – But those conversations are good and healthy.

Verse 26 continues:

26 Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

We will be looking into the topic of taming the tongue in chapter 3 in two weeks. The point here is that managing our Christian lives is not passive but requires action:

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

There is a great deception that James wants to reveal to us in that we can study scripture, listen to endless sermons, watch countless Joyce Meyer YouTube videos, read tons of books but if it doesn't translate into some kind of action – doing - it is a deception. At some point in your life, you are going to have to take up a T20 Torx wrench and attach the vertical cross brace to the horizontal panel of life because otherwise, it is all just a worthless pile of wood.

I sometimes take the service for seniors at Carlisle Lodge or Nerina Gardens. None of the residents are in a position to become great missionaries or preachers or evangelists, but I do encourage them to put their faith into action by witnessing and praying for other residents, having a word of encouragement for each other – you see action doesn't have to be complicated.

Doing Christianity is managing what God has entrusted to us – it works out in such practical ways:

27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

The book of James was never written to put a burden of guilt, blame, legalism or condemnation on God's people but was written as a book of instructions so that we can live a fulfilled, fruitful and productive life for Him.