

## All In – The Epistle of James

The phrase “All in” has a subtly different meaning depending on which part of the English speaking world you are in.

- In the UK it tends to mean “inclusive of everything”, e.g. the all in price for the car is...
- In the US it means “to use up the last of your resources on something”, e.g. “I’m all in” in a game or on a deal,
- In Australia typically it means “something in which many people or everyone becomes involved”, e.g. an all in brawl

Regardless of which of the countries you draw your preferred definition from, the overall theme of the book of James could be covered by any of them. James, the author of the letter, whizzes from topic to topic, linking diverse ideas and concepts together with advice for practical living as a Christian. This is the letter of a wise Christian teacher, weaving strands drawn from the Old Testament, the oral teaching of Jesus and the challenges of the early church to answer the question: ‘What does it mean to be “All In” for Jesus?’ to live wholeheartedly for him and to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” [Jam 1 v 22]. The answers James lays down align with our three definitions above: wholeheartedness is inclusive of everything we are, it requires everything we have, and it is a team sport, requiring us to relate differently to all of the people with whom we come into contact.

In his excellent commentary on James, Alec Motyer builds a map of the book of James in three threes: having articulated three truths about God the Father in Jam1v18, James identifies three corresponding marks of God’s adopted children in Jam1vv26&27 and then expands those three marks across three large discussions of wholehearted character in the epistle (“Caring ministry” Jam2vv1-26, “Controlled Tongue” Jam3vv1-12, “Holy Life” Jam3v13-5v6) [p64, The Message of James, Motyer, IVP 2021].

For our series on James we are going to try to help our people to practically apply this practical book. In addition to planning sermons for the five weeks we will spend in James, we will provide a short meditation and practical response which folks at ACC can take out into the week. The sermon titles and content have been developed in advance and preachers will have begun preparation, but we can use Motyer’s map as a guide to provide a meditation and response activity to take away into the week. Ideally these weekly themes will be supported by digital ministries content and home group discussion.

<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>Preacher and passage</b>	<b>Week theme</b>
<u>29 May</u>	(Jam1:1-18) Don	Trials & temptations

### **Week1 - Character of the Father**

#### **Meditation**

Consider James 1:17-18:

*“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”*

- The character of God does not change, but our attitude to him can fluctuate. How are we to love and keep loving God when our hearts are so changeable? Verse 17 seems to give us an answer.
- In verse 17, James describes God as “the Father of lights”. What is the significance of that description?
- The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God. How do you read verse 18 in that light?

#### **Response**

The Children of Israel in the Old Testament consistently forgot God’s goodness and character. Their story is a continuous cycle of being saved by God and then forgetting, breaking His law and running from Him. To remind the people of God’s steadfast love and divine help, the prophet Samuel raised an Ebenezer (literally ‘stone of [God’s] help’) to commemorate God saving his people from the Philistines (1Sam7). Our own lives can often be subject to the same pattern: great feelings of closeness to God and sureness of his help and presence followed by forgetting His character and goodness. We need our own Ebenezers, to remind us of His active goodness in our lives: records of times when we know that God has helped us to serve as a reminder when we need it.

Make a list of the times that you know God has helped you in your life, put it somewhere visible where you will notice it as you go about your day. It will serve as a reminder of God’s goodness for when you need it.

<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>Preacher and passage</b>	<b>Week theme</b>
<u>5 June</u>	(Jam1:19-2:26) Don	Walking in the Spirit (“Listening & doing”- “Faith & deeds”) ( <i>Pentecost</i> )

## **Week2 - Adopted Children**

### **Meditation**

James is a ‘practical’ book, with wisdom and advice, building on the Old Testament and Jesus’s teaching to highlighting the importance of living our faith. James 1:26-27 are the core of the letter highlighting the three things that James sees as important for Christian living. *“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”*

- What three examples of life application does James highlight here? What are these three things look like in the 21st-century?

- What does “religion” mean here? (Sometimes chapter boundaries in the Bible inhibit our understanding. Chapter 2 v 1 uses the word “faith” - does that change your understanding of verses 26 and 27?)

- Do any one of these three things stand out for you? How would God like you to change your heart in response?

### **Response**

In the original Greek, James often uses the word ‘teleios’, meaning perfect, to link to the type of wholehearted living that he wants his readers to know. This is a New Testament expression of lots of Old Testament wisdom: In Proverbs 3v5 the writer tells us to “trust in the lord with all of our heart”, in the book of numbers God blesses Caleb for his “wholeheartedness”.

We all need time and space to hear the voice of God in our lives. One way of reflecting on the contents of our heart and how in rhythm it is with God’s is to keep a journal. As part of your quiet times this week would encourage you to journal your thoughts and feelings and prayers towards God everyday. If you are struggling to know how to start, take a blank page and a pen, read Psalm 139 v 23-24 and write down what is on your heart.

<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>Preacher and passage</b>	<b>Week theme</b>
<u>12 June</u>	(Jam3:1-18) Julie and Andy (Street Connect)	"Wise & foolish living" ("Words & Wisdom")

### **Week3 - Holy living**

James 4:7-10 says *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."*

- What are the four steps that James sets out here to enable us to receive Gods grace more effectively?
- What do you think you need to do in response to this passage?

James repeatedly emphasises that the key to wholehearted living is about the way that our relationship with God translates into a relationship with others; how our faith in God is shown to be living in the way that we treat one another.

- In the continuing verses (from v11 onwards) James speaks of how we should regard each other. What does James tell us about the measure of our hearts?
- Look at verses 13-17 of chapter 4. What steps can we take to guard against assuming that we know what Gods will for us is?

### **Response**

The book "Wholehearted" by Duncan Clark is an excellent exploration of the life of Caleb; but it is also a practical guide to getting closer to God's will for our lives. It contains meditations for finding quietness and intimacy with God, seeking God's voice to allow us to live wholeheartedly for him.

The expand on last week's journaling response, Duncan Clark suggests four questions to ask yourself in a journal entry to explore what is in our heart and set it out before God:

- Have I allowed anxiety into my heart as a result of not fully trust in God?
- Have I allowed unforgiveness into my heart as a result of carrying an offence?
- Have I allowed idolatry into my heart as a result of not putting God first in my life?
- Have I allowed discontent to trouble my heart as a result of my ingratitude?
- Have I allowed hardness to form in my heart as a result of my lack of appreciation of grace?

These are challenging questions, but by asking them repeatedly we will come to know our own heart better and what God's desires for it are. We would encourage you to use them as you journal this week.

<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>Preacher and passage</b>	<b>Week theme</b>
<u>19 June</u>	(Jam4:1-17) David McNaught	“Submission & security”

## **Week 4 - Controlled Tongue**

### **Meditation**

James spends longer on watching what we say, than on any other single topic in his letter. James 3 starts with a series of warnings about how the words we say influence the rest of our lives. In particular James highlights how our words affect our relationships with one another: words' ability to spread evil, to both bless and curse, and to be evidence of the character that is in us. Considering the start of James.3:

- How do the illustrations about the horse and the ship ( verses 2-5) help us to understand the power of the words we say?
- In verse 8, James says that *“no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”*. Have you found this to be true? What do you think the ‘deadly poison’ that James refers to is?
- In verses 9-11, James seems to be saying that it is the tongue’s pollution, not its sweetness that most affects our lives. Do you find this to be true? What can we do in light of this?

### **Response**

Of all The 10 Commandments, the second: *“Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain”* is one that many Christians would feel comfortable saying that we follow most or all of the time. We have a clear understanding of what it means to take “God’s name in vain”, as a swear word without the respect it deserves. In the sermon on the Mount in Matthew5, however Jesus sets a higher standard than the Commandments for Christian behaviour identifying anger and lust as the underlying cause of our sinfulness which need repentance as much as our actions.

Similarly, James sets a higher standard for our speech in his letter, drawing a direct connection in these versus between The hypocrisy of having lips which praise God and at the same time that curse other people. The radio personality Bernard Meltzer said: *“Before you speak ask yourself if what you are going to say is true, is kind, is necessary, is helpful. If the answer is no, maybe what you are about to say should be left unsaid.”*

This week ask God to help you to hold your speech to that standard, blessing those around you with words moderated by God’s love for them.

<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>Preacher and passage</b>	<b>Week theme</b>
<u>26 June</u>	(Jam5:1-20) Linda Todd	Care for others

### **Week5 - Caring for others**

#### **Meditation**

The Bible is candid about the dangers of wealth for distracting and diverting Christians, In James 2:5-7 the author gives us some very specific advice for how we should think about who is important in church: *“Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called?”*

- How does James back up his advice against showing a preference to those who are wealthy?
- Is James inviting us to assume that the poor always in the right right and the richer always in the wrong? What implications does this have for you?
- James 2:18-23 is absolutely clear about how a faith that is living appears in the life of a Christian. In what specific ways might living faith respond to the overwhelming needs in the world today?

#### **Response**

Being wholehearted after God is not about effort or trying really hard to follow and please Him. Instead, when we wholeheartedly pursue the things of God, we are freed from the burden of self-centredness, of always having to get our own way and be in control. By following after the example of Jesus, We can develop other-centred living, to give way to others and hold their interest above our own.

This week be creative think up some imaginative ways you can step away from self-centred living and learn to focus on other people. Choose a morning or afternoon to give your children or spouse your full attention, without distraction, call a friend and offer them your time to do exactly what they want to do. Practicing fully focusing on the needs of another person will help to create a new heart within you.