

Perfection

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] you likely remember when Joshua told the people of Israel, choose this day whom you will serve. Well, years later, the prophet Elijah stood and asked, how long will you waver between two opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal, follow him. And the text says the people didn't answer a word. In Joshua's day, they were quick to renew the covenant that they had with the true God, but in Elijah's day, you might say they were thoroughly double-minded.

Well, in essence, James confronts early Christians with the same question, how long will you waver between two opinions? How long will you be double-minded?

How long will you permit your hearts to be divided? Now, in the case of these early Christians, the problem isn't quite as obvious as wavering between worshipping Yahweh and worshipping false gods, but the problem is, in fact, the same at its core.

[1 : 10] Their allegiance is torn. Their words, and perhaps many of their actions, indicate that their allegiance is to God and to the Lord Jesus Christ, but they are also doing many other things that indicate their allegiance is not wholehearted.

So with their lips, they say, as for me and my family, we will worship the Lord, but many of their actions actually tell a different story. Let me begin by reading the first 18 verses of James chapter 1. If you'd like to follow along, go with me to James chapter 1. The Lord's brother writes, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes dispersed abroad, greetings. Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without doubting.

[2 : 35] For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.

Let the brother of humble circumstances boast in his exaltation, but let the rich boast in his humiliation, because he will pass away like a flower of the field.

For the sun rises, and together with the scorching wind dries up the grass, its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance perishes. In the same way, the rich person will wither away while pursuing his activities.

Blessed is the one who endures trials, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. No one undergoing a trial should say, I am being tempted by God, since God is not tempted by evil, and he himself doesn't tempt anyone. But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.

[3 : 47] Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. By his own choice, he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Now, what if I were to ask you, what is the primary theme of this passage? You see, most people see James, especially this first chapter, as a collection of New Testament proverbs, if you will. In fact, I've heard many comparisons made between James' epistle and the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Because James doesn't have a linear writing style, we often fail to see the connection between all of these various subject matters that he addresses.

It seems that he's just moving from one topic to another without much rhyme or reason, but I will argue that these subjects do, in fact, have a connection. So, what is the theme here?

Last time, I explained how James deals with various symptoms of one underlying problem. The symptoms are all over the place, which is why James is all over the place.

[5 : 06] In one passage, he's talking about how we speak. In another passage, he's talking about showing favoritism. In yet another, he's talking about a lack of good works.

But as I said, the one underlying problem is double-mindedness. It's instability. It's inconsistency. It's a two-souled person with a divided heart.

They have one foot on solid ground and the other foot on what amounts to sinking sand. Have you ever tried to step into a small boat from the shore or from a dock without someone holding on to that boat for you?

It isn't easy. There's always, always a good chance you end up in the water. And that's the danger that James addresses in this letter.

How long will you waver between two opinions? James says he is a double-minded man and unstable in all his ways. Just like God's people in the Old Testament, it's a kind of wavering and double-mindedness that the Bible often describes as adultery.

[6 : 18] We should be completely committed to God, our husband. But what happens is sometimes we flirt with the world.

We're having an affair with the world. And that's precisely what James accuses these early Christians of in the fourth chapter. You may remember, he says, you adulterous people.

Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. As I said last time, double-mindedness tears apart what should be singular.

That's why the analogy to marriage and adultery is so fitting. Adultery destroys the union between husband and wife. It tears apart what should be one. Jesus said, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

But double-mindedness does precisely that. It creates a rift between God and us, and it tears ourselves into two. Man is not supposed to have two souls moving in opposite directions.

[7 : 30] As Psalm 119 verse 2 says, happy are those who seek the Lord with all their heart. So again, double-mindedness is the underlying problem throughout this letter.

But what is the opposite of that? If double-mindedness is the thing we're trying to avoid, what are we trying to achieve?

So if we repent of our wavering and our inconsistencies as Christians, and we turn around, we face the opposite direction, what do we see?

Well, in a word, we see perfection. We see singularity. We see wholeness. Notice verse 4.

Let endurance have its full effect so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing. In place of mature, some Bibles read perfect, be perfect and complete.

[8 : 39] To be clear, this is not sinless perfection. But from the start of this letter, James is showing us the opposite of double-mindedness. He uses a word that means brought to completion, or fully developed, fully realized.

And this is a prominent theme. In James, it's a prominent theme, especially here in this passage. He uses the word twice in verse 4.

Let endurance have its full, there's the word, full effect, so that you may be mature, there it is again, and complete, that's a very similar word, lacking nothing, which further emphasizes the point.

In fact, James uses this same word a total of seven times in this letter. We see it twice in verse 4. Then he uses it again in verse 17.

Every good and perfect, that's the word, every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. Now obviously, he's not talking specifically about our perfection, our maturity in that verse, but it has a direct connection, which we'll come to.

[9 : 54] We see this word again in verse 25, when James refers to the perfect law of freedom. And then he uses it twice in chapter 2, verses 8 and 22, and then he uses it once more in James 3.2.

So that's a total of seven times, not including other very similar words and ideas. As one commentator says, careful study shows that this is not just one important theme, but the overarching theme of the whole letter, encompassing all the other major concerns.

So while double-mindedness is the underlying problem James is addressing in this letter, perfection or maturity or wholeness is the overarching theme.

When the double-minded person repents, this is what he's turning toward. This is what he's striving for. He's striving for perfection. But what do we mean by perfection?

Again, we're not talking about sinless perfection, so put that out of your mind. What does James mean by perfection? Well, remember what I said last time about the so-called Jewish Christianity of James.

[11 : 16] Now, that wasn't to say that James has a different kind of Christianity than, say, the Apostle Paul. But the writing of his letter does have a distinctly Jewish orientation.

James is a Jewish Christian writing to Jewish Christians. So unlike Paul, who primarily wrote to Gentiles, he's not frequently explaining Old Testament laws and themes.

Instead, he writes with the assumption that his audience already knows these things. He doesn't necessarily have to cite particular references because his audience already has the fundamental understanding they need to understand his points.

So when James talks about double-mindedness or having a divided heart, where do you suppose the minds of his Jewish audience went? What would they first think of?

Well, I've referenced a couple of passages already. Joshua 24, 1 Kings 18. I'm sure their minds to some degree or another went back to Israel's history in the Scriptures when they so often displayed divided hearts and double minds regarding their faithfulness to God.

[12 : 31] and I suspect, keep in mind, this is pure speculation on my part, but I suspect that one of the first passages that came to their minds was one that they learned from a very early age, one they memorized in their youth, and that is what we call the Shema in Deuteronomy 6.

Deuteronomy 6, starting with verse 4, says, Listen, Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children.

Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead.

Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates. Remember, these two things, Israel. First, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[13 : 45] He is undivided. Now, I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, but we see James making that very point in verse 17.

He says, the Father of lights does not change like shifting shadows. He remains constant. He remains consistent. He remains whole and undivided.

Even as three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, He is altogether unified in Himself. He is, I am who I am.

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And second, Israel was never to forget that, we might say, because the Lord is one, they should love the Lord their God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength.

Emphasis on the word all, completely, totally. God is undivided, so our love and our commitment and our devotion to Him should also be undivided.

[14 : 56] His character is pure, so our character should be pure. What did Jesus say in His Sermon on the Mount? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There's that word again, perfect, complete, finished, as opposed to partial and incomplete. Douglas Moo, commenting on James, says, nothing less than the complete moral integrity will ultimately satisfy the God who is Himself holy and righteous, completely set apart from sin.

I mentioned before that James is clearly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. And the theme of wholeness or completeness is really the primary theme of that sermon if you pay close attention.

Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Singular devotion to God is at the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount. For example, Jesus said, blessed are the pure in heart.

That word pure means unsoiled, it means sincere, it's a heart of integrity, if you will. Then what does Jesus do throughout the remainder of that sermon?

[16 : 15] He talks about the hypocrisy among many of the Jewish people, namely the Pharisees. He talks about their lack of integrity, their lack of singular devotion to God.

He explains how they seemingly follow the letter of the law, but their hearts are in a much different place. Sure, they didn't murder anyone, but they still had anger and resentment in their hearts.

Sure, they gave to the poor, but they did it to be applauded by people. Regarding materialism, Jesus said, no one can serve two masters, since either he will love the one and hate the other or he'll be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. So, several times in the sermon, he could have said, you double-minded people. Near the end, he makes it clear, there is only one way.

Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.

[17 : 28] Then, as he's wrapping up the sermon, he speaks of the two men, one building his house on solid foundation, another building his house on unstable sand. So, while many of the Jews attempted to keep, you know, one foot on the dock and the other foot on the boat, Jesus says, it doesn't work.

Only the pure in heart will see God. No one can serve two masters. There is only one way that leads to life. In Matthew 5, Jesus says, for I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, that is, a double-minded, so-called righteousness of the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, that might leave us feeling a little troubled. Who doesn't have a divided heart at times? Who among us is altogether pure in heart?

Well, listen closely to what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount. Don't think that I am come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. So, in other words, he didn't abolish the law. He did not abolish the law that calls us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength.

[18 : 57] He didn't abolish the law that calls for our singular devotion to God, but he did fulfill it.

Better yet, he fulfilled it on our behalf to our benefit. Of course, God made him who knew no sin to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Even here in James 1, James doesn't suggest the solution to our problem of double-mindedness is merely doing better. He doesn't say, okay, people, just get your act together.

Instead, he lovingly points us back to God. We need God. We need His grace. On our own, we are missing the dock and the boat.

We are falling in the water every time. Here in chapter 1, he says, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should what? Learn more? Read more?

[20 : 00] Study more? No, he says, if anyone lacks wisdom, he should ask God. Later in the book, he says, God gives greater grace.

Then he says, submit to God. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. We're not told to rely on ourselves.

And if we tried, we'd be no better than the Pharisees. But remember, Jesus said, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

So ultimately, we need God and His grace through Jesus Christ who fulfilled the law on our behalf. He loved God with all of His heart, with all of His soul, with all of His strength. So we need His righteousness, not our own.

[21 : 01] So keep that in the back of your mind as we continue to move through James. We'll come back to this. For now, let's work our way through these 18 verses in James 1.

Verse 2, Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Let's work our way backward through these verses. The goal here, the one thing that we want for ourselves is expressed in verse 4, that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

We want wholeness. This is where God is leading us, and this is where James is directing us. So how do we get there? Do you believe God is sovereign?

Do you believe all things work together for good for those who love God? I hope so. Otherwise, the path to wholeness will seem wildly counterintuitive.

[22 : 15] According to James, the path to wholeness is actually filled with suffering. It's filled with hardship. Trials lead to the testing of our faith, and this testing leads to endurance, and endurance

leads to wholeness.

And once again, you may notice the similarities between James and the Sermon on the Mount, because Jesus too spoke about the path to wholeness, the path to perfection, and he did so in very similar paradoxical terms.

I'm talking primarily about the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

[23 : 31] You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice because your reward is great in heaven.

Be glad and rejoice when you're persecuted? James says, consider it a great joy whenever you experience various trials.

Now you'll notice he doesn't tell us to feel joy when we're tried. He says, consider it a great joy. Think of it as joy.

Why? Because God is using it for something. He's using it for your ultimate good. No, it most certainly will not feel pleasant in the moment.

But you can still rejoice over God's purpose for it. You see, we need to engage our minds in what's happening. Perhaps we need to shift our perspective.

[24 : 36] So if we consider it a great joy, that is, we have the right perspective, whenever we face trials, the testing of our faith in those trials produces endurance. We get stronger.

Then if we let endurance have its full effect, let it continue on to completion, making us stronger and stronger, accomplishing what God would have it accomplish, we may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

This is actually a very simple principle I think we can all understand. You know, back in high school, I ran cross country. But after high school, I did very little running.

So as you would expect, a few years ago, when Danae and I decided we were going to do the Couch to 5K program, where it takes you from no exercise at all to running about three miles in a matter of, I think it was 30 days, that was tough.

There was a considerable amount of pain involved. But you know what happened? Well, first of all, I knew what the program was designed to accomplish, right?

[25 : 43] So I started with the perspective that any pain I would experience was ultimately for my good. That's where I started. And once I started the program, unsurprisingly, it got harder and harder.

First day was a breeze. They have you walk 30 seconds or whatever it is, and I thought, yeah, I can do this. But it got harder and harder. At the same time, my endurance grew stronger and stronger. And because I allowed my endurance to have its full effect, as James would say, rather than quitting, I was able to run three miles by the end of it.

But I could have never got there without the pain that was involved, not to mention my willingness to embrace that pain. Right?

David Gibson writes, about an oyster making a pearl, which is a great analogy. The pearl has to be irritated on the inside before it starts to do what needs to be done in order to turn that irritation into a pearl.

[26 : 50] And then he says, James is writing about God's pearl culture. A pearl is a mature saint, not lacking anything, a perfect and complete believer.

But some of us are just starting to get sand in the eye. We're rubbing it and rubbing it. We want it out. But God is just leaving it there.

And so we're rubbing even more furiously. We're wondering where God is and what He is doing.

And James comes alongside here to teach us how God makes pearls.

We need to smother the irritation with the most precious part of us, with clear-eyed thinking. Jump down to verse 12 of James 1.

Blessed is the one who endures trials because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

[27 : 50] This crown is certainly coming for believers in Christ. Completion. absolute wholeness in every way. But the road there has its challenges.

The question is, do we want to be whole? Now I can imagine someone saying, I don't think you understand how unbearable my trials actually are.

I can't possibly consider them a joy. Well here's what James says to that. Verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly and it will be given to him.

Jesus said what amounts to the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. Ask and it will be given to you. If we're struggling to have the right perspective on our trials, we need wisdom.

But again, James doesn't suggest that we rely on ourselves for this. We need God. We need his wisdom. Unlike us, he's not finite in his understanding.

[29 : 05] He knows precisely what our trials are accomplishing. He knows precisely how our trials are working to combat the double-mindedness that we face and make us whole.

so we turn to him. And as James says, God is more than willing to give us wisdom. He wants us to have this understanding.

He wants us to have the right perspective. Now, interestingly enough, the word generously can mean what you would think, liberally or bountifully, but it can also mean sincerely.

Paul uses the same word in Ephesians 6.5 when he tells slaves to obey their human masters with sincerity of heart.

So, we might understand James to mean that God gives wisdom sincerely. That is, not without hesitation. Not with reservation. He sincerely wants to give it.

[30 : 10] He's ready and willing to give. Jesus uses the same word in Luke 11.34 when he says, your eye is the lamp of the body.

When your eye is healthy, your whole body is also full of light. So, in that case, the word is translated into healthy. The King James Version, I remember, renders it as single if thine eye is single.

So, what's the idea here? Generously. Sincerely. Healthy. Singular. What does this word really mean? Well, all of these various ways of translating this word into English point to the concept of integrity.

There's no wavering or uncertainty involved. It isn't double-minded. It's singularly focused. It's sincere. It's healthy in that it's not divided.

It's whole. It's complete. It's what it should be. So, the overarching theme of James is that we become whole. We become people of integrity.

[31 : 17] And in verse 5, James, in a somewhat subtle way, draws our attention to the character of God Himself. If we want to know what integrity looks like, look to God.

The, I am who I am. Again, verse 17, James says, the Father of Light does not change like shifting shadows. He is of complete integrity.

But more to the point, this God of integrity is willing to sincerely give, generously give, in order to make us sincere, single-minded Christians.

Put another way, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and while we should love the Lord our God with all of our heart, we often don't.

We are frequently double-minded. And we need help in this regard. Jump down to verse 13. James, he illustrates this.

[32 : 24] No one undergoing a trial should say, I am being tempted by God, since God is not tempted by evil and He Himself doesn't tempt anyone.

But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.

Here's what David Gibson says. God is everything we are not. He is simple, undivided, and whole, and there is nothing about Him that lacks integrity.

We are partitioned, fractured, double-minded, and capable of being lured into sin by our own sinful desires. When we face trials, one of the main ways we fail to be steadfast is by giving in to temptation and blaming God for what is happening in our lives.

But as James makes clear here, these temptations are not coming from God. They are coming from within us because we are fractured.

[33 : 31] We are double-minded. What comes from God is the gracious antidote. He gives us wisdom to see our trials with the right perspective. And according to verse 18, He gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.

Now we'll talk about that more and what it means next time, but in direct contrast to ourselves, God graciously supplies what we need to become more like Him, undivided, unbroken, people of integrity.

Gibson writes, James believes that God is a united whole, a being of perfect integrity and oneness, and our greatest problem is that we are not yet like Him in our character.

We are pulled in different directions, capable of great good and of catastrophic evil, tossed like waves on a sea by the wind. But God is constant, immovably and unchangeably good in who He is and what He gives.

As I said, James doesn't write in a linear way, so when we read this letter, we might think that he's randomly telling us, one, we're doing things the wrong way, two, here's what you should be doing, and three, here's a little bit about God.

[34 : 57] But I hope you can see the connections here. I hope you can see how it all fits together. I hope you can see the contrast James is making between God and us.

And I hope you can see that God is the solution to our problems. You see, James is not laying down the law for us to follow and merely tossing in a few interesting facts about God along the way.

No, there's a direct connection between what he says we should be and the character of God. God. So James tells us to ask God for wisdom.

Turn to him. Verse 6, But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea driven and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.

Now, this might seem a bit paradoxical because if we're struggling with double-mindedness, which is the primary reason we're turning to God in prayer, why does James insist we do it without being double-minded?

[36 : 08] Without doubting? Well, we have to remember that James is writing to believers. Granted, they are double-minded in many of their behaviors, but they are believers.

And the encouragement here is to recognize those shortcomings, turn to God for help, and turn to him with the recognition that number one, he is everything we're not, i.e. whole.

And number two, he is able and willing to help us, i.e. make us whole. Right? This is like the man who went to Christ and said, I do believe.

Help my unbelief. This is like really every prayer, especially prayers of repentance. We are not what we ought to be when we go to the Lord, but we go to the Lord because we trust he is able to make us what we ought to be.

Perhaps this paraphrase from J.B. Phillips will help. He says, He must ask in sincere faith without secret doubts as to whether he really wants God's help or not.

[37 : 24] The man who trusts God but with inward reservations is like a wave of the sea carried forward by the wind one moment and driven back the next. So, as much as we may waver in our faithfulness to God, James says, don't waver when you go to Him for help.

Trust that He is able to make you whole. Briefly, let's consider the remainder of the passage.

Verse 9, Let the brother of humble circumstances boast in his exaltation, but let the rich boast in his humiliation, because he will pass away like a flower of the field.

For the sun rises and together with the scorching wind dries up the grass, its flower falls off and its beautiful appearance perishes. In the same way, the rich person will wither away while pursuing his activities.

Now, what does this have to do with anything else James has said here? Well, chances are many of their trials are actually related to their own relative poverty.

[38 : 34] In the second chapter, James says, don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court? James is writing to Jewish Christians spread out through Gentile nations, right?

So as Jews, they have a pretty low standing among the Gentiles. And as Christians, they have a pretty low standing among the Jews. And consequently, this likely had an economic impact on many of them.

To say they had a low standing in their communities is to say they may have been cut off from much of society. Perhaps their opportunity to make money and do business were relatively low.

So James reminds them that none of that really matters. It doesn't ultimately matter. Like the flower of the field, the rich person will eventually wither away.

I mean, what is the believer's ultimate prize? It isn't earthly wealth. It isn't fair treatment everywhere you go.

[39 : 43] It's the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. So James says, let the brother of humble circumstances boast in his exaltation.

J.B. Phillips paraphrases it this way, the brother who is poor may be glad because God has called him to true riches. Be content. You cannot serve both God and money.

The more you gain, the more you have to lose. Instead, let us boast in Christ and in his everlasting promises. And if we happen to be rich, let us boast in our spiritual poverty, trusting in Christ rather than our wealth.

We'll come back to this subject as well, but if there's any area of life where we may be prone to find ourselves double-minded, having one foot in heaven and the other in the world, it's often this one.

But once again, God is gracious. God is gracious. We are not what we should be, but God is.

[40 : 56] but God is. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you are undivided.

We come to you with our divided hearts. We confess our wavering. We confess that our allegiance is often divided between you and the world.

We have not always loved you wholeheartedly, yet you remain constant. You remain unchanging in your perfection. So grant us the wisdom to endure trials, that we may be mature and lack nothing.

Renew us by the word of your truth, that we may reflect your wonderful oneness, conform our divided natures into your likeness with pure hearts.

For Lord, we long to see you and we ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whom your perfect unity dwells. Amen.

[42 : 03] We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed. We're dismissed.