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James

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If you were asked, who are you, what would you say? Think for a minute. What defines you? Anyone want to give me some of their answers?

Would you say I'm a wife or husband. Would you say a mother or father, a sister, brother, aunt or uncle. Would some of your family relationships define you? Would you also say I'm a nurse, a teacher, a mechanic, a carpenter, a farmer? The list goes on.

We all have ways of answering that question. We reach for the things that tell people something about us—our relationships, our careers, our accomplishments, our experiences, our titles.

You see, when I applied to the Acadia Divinity College years ago to begin my degree they asked us to write a letter of intent. They asked it to include relevant information on who we are, why we are applying to the program, and what our goals are, within one page or less. So I had to answer that very question: Who am I? I spoke of being a wife and mother to two, living in the area most of my life, but most importantly being a child of God. I then went into my call to ministry and why I was then applying to go to ADC.

And all of those things are true. They are pieces of who I am. But I think that's why James' introduction caught my attention.

Today we start a fall series on the book of James, one of my favourite books of the Bible.

There are three main James' in the Bible. We hear of James, the son of Alphaeus, also called "James the Less." There is James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, one of the original 12 disciples. And lastly, there is James, the half-brother of Jesus, also called "James the Just." While there are sometimes discrepancies amongst scholars of who wrote this book, many believe it to be from James, the half-brother of Jesus, as it is very Jewish in nature, with Jesus' brother, James, ending up leading the early Jerusalem church. The author refers to himself as James, where as the other James' often distinguished themselves with son of.

So, let's look a little closer at who James was.

Jesus had four brothers — James, Joses, Judas, and Simon — and an unknown number of sisters. With James being listed first as we hear in Mark 6:3 "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him," he is often thought to be the oldest of the brothers, but

perhaps this is because he became the best known of the four brothers.

He was a skeptic of Jesus. Prior to Jesus' death and resurrection, James, along with his brothers, were unbelievers. We hear in John 7:1–5 "After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths was near. So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." (For not even his brothers believed in him.)"

Jesus' brothers try to forcibly take him home, to stop him from doing and saying things that make people think he is crazy, as we hear in Mark 3:21 "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."" We also read in the Gospel of John, Jesus ask on the cross for one of his disciples to care for his mother (John 19:25–27), which could seem like an insult to James and his brothers.

Yet after Jesus' resurrection, things change. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:7 "Then he [Jesus] appeared to James, then to all the apostles." James then became a believer. Acts 1:14 we read "All these were constantly

devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers," being part of the early church in Jerusalem, being present for the first day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

James becomes the first leader of the church in Jerusalem as we hear in Acts. Acts 12:16–17 "Meanwhile Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the gate, they saw him and were amazed. He motioned to them with his hand to be silent, and described for them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he added, "Tell this to James and to the believers." Then he left and went to another place." Then continuing into Acts 15:13–14 James' words to the Jerusalem council, "After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name." Acts 15:19 "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God." And Paul's final visit with James, Acts 21:17–18 "When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly. The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present." James' presides over the apostolic council described in Acts 15 and offers a final authoritative ruling that he expects to be disseminated and accepted by Christians everywhere.

As Mark Powell writes, "James' importance as a leader in the church is also acknowledged by Paul in Galatians, albeit somewhat grudgingly," which we reach in Galatians 1:19 and Galatians 2:9

Paul disagreed often with James' policies regarding the continued relevance of certain markers of Jewish identity within the Christian community (Galatians 2:11–14), and yet Paul still devoted much of his ministry to supervising a collection for Christians in Jerusalem where James was a leader.

That is a bit of background information about James. He wrote this letter, as we will hear in the first verse, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion, typically Jews (including Jewish Christians) living outside Palestine (synonymous with "Diaspora").

James 1:1 reads "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings."

And I promise we will go faster through the book than what we are today, but I wanted to set it up and after reading the first verse I sat and pondered. As I said, it caught my attention.

James, the brother of Jesus, mentions none of his family relationship to Jesus. Nothing that would have you know of his blood relation to Jesus.

Think about that. If we were James, wouldn't that be

one of the first things we would want people to know? "I grew up with Jesus." "I knew Him before He was famous." "I was there when He was growing up." "I'm His brother." But James doesn't say any of that.

James 1:1 says: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..."

A servant. The Greek word is *doulos*—a bond-servant, one who belongs to another. The term appears one hundred twenty-six times in the New Testament. It can describe literal slaves, hired servants, disciples, and, most profoundly, a believer's relationship to God through Jesus Christ. *Doúlos* ("bond-slave") is used with the *highest dignity* in the New Testament – namely, of believers who *willingly* live under Christ's authority as His devoted followers.

Although Greek is employed in the New Testament, the idea is rooted in the Hebrew עֶבֶד (*'ebed*). Israel's patriarchs, prophets, and kings were frequently called "servants of the LORD," marking total allegiance to Yahweh (Joshua 24:29; 2 Samuel 7:5). This background informs the New Testament use: servanthood signifies ownership, loyalty, and covenant faithfulness, not merely menial labor.

Within the Greco-Roman world, it is estimated that around one-third of the population lived as slaves. Some were household managers; others performed

hard labor. Into this social order the gospel brought a radically different valuation of the slave, insisting on equal standing in Christ (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11) while exhorting believing masters to treat slaves "with justice and fairness" (Colossians 4:1).

Jesus identifies Himself as one who did not come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). He told his disciples in Matthew 23:11 "The greatest among you will be your servant." Authority in the kingdom is expressed through sacrificial service.

Jesus, knowing exactly who He is, as we hear in John 13:3 "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God," doesn't use that knowledge for power but instead for service, for sacrifice. We continue to read in John 13, he gets a towel and washes the disciples feet. Something that only a servant would do. Jesus doesn't need to prove His status. Jesus knows He's Lord—and washes his disciples' feet.

James knows he's Jesus' brother—and calls himself a servant. When you know who you are, you don't have to prove how important you are.

James had a relationship with Jesus that nobody else could claim in quite the same way, but he doesn't lead with his status. He leads with his surrender. And maybe that's one of the first things James wants us to

understand about following Jesus. Following Jesus isn't primarily about who we are in the eyes of the world. It's about whose we are.

James had a choice. He could have built his identity around his family connection, his position, his influence, his leadership. Instead, he chose to define himself as a servant of God. And that brings us to something that runs throughout this entire letter. James is going to keep putting choices in front of us. Faith or doubt. Hearing or doing. Favoritism or love. Worldliness or friendship with God. Pride or humility. Life or death. James is deeply concerned about the direction of our lives.

Mark Allan Powell describes James as the biblical book most attentive to this idea of two paths. James repeatedly warns us about being "double-minded"—trying to walk in two directions at once.

That made me think of a story I once heard of a man who was sitting beside his grandmother's bed as she was nearing the end of her life. Knowing that she didn't have much time left, he asked her a question:

"Grandma, is there anything you regret?"

She thought about it for a moment and said, "No. I don't think I have any regrets." The man accepted her answer. But the next day, when he came back, she said, "You know, I've been thinking about your question all

night." She said, "I told you yesterday that I had no regrets. But I realized there is something I wish I had done differently."

The man asked, "What?" She said something like this:

"Throughout my life, I discovered that there are usually two choices in front of you. There's the safe choice, and there's the choice that requires faith. And too often, I chose the safe one." She had spent a lifetime choosing what was comfortable, predictable, and secure.

And now, near the end of her life, she realized that some of the greatest opportunities to trust God had come disguised as opportunities to take a risk. Sometimes the safe choice is wise. But sometimes the safe choice is simply the choice that costs us the least. And following Jesus will sometimes require us to choose the road that costs us something.

I think that's exactly where James is going to take us this fall. James is going to put choices in front of us. And he's going to ask us—not just what do you believe, but which road are you walking?

That's where James becomes so relevant. Because James isn't simply asking us what we believe. He's asking us what our faith looks like when we have to choose. What happens when following Jesus costs us something?

What happens when humility costs us our pride?

What happens when generosity costs us our money?

What happens when loving someone costs us our comfort?

What happens when obedience means taking the road that isn't safe, easy, or popular?

James is going to spend this letter telling us that faith isn't merely something we say. Faith chooses a path. And perhaps that's why James introduces himself the way he does. He could have said, "I'm His brother." Instead, he says, "I'm His servant."

James now knew who Jesus was calling Jesus, "the Lord Jesus Christ." The brother that he grew up with in a home together, who he was skeptical of, he now knew as Lord. As James got closer to understanding who Jesus really was, the less he was interested in making himself important. Because when James finally understood who Jesus was, it changed the way James understood who he was. And when we understand who Jesus is, it should change the way we live.

There are people who spend their whole lives trying to acquire a title, and then there are people who have a title but spend their lives trying to serve.

The question isn't simply, "Who am I?"

The question is, "Whose am I—and which path will I choose because of it?" Remember, following Jesus isn't

primarily about who we are in the eyes of the world. It's about whose we are.