

# Deuteronomy



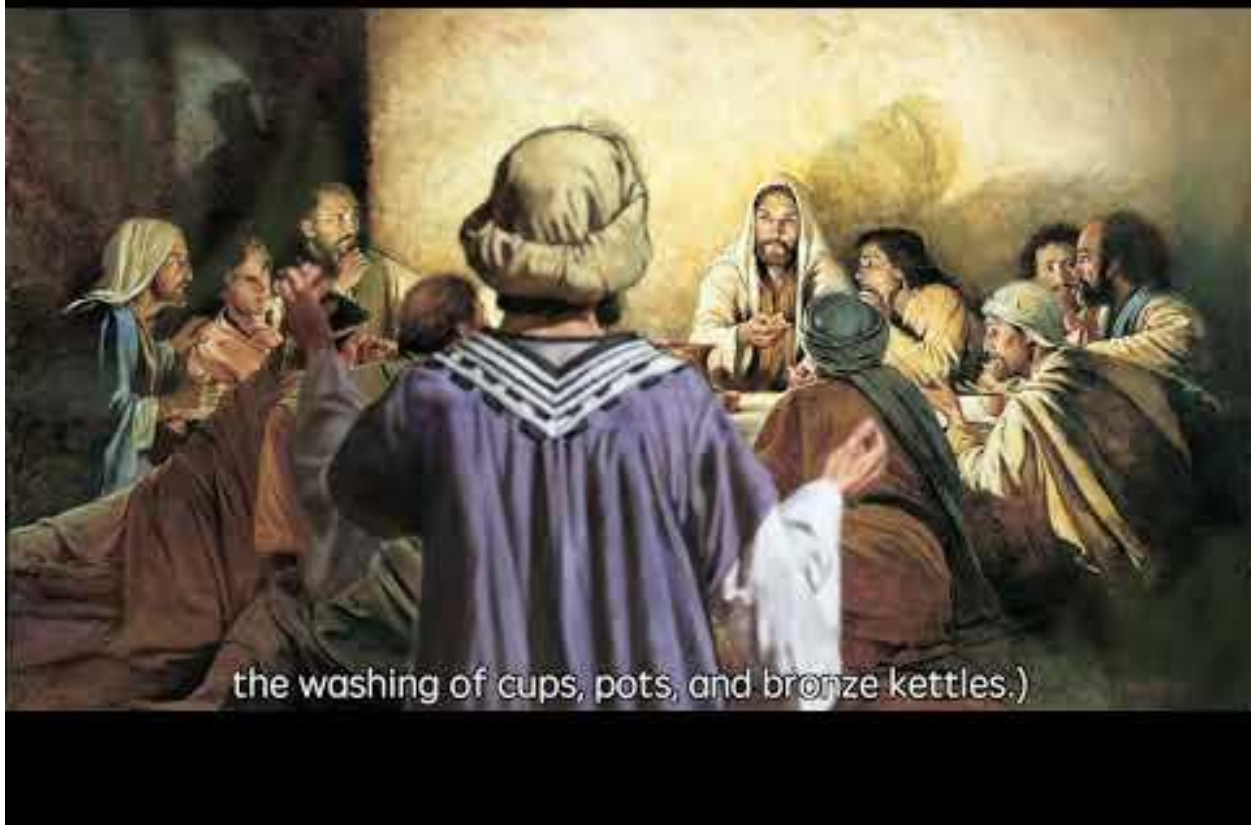
2024 Christian ed September 1

**4 MINS**

**JAMES 1:17**

**CHECK THIS OUT!**

A vibrant promotional graphic for a video. It features a central photograph of a young girl with braided hair, smiling joyfully. The background is a mix of bright colors: a dark blue top-left corner, a yellow top-right corner, and a pink bottom-right corner. A large green circle is partially visible behind the girl. A red arrow points from the top-left towards the center. A yellow banner with the text 'JAMES 1:17' is overlaid on the green circle. A pink banner with the text 'CHECK THIS OUT!' is at the bottom. The text '4 MINS' is written in a black, hand-drawn font in the yellow corner. There are also stylized sunburst icons in yellow and pink.



James 1:17-27  
Year/Cycle B

The Letter of James gets a bad rap in Reformed circles. James makes Protestants nervous; we wring our hands and whisper about the slippery slope to “works righteousness.” Martin Luther advocated for James’ removal from the canon, denouncing it as, “an epistle of straw,” with “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” Ouch!

I’ve always been surprised by the Protestant antipathy toward James. Have we read so much Paul that we get defensive anytime someone comes at the gospel from a slightly different angle?

We would do well to consider both the genre and the audience of the letter. In her commentary on James, my New Testament Professor Frances Taylor Gench points out that the entire letter is written in the form of parenesis, a Greek rhetorical term meaning counsel or exhortation about how to live. Most of Paul’s letters also include paraenetic sections, too;

check out the second half of any of the classics (Romans, Galatians, a Corinthians of your choosing, etc.).

That's because James is an in-house document. His is a letter addressed those already within the fold. James is, quite literally, preaching to the choir, and he has no interest in wasting his words trying to evangelize those who already believe the gospel. But he is very concerned with how our faith in Jesus Christ plays out in our daily lives. If Paul answers, "What?" James answers, "So what?"

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We see this at the heart of today's epistle reading, the exhortation to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (v. 22). Note that the contrast here is not between hearers and doers: it's between hearers-only and hearers-who-are-also-doers. That we have heard the gospel is a given; the question is: Does it make a difference?

This is real, down-to-earth, rubber-hits-the-road kind of stuff. Not "Do you believe in a Triune God?" but "Can you sit in a room and listen to someone who disagrees with you without lashing out in anger?" Not "How does Christ's death and resurrection enact justification?" but "How should we treat the homeless person who shows up to worship in street-soiled clothes?" James calls readers to live with integrity. How does what we do line up with what we believe?

In the coming chapters (and lectionary weeks), James will go on to dispel the notion that any aspect of our lives lies outside the gospel's reach. Doers of the Word will find that Jesus is Lord of our economic lives (5:1-6), our political lives (1:27), our social lives (2:1-13), our intellectual lives (3:13-18), and even the most basic interactions in our personal lives (1:19-20, 3:1-12).

According to James, the gospel permits no compartmentalization. In the words of the Barmen Declaration, Jesus Christ is "God's mighty claim upon our whole life."

This is daunting, to be sure. There is a perceived safety in compartmentalization. I tell myself that my faith can lay claim to most of me, but there's a little part I can keep back, just in case this whole Jesus thing ends up being a bad idea. Yet there is also great comfort in knowing that God lays claim to our entire lives, for it means that there is no part of our lives that Christ's grace cannot reach. Nothing is too big or too insignificant for love and mercy of our God.

In this tense and emotional season, most of us aren't wondering, "How am I saved by grace?" but rather, "How on earth do I talk to my neighbor?" James is not an easy book to read, teach or preach, but it has the advantage of answering questions that our congregations and communities are actually asking. In this tense and emotional season, most of us aren't wondering, "How am I saved by grace?" but rather, "How on earth do I talk to my neighbor?" If you're seeking a word that is practical and relevant, take a walk this month through the Letter of James. You won't be disappointed.

#### Questions for reflection

1. James differentiates between "hearers-only" and "hearers-who-are-also-doers?" What might the difference between those two kinds of people look like in your congregation? Can you think of times when you have had the choice to hear-only or to hear-and-do?
2. What aspects of your life do you wish you could compartmentalize? Politics? Finances? Behavior in the privacy of your own home? What makes you want to keep this area(s) a safe distance from the reach of the gospel?