

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

If you have ever made pancakes, you know that following the recipe is crucial. To get light, fluffy hotcakes that are delicious requires the right amount of flour, eggs, and milk. There needs to be the perfect combination of wet ingredients to dry ingredients. And then you have to mix the batter in such a way that there aren't any clumps of flour left untouched by the wet ingredients.

Or consider making bread. My great-grandmother could mix a dough and tell what the bread would be like when she was kneading it. She knew the feel and consistency of the dough just by the touch of her hands. And kneading bread dough is important to help the gluten formation within the bread. But you don't want pancake batter to have the stickiness that that is needed in bread dough. To be a successful baker, you've got to know your ingredients, your environment, and your steps to make a great product.

In a similar way, life requires wisdom so that we would know how to become consistent. And the letter of James is written to people who faced pressure and needed the reminder to be consistent. James calls this "steadfastness" and he begins and ends his letter with the burden to develop steadfast people who live by faith. So how do we become consistent people?

Embrace a Consistent Message

We live in a world where people are very consistently inconsistent. And the reason for our inconsistency makes sense. Every day, you receive thousands of pieces of information. You don't have time to decide what is true or not. If you start to try to decide what's true, it's easy to become overwhelmed by all of the information that is available. Sociologists have noticed that with the advent of the internet, people have moved from embracing a consistent story to their lives to living with inconsistent pieces that fragments their lives. So people tend to believe what already fits their bias. This is true politically, socially, economically, and spiritually. So people get all their news from whatever mainstream or independent source fits their preconceived bias without acknowledging that they have a bias, and social media has curated an algorithm that creates what is called an "echo chamber" – the people you predominantly hear from are those that agree with you.

The result is that we never have to confront our inconsistencies. But James isn't offering wisdom just so you can look a certain way. James offers wisdom for a purpose: to encourage steadfastness of God's people so that people would grow in maturity and completeness – what I am calling 'consistency.'

When reading the book of James, many people read it as a bunch of random sayings and thoughts just thrown together. But I believe that James has a consistency from beginning to end. The first time I preached through this book as a young pastor, that's how I preached it – as a bunch of eclectic sayings put together in a letter. But as I have preached through this letter

Consistency – Selections from James

CBC Ilderton

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June 2, 2024

this time, I can see that James wants people to be single-minded in wisdom so that they might live consistently and grow in that consistency. Here are people who have lost their position in the culture, who have lost their possessions and jobs, and who have lost respect of the broader world. Just consider the consistent message James gives from beginning to end:

- When you undergo trials from the rich who oppress you, choose joy and have a single-minded faith in God to endure (1:1-12)
- Don't be like shifting shadows, but look to the consistency of God who is always good (1:13-18)
- Listen to the consistent message of the Word that God has given you (1:19-21)
- Don't just hear the word, but do the word (1:22-27)
- Don't be inconsistent in how you treat people; don't show favouritism but remember the poor (2:1-13)
- Don't think that believing is enough; show your belief in action (2:14-26)
- Have teachers who are consistent between word and action (3:1-12)
- Follow those who are wise, not those who are divisive (3:13-18)
- Stop fighting and judging one another and instead be humble (4:1-12)
- Endure hardship because God will judge (5:1-12)
- Live in community instead of living for yourself and your rights, and care for one another, pray for one another, restore one another (5:13-20)

This is the overall message of James – stop the inconsistency and live steadfastly so that you will grow together in wisdom as mature people. James's message is consistent from beginning to end, and this points us to our need to embrace a consistent message that will shape our lives.

Grow in Consistency by Faith

How do you embrace a consistent message if you live in a world where there are competing narratives, confusing messages, and inconsistency all around? You have to believe that there is a source of consistency. If there can be consistency in the mixture of a batter of pancake mix, there must be hope for consistency on a bigger scale. In the past, people lived with greater consistency and wholeness, so that means that we ought to consider how we should live with a consistent hope.

James says that we should not be double-minded (1:5-8) and practically that means that we should not be people who try to live like we love the ways of the inconsistent culture around us but the singlemindedness of God (4:4). In fact, he says that living inconsistently is like being adulterous (4:4) – you can't love God and love the power of society and culture.

So James presents us with a contrast. On the one hand, he wants us to see that the double-mindedness of the culture actually creates chaos, division, hostility, and bitter jealousy. It promotes the self rather than the good of the whole (3:13-16). You can see the inconsistency that people have all around us. It only takes minutes to realize that every person has embraced

some form of double-mindedness, some form of inconsistency, some type of dissonance in their life and they have come to peace with it. Broken relationships, self-promotion, personal competitiveness – these are all evidences of a world that is satisfied with inconsistency.

We have to come to find this type of lifestyle repugnant to us in order to see the beauty of consistency. God is consistent – he is single-minded in his goodness and grace. And this is where faith must begin. It must believe that God exists, that God is good, and that all of God's ways – even if we can't understand them – are good. Every good gift and every perfect giving is from God, who doesn't shift like a shadow (1:17). He is the rock of goodness.

When you see that God is good, then you see how James is telling us something that the rest of the Bible tells us – that we should pursue to know God with our whole heart (Ps. 119:2), that we should ask him to teach us his ways and to give us an undivided heart (Ps. 86:11). Jesus would appeal to the great command of Judaism – to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). Proverbs would speak of the two paths – the way of folly and the way of wisdom. We cannot have two masters – we need to build our lives on a foundation that is solid (Matt. 7:13-27).

That solid foundation is not only rooted in the goodness of God (1:17), but also in the glorious Lord Jesus (2:1) – a phrase that scholars suggest points to the one who overcame the inconsistencies of sin and death by rising again and showing us the way to life. Jesus, the brother of James, showed himself consistent in this life so that people hated him, and hated him to the point that they killed this innocent man in the greatest act of injustice. But God showed his goodness by raising Jesus from the dead. And the result is that we ought to love the consistent goodness of God who sent his Son to rescue us from our inconsistencies by forgiving us and showing us a new way to live. And that means we can grow in consistency by embracing Jesus by faith so that we might...

Live More Consistently

This consistency shows up throughout the letter of James. How do you treat people who are poor, disadvantaged, weak, and frail? James says that true religion is that it keeps a check on your tongue and cares for the disadvantaged (1:26-27). It means that we don't let divisive, rude, or slanderous talk come out of our mouths. It means that we don't talk one way in public and another in private (3:3-12). It means that we resist the competitive spirit of our age and we live to be more collaborative, more peace-making, gentler, and humbler. It means we resist grumbling about others (5:9) and that we endure hardships and difficulties believing that the present hardships are actually helping us to grow into a consistent person.

And the result of this life is that it produces a harvest of peaceful fruit. And in a world that loves to make politics, gender identity, sexual ethics, and being on the right side of history the benchmarks of being a tolerant person, Jesus shows us a different way. He calls us to a life of non-conformity not by being obnoxious, rude, and harsh, but true and gentle. He wants us to love those that are seen as the least of these in the world around us. He wants our message to

be backed with a life that displays that we have joy in hardships not because we love the hardships but because we love what a good God does.

And if there ever was proof that God is good, he took the worst injustice in human history and made it serve his healing purposes for the world. The man who was despised and mocked and shamed, the Lord Jesus, is now called the glorious Lord Jesus (2:1). The one who was despised and rejected, the one people hid their faces from (Isa. 53:2ff) has become the one that displays the glory of the goodness of God.

Do you want to live a more consistent life? Or will you settle for the dissonance that has to be ignored? If you want to live a more consistent life, you need to embrace a message that will bring your life together into a comprehensive whole, but you can only do that by believing that there is a good message and story that can put your life together and take the ugly pieces of this life and remake them into something good. And then, and only then, can you care for those who are the neediest and speak in ways that show that your life has something of greater worth than just living for the moment. Because when you live for the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, he will take your life and make it serve something greater for the whole and give you joy now and forevermore.