

“Doers of the Word”

The Little Book of JAMES

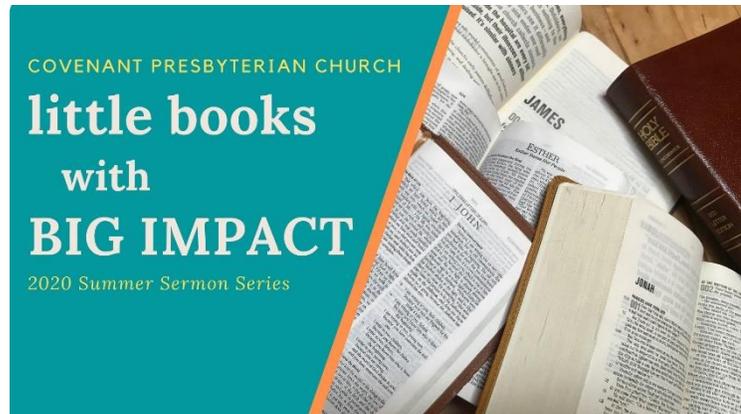
James 1:22-27

Sunday, June 7, 2020

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Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, Wisconsin



This is the Bible! This is our Holy Book.

We give them to our children on special occasions. Many of us have treasured family Bibles. We call it the “good book.” Clearly the Bible is important.

And the Bible is all around us. The average household has three Bibles. The Bible remains as the best-selling book of all time. And the Bible is easily available online.

And yet for all the value we put on the Bible, and for all the ease of access, we don’t read it very much.

According to Barna Research, 33% of Americans read the Bible at least once a week which is good. But about 40% read it less than once a year.

And various surveys over the years have shown our illiteracy, with sizeable numbers of people who

- Cannot name the first book of the Bible (Genesis)
- Don’t know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount (Jesus, not Billy Graham)
- Cannot name the four gospels (Matthew Mark Luke and John)

And in our society, we talk about the importance of the Ten Commandments, yet only 60% of the population can name half of them.

And according to one infamous survey, about 12% of Christians think Noah’s wife was Joan of Arc.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2000/12/09/we-revere-the-bible-we-dont-read-it/ff4d2cfd-7861-44a0-ae59-d8bcdb4f2809/>

Collectively, we don't read the Bible a lot.

And yet, survey after survey finds that people who do read the Bible regularly are not only more deeply connected to God and live a more authentic Christian life, but they are happier and more focused and more peaceful.

I read the Bible most days, and I do find that the discipline of reading God's word keeps me connected to God and it keeps me focused and gives me peace.

So in June and July, I invite you to join me in doing some intentional Bible reading with hope that God will teach us and nourish us.

Just to clarify, as Presbyterians, we take the Bible seriously, but not literally. We study it, looking at history, culture, translations, and more, as we try to discern God's will through the Scripture.

Some people of faith have a literalist, inerrant view of scripture. We Presbyterians don't, but it's still God's word so we need to hear it, wrestle it and let it guide us. In other words, we don't worship the Bible, but we worship the God who is known in the Bible.

Our new series is aimed at helping us to know God and God's ways in eight of the smaller books of the Bible. The series is called "Little Books with Big Impact."

As you may know, there are 66 books in our Protestant Bible, with 39 in the Old Testament, often called the Hebrew Bible, and 27 books in the New Testament.

Genesis	1 Kings	Ecclesiastes	Obadiah
Exodus	2 Kings	Song of Solomon	Jonah
Leviticus	1 Chronicles	Isaiah	Micah
Numbers	2 Chronicles	Jeremiah	Nahum
Deuteronomy	Ezra	Lamentations	Habakkuk
Joshua	Nehemiah	Ezekiel	Zephaniah
Judges	Esther	Daniel	Haggai
Ruth	Job	Hosea	Zechariah
1 Samuel	Psalms	Joel	Malachi
2 Samuel	Proverbs	Amos	

The Old Testament (The Hebrew Bible)

- Some books are more historical, some are poetic.
- Some are letters, some are prophetic.
- Some are wisdom literature, kind of like philosophy..
- Four of the books, the gospels, focus on the life of Jesus.
- Many books have multiple genres.

Matthew	2 Corinthians	1 Timothy	2 Peter
Mark	Galatians	2 Timothy	1 John
Luke	Ephesians	Titus	2 John
John	Philippians	Philemon	3 John
Acts	Colossians	Hebrews	Jude
Romans	1 Thessalonians	James	Revelation
1 Corinthians	2 Thessalonians	1 Peter	

The New Testament

Books like Genesis, Psalms, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, and Revelation are reasonably well-known.

But there are many little books in the Bible that we almost never read, filled with wonderful teachings and stories and inspiration.

Over the next eight weeks, we’re going to look at eight of these little books, with the hope that we will grow closer to God, stronger in faith, and like the surveys suggest be happier, more focused, and at peace.

We’re going to look at four from the Old Testament:

Esther, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk

And four from the New Testament:

Ephesians, Colossians, 1 John, and James

Not only will we have sermons on the books, but we’re also having Sunday morning classes (at 10:30 via zoom—check our website for details). We have

email devotionals, and our weekly CONNECTIONS email has background info available on each little book.

As we embark on this eight-week series, our engagement will vary.

- Some of you will dig into all eight books, reading the whole book and study materials.
- Some of you will read a little from each of the eight books, maybe a key verse.
- Some of you will find it helpful to pick one or two of the books and dig in deeply to them, reading and studying them over several weeks
- Some of you are going to realize you haven't really read your Bible in a long time, if ever, and your going to find your Bible—or maybe get a new one—and put it in a central place and try to read it every day.
- Some of you are going to read the Bible together with your family, or talk about it with other people from church, with partners or small groups
- Some of you are going to add websites to your shortcuts on your computer or add apps to your phone and read the Bible before you get on Facebook or start look at the news.

Whatever you do, I pray that we all grow closer to God over these eight weeks.

Our first book is **James**, a little letter toward the end of the Bible. Unlike most of the New Testament letters, James is not addressed to a specific community. It's a general letter and it reads almost like a collection of proverbs or wisdom sayings.

With 108 verses, it will take you about 10-20 minutes to read, depending on your reading speed.

But here's a little secret: chapter one James pretty much reflect the themes of the book, so if you only have a couple minutes, just read chapter 1!

While Jesus is mentioned only twice in sort of an introductory way, the teachings of James actually reflect the teachings of Jesus pretty strongly.

Some of the themes include:

- Love your neighbor; show no partiality
- Be humble, live with integrity

- Choose your words carefully (“tame the tongue” as James says)
- Seek justice for the poor; heed warnings for the rich

You’ll see those themes woven through the book.

And James is perhaps best known for its call to action, reminding us that faith or simple words alone aren’t enough.

In chapter two we read:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

This is pretty much what Jesus said at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7, when he said that people who put the words in practice are like wise people who build their homes on solid foundations.

James puts the same idea a little differently in chapter one, encouraging God’s people to be “doers of the word” to put faith in action, and he includes an action-oriented definition of true religion:

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

What a great way to start our series on reading the Bible!

Not only are we called to hear and read God’s word, but we have to put it into action, we have to make it real, we have to make it part of our daily living.

So our Bible reading and our Bible study is meant to shape our choices, our actions, what we do every day.

This is exactly what our calling is at Covenant: Learning God's Love, Living God's Love.

We learn God's word, and then we live it, we "do" it, we make it real.

We can't simply stand up with a Bible in our hand and think that's enough.

Serious Christians know that we need to read the text and be open to God changing us, motivating us, guiding us. As we read the text we see God's relentless concern for the widows and orphans, the poor and the oppressed, the voices long silenced, the people who feel their lives don't matter.

We are in midst of very challenging times right now,

- as we face (again) the reality of racism and white supremacy,
- as we continue to battle the coronavirus,
- as we face catastrophic environmental problems.

We need to wrestle with these issues. We need to read God's word in light of these issues. And we need to pray for wisdom and courage to act on these issues, to put God's word into practice, to actually do something, as followers of Jesus, the word made flesh.

There are no easy answers. A foundation in God's word is a good place to start. But that is just the foundation.

For if we're not committed to put our faith into action, if we're not committed to being challenged and changed and motivated by God's word, if we're not committed to being doers of the word, then we shouldn't even bother to read the Bible.

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Let us pray—Thank you for gift of your word. Thank you that you've made it so easy for us to read and study and grow in your word. Free us from distraction and temptation so that we actually read and ponder and act on your word today, this month and beyond.