

These Are Our Non-Negotiables

James 1:5-11, 22-27

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Years ago, I was speaking with a woman just after her oldest son had died in a car wreck, and she was looking for something biblical to read in the way that people who are feeling aimless or ungrounded or unglued are looking for something to offer stability. She asked what I was reading right now, and I told her that I was covering the book of James with her younger son and his friends in our high school Bible study.

“James,” she repeated, as if uttering the name of the book would help make its truths appear and soothe her.

“It’s one of my favorites,” I told her.

“I’ll give it a look,” she said.

A couple of weeks later, our conversation returned to the book of James, and she told me she had been giving it a shot. “But, Trey,” she confessed, “I’m not really sure I like it much.”

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s just so...it’s so hard.”

I didn’t push her to elaborate, but I assumed at the time that pretty much everything in her life right then was hard. I found James to be relatively straightforward in its message, if poetic in its structure, and given the number of things in the Bible that are not straightforward, it was somewhat of a relief to have something that said exactly what it meant.

Sometimes, of course, straightforwardness is stabilizing...and sometimes it boxes us in.

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There is a lot of debate about when and by whom the book of James was written—the potential years span from around 60 CE to early second century. The potential author is also impossible to determine—there were a lot of different Jameses in significant positions in the early church, and there’s always the chance that someone else wrote this claiming to be one of those Jameses. But perhaps the hardest part of dating this letter is that it’s not addressing precise concerns for a particular group of people. Unlike many of Paul’s letters written to specific congregations dealing with specific issues, James primarily includes broad advice that can be applied to numerous situations. It is what we call wisdom. The instruction or exhortation given in this book is nearly universal, applicable for all people in all situations.

If there is any hedging on that statement, it is this: the words of James are intended for a church that is looking forward more than backward, trying to establish something new that will last and will reach others, and the words of James are aimed at a community of believers who value God, value Christ, and value each other. It is a book for communal bonding and growth...and it is, otherwise, what I would call a “blank slate” letter.

Everyone has to start somewhere, and the early church was no different. It needed a set of ideals, virtues, practices, and policies that would help set the tone for this new body of believers, something that insiders could articulate simply and cleanly when explaining their new faith to others and something that outsiders could digest in a sentence or two and rumble around in their brains while they contemplated what this group was all about. The blank slate is incredibly inviting, but it's also not particularly captivating. At some point, you have to put some words on the slate.

Given these circumstances, the words James chooses are largely as expected. Wisdom literature is filled with pithy aphorisms that pack a lot into just a few phrases; James—especially the first chapter of James—does this throughout, and does it very well. Again, this is what we expect from a “blank slate” letter. We expect proverbs and adages that are easy to memorize, fun to repeat, and appealing for a short attention span.

What we do not expect when it comes to a blank slate letter, typically, is words that take a hard stand...and yet that is also what James does. In the beginning, the fresh start of something new and amorphous, we expect an appeal to the lowest common denominator. We expect wiggle room and compromise. James offers us none of this.

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Imagine, if you will, a church committee tasked with launching a new program. Let's say it's a midweek meal targeting the whole church, everyone from 8 to 80 and beyond. The committee gathers and their first order of business is to put someone in charge. They all look around at each other expectantly...no one wants to say “I'll do it” because taking the reins might alienate or offend others. Eventually, someone says, “I think Wally (this committee has a guy named Wally on it) would be good,” and Wally reluctantly accepts his post. This is the first meeting.

Upon regathering, Wally asks everyone on the committee on what night of the week the meal should take place. It's a midweek meal, so it's pretty much got to be Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, but there's a lot of hemming and hawing over those three days. Families in the church have conflicts every night—soccer practice, dance rehearsals, travel commitments, homework every night (but, for some reason, different people mention the problem of homework whenever each night is raised as a possibility). After an exhaustive discussion, the committee lands on Wednesdays because it is the “true midweek” night, whatever that means and as if that matters. This is the second meeting.

When the committee comes back together again, Wally asks what the menu should be. At home, the members of the committee would likely eat skillfully seasoned steaks and fresh baked breads and cuisines from around the world, but everyone at the meeting knows that there are church members who are vegetarian and gluten-free and homebodies, and no one wants to suggest culinary choices that might turn someone away. Again, there is much discussion about these factors and various menu options, and in the end the committee decides to do gluten-free spaghetti with two sauces, one of which is meat-free. Wally takes four Advil and a shot of Pepto-Bismol. This is the third meeting.

At the fourth meeting, the committee tries to decide who will cook the food, but Wally (growing savvy) and many of the other committee members are determined that it will not be them, so they never quite figure this out. And so it is that after a month of meeting, the committee trots out a plan to host a spaghetti dinner on Wednesdays that someone undetermined will cook.

At this point, on the inside, you're either laughing or crying because you have sat on a committee like this...but either way, the scenario is far too familiar and too common, and not just to church. But this is who we are. We are people who choose the path of least resistance, the one that leaves as many options open as possible because we think this will appeal to the broadest group...and, instead, we end up with the top choice of very few. We think that we can leave the slate blank...but a blank slate is meant to be filled, not to stay empty. And so we often try to fill it in a way that will appeal to everyone...which results in appealing to no one.

Or, in the words of one of my favorite *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strips, "A good compromise leaves everybody mad."¹

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The woman who told me that she found James challenging was in a place where she needed a blank slate—her world had been dashed, erased, and she was starting over again. She needed the hope of an open board. She needed stability and comfort, and instead she encountered a list of non-negotiables.

We have all, undoubtedly, been in similar situations. We have all found ourselves in a new job, a new town, or a new family and hoped for both the freedom of the blank slate and the support of establishment.

The question is whether or not the book of James offers both.

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I am a lifelong North Carolinian, but aside from our state's history, the history of Rhode Island has always intrigued me. The way I understand it is this: in 1628, a group of settlers from England founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Their reasons for coming here were undeniably manifold and diverse, but they bonded around a distaste for the British government dictating their actions and requiring taxes. Their taste of rebellion led to friction early and would eventually help fuel the American Revolution about a century and a half later.

In the meantime, though, the Massachusetts Bay Colony quickly determined its own set of rules, and one of their members was a man named Roger Williams who objected to those rules. He specifically objected to their church, which he deemed "not separate enough" from the Church of England. The leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony told him to clam up (sorry; that's a terrible pun), and as a preacher Roger Williams had no intention whatsoever of zipping his lips. They attempted to arrest him, only to find that Williams had fled Massachusetts and hiked 55 miles through a blizzard to a plot of land beyond the Massachusetts Bay Colony's jurisdiction.

There, with a group of other settlers who were also frustrated with their lack of religious freedom, he formed what would eventually become the colony of Rhode Island and, as I suspect many of you know, also formed the First Baptist Church in America.

All of this started a mere three years after the Massachusetts Bay Colony founded. It took only three years for someone to take issue with the colony's lack of freedom, a colony that ostensibly was founded on the premise of granting more freedom.

¹ Watterson, Bill. *Calvin & Hobbes* May 1, 1993. Appears in *Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat*.

We who are Baptist have a long love-hate relationship with structure and freedom. We insist on freedom...and then, having achieved some measure of latitude, often end up endorsing structure that actually limits freedom.

This is one way to read James: “here is a blank slate...but not for long, because we’re going to fill it with our non-negotiables, and they will control you.” This is one way to read James...but I don’t think it’s the best way. The metaphor for the way I’d choose to read this letter lies not within the example of Rhode Island but back here, in my beloved home state.

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The archetypal freedom, I think, is the freedom of flying. On nights when I dream that I have been flying, I awaken with a smile on my face. My heart feels fuller and my spirits lighter. There is a release that comes with the dream of soaring with eagles, swooping with crows, or lazily floating with a flock of geese.

When the Wright Brothers sought to make this dream reality, they defined the “problem of flight” as trifold—there were three issues that each needed to be resolved in order to take to the skies. The first two of these were wings to provide lift and engines to provide thrust; the brothers believed both of these issues had already been figured out, but the third issue remained unanswered. Solving this third issue would allow them to create a heavier-than-air flyer, to take wing. Solving the third issue would allow humanity to embrace the freedom, the dream of flight.

The third issue was control. The Wright brothers believed that the pilot needed absolute control over his plane, control that could be maintained without the assistance of solid ground, control through gusts of wind and altitude changes and pretty much whatever else the sky would throw at a pilot.² Other aeronautical engineers of the time assumed that, given the freedom of the skies, there wouldn’t be as much of a need for control...but the Wright brothers were different, and in the end, that difference proved the key to their success.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony and Roger Williams give us one example of the relationship between control and freedom, one where humanity wants freedom and then upon gaining it immediately exerts control over someone else. The Wright brothers illustrate a different relationship, one where establishing the proper structure and control in the beginning allows for unfathomable freedom, limitless opportunity, the chance to soar above the clouds.

To be clear, we’re not talking about an excessive amount of control. If you’ve seen the Wright flyer, you know that it’s not exactly rigid. The plane was largely made from flexible material like spruce and canvas. The wings are drooping anhedral wings, which are inherently less stable.³ The attempt at flight was not about exerting control everywhere; it was about choosing the right places to exert control and claiming it there unequivocally.

² Crouch, Tom D. (2003). *The Bishop's Boys: A life of Wilbur and Orville Wright*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 0-393-30695-X. Qtd. On Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wright_brothers#Ideas_about_control.

³ Ibid.

This is what happens in the book of James (which, in case you've forgotten, is the subject of this sermon). It's not "here is a blank slate...but not for long, because we're going to fill it with our non-negotiables." It is "here is a mostly blank slate...with just a few non-negotiables that we absolutely cannot bend on." And, James promises to the newly forming church, "If we do not bend on these things, we will attain a remarkable freedom, a freedom wider than anything we have dared to dream. We will soar."

This is how the US Constitution works: we agree to a small number of rules precisely because they afford us countless freedoms. It is how a friendship works: you commit, and if you do, you discover a whole new level of openness and intimacy. It is how most relational things in our world work...and yet, we are often dissuaded from choosing an option with a small number of non-negotiables in favor of an option that attempts to leave everything on the table.

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The first chapter of James functions like the prologue of a Shakespeare play. It tells us everything that is going to happen throughout the rest of the book. Part of why chapter one is a scattered assortment of proverbs is because that's how proverbs (and non-negotiables) work; part of it is because James will return to those ideas in the following chapters to elaborate on them. We will also return to those ideas in the following weeks as we continue a series on the book of James. The non-negotiables that he discusses are, again, filled with eloquent wisdom for any body of believers seeking to originate something enduring that will have appeal beyond the relationships of that group. These non-negotiables are worth contemplating over several weeks.

But it is also worth hearing them now, up front, with an emphasis on the fact that they are indeed non-negotiables.

One commentary I consulted suggested that the beginning of James asks its readers, "Is this really what you believe?" followed closely by "and will you actually behave this way?"⁴ If the reader cannot answer those questions in the affirmative, the rest of the book will not matter.

We do not need to be controlled...but we do need to know what the true non-negotiables are. This is true in any situation and any relationship: in our faith, our work, our families, our culture, our country. It is critical to state them early and often, to remember them diligently, and to cling to them unwaveringly. This is what determines, builds, and maintains our character, and our character is what sets us free.

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James may not have been the best recommendation to the woman who was grieving a loss of a son—it was my first year in ministry, one marked with naiveté, and I probably could have tailored my response to her specific situation a little more carefully. It is a challenging book if we are looking for compromise. But I still think it can be a helpful book for someone who is aimless or ungrounded or unglued, or for a community looking for just a few uniting words to write on a blank slate. The non-negotiables that James offers, when examined carefully and adhered to stringently, should not offer limitations but rather should provide a framework that inspires, unleashes, and uplifts. They should enable us to soar.

⁴ Johnson, L. T. (1998). *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 12). Abingdon. 189.