*O Lord, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue and do no evil to their friends nor heap shame upon their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are despised but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.*

Psalm 15

*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of His own purpose He gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of His creatures. You must understand this, my beloved brothers, and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. 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. If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.* James 1:17-27

*So, here we are: A husband was coming out of anesthesia after a series of tests in the hospital. His wife was sitting at his bedside, when his eyes fluttered open he said: “You are beautiful.” Flattered, the wife continued the vigil.*

*Later he woke up again and said, “You’re cute!” “What happened to beautiful?” She asked.*

*“The drugs are wearing off,” the husband replied.*

Hearing and Doing

1. James begins his letter with the words: “*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”* James is recognized by the Easter Orthodox Christians, as well as most Protestants, as the brother of Jesus. The Church historians identify him as the first *“Bishop”* of the church in Jerusalem, although he was not one of the *“Twelve,”* and was not even called to become an *“Apostle,”* like Paul was. His message, delivered through this letter, is addressed not only to the church in Jerusalem, but to all the *“twelve tribes in diaspora,”* meaning to all the Jews, wherever they could be found. His letter is still considered quite controversial by many, because it seems to clash in some sense with what Paul wrote. I personally believe that James had more of a *“hands on”* approach to the Gospel’s message, while Paul’s is more of an *“intellectual”* one. James’ knowledge came from the practical experience, while Paul’s was more from the *“philosophical”* approach. After all, Paul was a very well educated man, while James, coming from rather a *“poor carpenter’s family,”* could not afford to get such a refine education as Paul did.

2. James’ letter is, in my view, among the most powerful texts studied in the Church today, because there is something distinctive about it. His role as a pastor of the church in Jerusalem made him rather unique, and not only based on the perspective of the location of the church, but from who constituted the *“church’s body.”* Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city with rather a peculiar flavor. This was a city which served as the Roman capital of the *“Land of Israel,”* as this province was officially known. Jerusalem was also a center of the Roman Legions military base in Judea. It was a military hub as well as a center of Judaism, the official religion of the Jews, with the *“Temple,”* where in the *“Holy of Hollies,”* God resided. Jerusalem was for the Jews what the *“Vatican City”* is for the Roman Catholic Church. This was also a place where the first *“Church,”* following the day known as the *“Pentecost,”* was established. It was Jerusalem after all, where the Holy Spirit manifested Himself, and where 3000 people accepted Jesus as their Messiah on that day. Jerusalem was not only a military and a religious center, but it was also a place of commerce, and a political seat, where all the different ideologies of various groups clashed daily. As a city, Jerusalem was indeed a very pluralistic bastion.

3. Since the city was sociologically so diverse, it must have been also the case with the Church, which drew the membership from this very cosmopolitan population. The Church in Jerusalem was indeed a very special, a very peculiar, and a very unique one. Any church, in any community draws people from the community where it is located, and the community’s issues are the issues that affect the Church. When we, here in Antigo, come to the Church, we too face the issues our community faces, since these are our issues as well. This was true then and there, in Jerusalem, as this is true here and now, today for our Church. Servig such a pluralistic congregation, James was exposed to many different views, ideas, and opinions. Additionally, as a Jew, being so well versed in Judaism, he was able to reach out to the people of diaspora as well, simply because of his experience as a *“bishop”* and pastor of the Jerusalem’s Church.

4. No wonder, his letter stirs controversy, especially among some protestant and evangelical denominations today, just as it must have done it then. Especially considering it, as I already said, in the light of some of Paul’s teachings. James writes about the importance of works in the life of a Christian, but I believe that contrary to some simplistic understanding of the doctrine of the *“Justification by faith alone,”* which some protestants and many evangelicals firmly stand on, James underlines the importance of the practical application of faith in the life of a Christian. I believe he, like Paul, accepted the Pauline’s view of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but he went one step further, calling for a practical application of that doctrine in a daily life of every believer. After all, we do not live in a vacuum, but in the reality of the surrounding world. The theoretical acceptance must be followed by the practical response. As I believe, the problem of accepting some of James’ notions, by the people like Martin Luther, and many others, comes from our, human willingness to accept the Scriptural passages we fully embrace and understand, while refusing to accept some others. James proves in his epistle, that we cannot just pick and choose some passages but not the others, and we must view the Scriptures as one text, an interlocking, whole product, not as written in *“bits and pieces.”*

5. James writes: *“You must understand this, my beloved brothers, and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”* What he says is that we are forgiven of our sins when we come to the Lord and repent, but just to say the words and ask for repentance is not enough. True repentance comes with the actions, indicating a true and a real change that occurs in one’s heart. I have so much issues with those, especially the politicians, who profess to be Christians and yet when it comes to practice what they believe, they *“back off”* from their convictions, in the name of the separation of their *“faith and the position”* they represent. No matter what the political office or the position one holds, we cannot have *“one face to God and another for the devil.”* James’ words are so important.It is not enough to know about the problem we encounter, we must respond to it. James’ might be seen as the old fashioned, but it is a valid advice: *“Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the Word planted in you.”*

6. It is very interesting that so many people like to offer their advice to others and camouflage it as a concern for what the other people might do, while at the same time, they are unable to see their own actions as being far from perfect, if not outright inappropriate. The question I like to ask them is: *“Why don’t they taste their own medicine?”* I believe this happens because it is much easier to find fault in someone else, and it seems easier to control other people, rather than to see own failings and to be able to control themselves. I believe that James’ advice has been simple: *“Get rid of all the ways that may lead* *to problems, and in the future simply avoid all such ways.”* I other words: *“Be selective with what you watch, what you read and where you seek your entertainment.”* If anything, we live in the day and age when we have such a huge selection of choices, but in making any of these choices, we must apply what the Scriptures teach us. This demands determination, but when we are determined, we will act accordingly. This does not mean we will never make mistakes, because we will, but when we make every effort to avoid them, the chances of making a mistake are much slimmer.

7. A few years ago I came across a statement by a 19th and 20th centuries British Methodist pastor Rodney “Gypsy” Smith, who said: *“What makes a difference is not how many times you have been through the Bible, but how many times and how thoroughly the Bible has been through you.”* I believe that this is exactly what James says when he call us to become doers of the Word and not the hearers only. (In NIV this verse says: *Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what is says.* 1:22) What good is a Christian faith which is exercised only between 10:30 and 11:30 on Sunday morning, or on whatever time a Worship Service in any Church is being held? We are called to a Christian life 24/7, the whole year round. *“Sunday only”* Christians are like the chap in this joke: *At the end of the service, while shaking hands with parishioners, Pastor Bob tells the man: Johnny, I want you to join the Service of the Lord. To which Johnny replies: I already am in the Service, Reverend. That’s why I see you in the Church only on Christmas and Easter? – the pastor asked. Because Reverend, I am in the “Secret Service”- Johnny replies.*

8. James’ reflections on the way to lead a successful Christian life, indicates that we are far more responsible for our own actions then we would like to admit. I believe that his letter must be studied carefully, and we all need to read James and to follow his practical solutions to everyday problems we may face. James’ wisdom comes from many years of experience, many turns and twists in his own life. Like his family he doubted Jesus, at times, did not believe in Him and with Mary and his brothers, he wanted Jesus to stop His ministry. It certainly took some time for James to realize that his brother Jesus is indeed the Messiah promised and send by God, but eventually he did. In his letter he introduces himself as: *“a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.”* As I already said, we know that James was a bishop of the Jerusalem’s Church, but this did not happen simply because he was Jesus’ brother. He has experienced, with hands on, Jesus’ teachings in his own life and that is why he was able to speak so powerfully as his letter shows us. He still might remain a controversial writer for some because of his approach to faith, but I believe that as we carefully study his letter, and seek practical applications in our own life, we may not only understand where he comes from, but why it is important to us to not only *“talk the talk, but also to walk the walk.”*