

JAMES

Verse By Verse



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INTRODUCTION

In this epistle James addresses practical issues that are as current as this morning's newspaper, and yet his challenges are not dated. The timeless truth that James presents is that true Christian faith will be lived out in our daily lives, or it is not Biblical faith. The faith that Christians claim must be demonstrated in all situations and circumstances of life. Trials and hardship are not to be seen as hindrances to faith, but as opportunities to exercise and perfect our faith.

James 1 GREETINGS / 1:1

How often do we open a letter without checking to see who sent it? Ancient letter writers signed their names right at the beginning, so readers immediately knew the author. Modern readers of the New Testament, however, frequently skip over the address because it strikes us as unimportant. The first verses of the New Testament books often tell us the writer's identity and how the writers perceived their roles. In James's epistle these helpful insights prepare us for the entire letter.

1:1 “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.”

- James is only mentioned by name a few times elsewhere in the New Testament (**Matthew 13:53–55; Acts 1:12–14; 15:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:3–8; Galatians 1:19; 2:7–9**). But as the leader of the Jerusalem church, he was well known by the rapidly expanding Christian world. By simply using his first name, James manages to convey humility as he signs his letter. He could have identified himself as “brother of Jesus” or “leader of the Jerusalem church,” but the only addition to his name is the title of **servant**.
- True humility will always depend on the source of that humility. Religious education, titles, power, accomplishments, reputation, and self-image are short-lived and ineffective substitutes for a close, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. When we truly know Christ as John did in **I John 1:1–3**, we find Him sufficient.

- **Servant of God.** The Greek word *doulos* (slave, servant) refers to a position of complete surrender, death to self, utter humility, and unshakable loyalty. Many of the first followers of Christ were, in fact, slaves. But among Christians, the idea of being a slave of Christ became not a position of humiliation, but a place of honor. There can be no greater tribute to a believer than to be known as God's dead-to-self and alive-to-God, humble, and loyal servant. If Jesus is truly our Shepard, our master, our actions will reveal a humble faith in Him.
- **Lord Jesus Christ.** The three names that make up this title refer to the unique character of Jesus. He is the heavenly, exalted **Lord** who will one day return in glory to this world. He is **Jesus**, God come to earth as a human being. He is **Christ**, the Messiah, the anointed one who fulfilled God's purposes by dying for us.
- **The twelve tribes.** The original twelve tribes of Israel no longer existed. Deportation of the ten northern tribes had effectively destroyed their identity. All that was left of that part of Israel were the mixed-race Samaritans who were despised by the Jews. By the time of this letter the term *the twelve tribes* had come to describe the regathered and renewed Israel that God would create in the last days (**Ezekiel 47:13; Matthew 19:28; Revelation 7:4–8; 21:12**). That regathering has been made possible by Jesus the Messiah.
- **Scattered.** The phrase "scattered abroad or among the nations" refers to Jews who had left Palestine by force or by choice. The deportation of Jews to foreign

lands had been practiced since the days of the Assyrians over six hundred years before Christ.

- Following the resurrection of Christ and the early successes of the young church in Jerusalem, the believers were severely persecuted. They were forced to escape to distant places. Taking their faith with them, they began to carry out the commission Christ had given his disciples in Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations”.

ENDURING TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS / 1:2–18

James wrote to believers facing difficult times. His desire was to encourage his brothers and sisters in the faith.

1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;”

- How can a person consider trials to be joy? Because we know that Rom. 8:28 and 29 is true. As believers in the finished work of Christ, we have the God-given grace to be joyful in situations where joy would naturally be our last response. When unwanted and unpleasant circumstances frustrate believers, James encourages us to be joyful. Those who are abiding in Christ exhibit a dramatically different, positive response to the difficult events of life.
- Our attitude is to be one of genuine rejoicing. This is not joyful anticipation *for* trials to end, but rather it is joy in the midst of trials. The joy is based on confidence in the one who loves us and is sovereign over all trials. It is the startling realization that trials are necessary for our growth. In contrast, to James’s statement, most people are joyful when they escape trials. James is not encouraging believers to pretend

to be happy. Rejoicing goes beyond happiness. Happiness centers on earthly circumstances and how well things are going here. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit rather than fleshly event-driven because it centers on the God who loves us and is working all our circumstances for good to bring about His purpose of molding us into the image of Christ. (**Romans 8:28-29**)

- *Count or consider* means “regard it as.” Count it pure joy. Don’t let pain or struggle take away the joy of new growth, new insight, new depth, or new and deeper dependency. Focus on the future benefits of your difficult circumstances.
- **When you fall into diverse temptation or trials. (Whenever you face trials.)** We are urged to be joyful, not *if* we face trials, but *whenever*. When James says, “Fall into various trials,” these are the unavoidable difficulties of life. Falling into trials is like falling among robbers, as did the traveler in **Luke 10:30**.
- **Trials of many kinds.** Where do these trials come from? They often come from just living in a fallen world in a cursed body; they can be hardships from without or fleshly temptations from within. They most often come when we are least prepared or when we are certain they could never come. A trial may be a hard situation that tests a person’s faith such as persecution, a difficult moral choice, or a tragedy. Life’s trail is marked with such trials.
- Considering your trials to be joy begins by seeing life from God’s point of view. We may not be able to understand the specific reasons for God’s allowing certain experiences in life, but we can be confident

that His plan is for our good. What may look hopeless or impossible to us never looks that way to God!

1:3 “Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience [or endurance].”

- *Dokimion* is the Greek word translated *trying*. It actually could mean “perfecting.” We tend to think of “testing” as a way to prove that we don’t know or don’t have, however testing ought to be seen as a positive opportunity to prove what we are learning. This is the term used in **I Peter 1:6-7**, “trial of your faith:” it means that the trial is God’s way of proving our faith genuine. It is a trial that has a positive purpose. The person’s faith who is being tried should become stronger and purer through the trial. Trials for believers that are referred to here in James do not determine whether or not we have faith; rather, the trials strengthen and perfect our faith by adding perseverance or endurance to the faith that is already present. An interesting scripture to consider regarding the trying/perfecting of our faith is **Psalms 66:10-12**.
- **Patience/Endurance** involves trusting God for a long duration. In the context of the New Testament, it is important to see that James is not questioning the faith of his readers; he assumes that they trust in Christ. He is not convincing people to believe; he is encouraging believers to by grace through faith, continue trusting God to the end. James knows that their faith is real, but is it strong enough to endure a long, difficult season of trial?
- We cannot really know our own depth of faith until we see how we react under pressure. Diamonds are coal, subjected to intense pressure over a period of

time. Without pressure, coal remains coal. The testing of our faith is the God ordained pressure that life brings to bear on us. Endurance or perseverance is the intended outcome of this testing.

- **Produces.** Testing of faith produces a harvest, or the final product, perseverance. The results are gradual.
- When the writer of Hebrews portrayed the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11), the outstanding characteristic of the Old Testament men and women of faith was their endurance. They lived on a promise they acted in faith. “Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised” (**Hebrews 11:39**). They stayed true to God even when they faced the most difficult hardships of all; not seeing the fulfillment of what had been promised to them. Elsewhere in the New Testament, perseverance is also noted as one of the essential parts of the believer’s life (**Romans 2:7; 5:3–5; 8:24–25; 2 Corinthians 6:3–7; 2 Peter 1:2–9**).
- Keep in mind that it is not our fleshly nature to endure. When it comes to trials, we would rather escape the difficulty.

1:4 “But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

- The word *patience* or *perseverance* suggests “steadfastness/endurance under trial.” What faithful perseverance generates is recognized by three significant characteristics:
 1. **Perfect or Mature** – seasoned, experienced, well-developed, fit for the tasks. Maturity in this sense is not related to age. It is a quality

developed by what we have learned from the trials of life. Maturity is the ability to recognize a mistake before we make it again. It is a God produced ability to learn from previous experiences.

2. **Entire or Complete** – fully trained. The weaknesses and imperfections are slowly diminishing from our character; we are gaining some measure of Christ produced victory over old sins; we are demonstrating a sense of competence about life, and it relates to our experience.
 3. **Not lacking anything** —Although this last quality is stated in the negative, it describes a security or contentment that comes from knowing that God is exchanging the self-life for the Christ-life.
- Scripture does not promise us perfection in this life. So to be mature and complete is not sinless perfection. These terms describe a person who is walking in the Spirit and being molded into the image of Christ. Perfection, as the Bible defines it for believers, is a deep, intimate, abiding relationship with Christ/God. The writer of Hebrews makes this comment: “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God” (**Hebrews 6:1**).

1:5 “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

- The shift here is sudden and helpful. The command to consider in verse 2 (1:2) relates to the need for wisdom in verse 5 (1:5). We need wisdom (looking at

life from God's point of view) in order to consider it pure joy when facing all kinds of difficulties. If we are paying attention to the implication of the first verses in this letter we will be struck with our lack of wisdom.

- **If any of you lacks wisdom, ask God.** Recognizing our lack of wisdom might cause us frustration and despair, but God wants us to turn to Him instead.
- **Who gives generously to all.** Our request to God for wisdom ought to be shaped by the following characteristics of God Himself:
 - ❖ *God is generous.* Since God's generosity has included the gift of His own Son, "How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (**Romans 8:32**) The wisdom we need is one of those "things" that God has given to us in Christ. (**I Corinthians 1:30**) As we rest in our position in Christ, we conditionally receive His wisdom. God loves sinful man (**Romans 8:38**). He supplies all of our needs (**Philippians 4:19**). He will never leave us or forsake us (**Hebrews 13:5**). God's generosity is universal. It is one of those basic character qualities of God that is revealed in creation.
 - ❖ God accepts us and understands our weaknesses, so we can come to Him when we face difficulties and suffering. So we must never hesitate, but come boldly to God to receive His wisdom. **Hebrews 10:19**
- **It will be given to him.** God's reply is sure.

1:6 "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed."

- The one condition for receiving this gift of God is *faith*. God will generously give wisdom, but the one who asks will not receive it if he does not know and trust in God.
- Our faith is being perfected by various trials (1:2-4). That same faith must be in and directed toward God as we realize our need for Him and His wisdom. When we ask, the asking must be by faith in God. Faith is single-minded dependence; trusting fully in God. Faith holds on to God during difficult times (**Job 13:15; Daniel 3:16-18**). It is continued confidence in God despite outward circumstances. The writer of Hebrews explained biblical faith in Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Evidence is always based on facts, and the facts that our faith is based on is God’s Word. So we could paraphrase this verse in this way: “Faith standing on the facts of God’s Word, gives evidence of things not seen.”
- **Not wavering, or we could say, not doubting.** Wavering means “a divided mind.” Wavering or doubting here has nothing to do with doubting whether God can do something; rather, it describes a person “divided” between being self-centered and being God-centered. This is the reason why James adds the idea of the “wave,” because it really means to be tossed to and fro between self and God. Doubting is trusting self more than God.
- **He who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.** The behavior of sea waves is unsettled, going back and forth, driven by the varying winds, like the doubter’s mind. Such a person wavers in his decisions and may, in the end, make no

decision at all. Circumstances become the decision makers in that person's life. When God's Word is given equal or less than equal authority with our feelings, desires, and the world's ideas, the result is an unsettled sea of indecision and chaos.

1:7 “For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.”

- The person who asks in faith does not determine how or when God will answer, but he or she can be confident in knowing that God hears and will answer. The person who asks doubting that God will answer or do what He promised cannot expect anything. His or her request was not genuine.

1:8 “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.”

- A double minded person is one who changes his or her mind often. **Proverbs 24:21** refers to this person as one “given to change.” He or she is a walking contradiction.
- **In all his ways.** Double mindedness and instability are revealed not only in individuals' prayers, but in all one does. When indecisiveness marks our relationship with God, that instability will affect all of life.
- The life that James presents to us in verses 2–8 is clear:
 - ❖ We can live a single-minded life of dependence upon God where every experience, including the trials we fall into, is another step in the process of becoming mature and complete persons. Keep in mind that doubts may be

some of the trials that a person faces. Those doubts fall into the category of the man who wisely confessed when he stood before Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (**Mark 9:24**) Single-minded persons do not dwell on whether they are aware of doubt in themselves; rather, they concentrate on wholehearted faith in God.

❖ An interesting verse is **I John 3:19-21**.

1:9 “Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted:”

- James now turns his attention to potential differences among Christians; notably between rich and poor. Although they share a common bond in Christ, they will face different trials as their faith is perfected. James returns to this theme throughout his letter.
- Some of the believers are **in humble circumstances on earth**. They are low on the socioeconomic scale. The Greek word here, *tapeinos*, means “insignificant in the world’s eyes, lowly, relatively poor and powerless, lacking in material possessions.” It is interesting that they receive the honor of being mentioned first.
- These scattered Jewish Christians would have been in such circumstances. They would have been looked down on by the Jews and were often disowned by their families. This was also a time of famine, and Christians may have suffered severely (**Acts 11:28–29**).
- **“Rejoice in that he is exalted”** or another translation is **“Take pride in his high position.”** This **pride** is not a fleshly arrogance, but a rejoicing in

the fact that contrary to the world's opinion, God's opinion of them gives them great worth. (**Jeremiah 9:23-24**) the only thing worth boasting about in this world is knowing God. And anyone who truly knows God will "humbly boast" of Him.

- The **high position** is a reference to our position in Christ. 160 times in the New Testament we see the phrase "In Christ." We may be facing trials and persecution now, but we can take pride in the high position we have been given. Through the perfecting of our faith we believers will eventually demonstrate to the world that we are "not lacking anything" (1:4).
- Whatever our social or economic situation, James challenges us to see beyond it to our eternal advantages. What we have in Jesus Christ outweighs anything in this life.

1:10 "But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away."

- As the gospel spread around the Mediterranean world, some who believed would have been rich Jews. Some, like Lydia in Philippi (**Acts 16:11-15**), were Gentiles, and wealthy. To such people, James gives a special challenge. He reminds them not to measure their worth by their earthly riches nor to depend on their possessions for security and joy because earthly treasures will not last.
- **Should take pride in his low position.** Christians, rich and poor alike, were being persecuted for their faith. God was using the persecution to bring these folks to the end of themselves. Wealth was not an effective protection against persecution and mob

violence (**Acts 17:1-9**). As they were being persecuted, the rich looked very much like those who were poor.

- To be made low also refers to the John the Baptist's statement in **John 3:30**, "He must increase and I must decrease." The rich are great in this world but are made equal to the poor in Christ. **James 2:5** says that the poor are rich in faith. So **James 1:9-11** is making clear that while the poor are low in this world, they are high in God's eyes, and while the rich are high in this world, they are lower in God's eyes.
- Wealth and the abilities that lead to wealth can create a barrier between us and God. If we are rich, or even if we live what we modestly call a "comfortable" lifestyle, James reminds us that our only lasting security is in our relationship with Christ. We must not walk in a vain show (**Psalms 39:6**), trusting what money and power seem to guarantee; instead, we must see ourselves as God sees us and humbly trust in Him and His eternal riches.
- "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low".
- **As a flower of the field he will pass away.** *All flesh is as grass, and all of man's goodness is as the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades.* The abundant, worldly comfort and security of one moment is gone the next.

1:11 "For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways."

- James describes a common occurrence in the Middle East. Morning is often welcomed by colorful desert flowers, bursting from the cool night. Their death is sudden in the sun's **scorching heat**.
- **The rich man also will fade away.** This fading or withering is as sudden and unexpected as the death of the wildflowers. Death always intrudes. The frequent announcements of the death of well-known people are often shocking. Somehow, death is not supposed to happen to successful people. But it does. Life is uncertain. Disaster is possible at any moment. It is foolish to trust in what will not last. The psalmist gives us an appropriate prayer: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a wise heart" (**Psalms 90:12**). Whether the number of our days turns out to be large or small, each should be lived acknowledging and depending and abiding and resting in Him (**Psalms 39:4-6**).
- The poor should be glad that riches mean nothing to God; otherwise, poor people would be considered unworthy. The rich should be glad that wealth means nothing to God, because wealth is easily lost. We find true spiritual wealth by growing into Christlikeness. The rich young ruler (**Matthew 19:16-24; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-30**) could not follow the Lord because his wealth was a hindrance. He had to forsake that god before he could honestly consider the true God.
- James begins his letter by making clear that believers, both poor and rich, are viewed in the same light before God (**Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11**).

1:12 "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."

- The Bible deepens the meaning of *blessed* to include a deep joy that comes from receiving God's grace. Jesus used this word in each of what are called the Beatitudes (**Matthew 5:3–12**). In that message, it is surprising to see the kind of people Jesus called "blessed."
- Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they will be filled.
- Joy-filled, then, **is the man who perseveres under trial**. As athletes persevere in training in order to improve their abilities and endurance for competition, so by God's grace, Christians persevere in spiritual training, enduring the trials that will bring a deeper faith and relationship with Christ. Today's trials will seem like training when we face tomorrow's challenges. James does not exhort us to enjoy pain or even claim that our trials are fun; rather, he tells us that the trials have a purpose; to perfect our faith and to give us an attitude of joy, so that we can patiently endure living life in a fallen world and in cursed bodies.
- **The man who endures temptation**. There is a finish line. There are successes along the way; spiritual progress has its mile markers, or bench marks. But the trials of this life are contained in this life.

Someday the trials will be over. Only then will we fully appreciate just how much we have needed these free gifts (grace):

- Faith in Christ and His finished work
 - Joy in the Lord
 - Endurance when all seems lost
 - The privilege to pray confidently
 - Wisdom from God
 - Hope in a God who loves and values us
- The phrase, “*endures temptation*” literally means “having become approved.” In the end, what matters is not whether our testing has been difficult or easy, but whether we have become more Christ-like through the trials. Near the end of his ministry, Paul used similar imagery as he summed up his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (**2 Timothy 4:7–8**). James’s words speak against the emphasis on instant results. The goals that he has mentioned thus far; faith, endurance, maturity, perfection, all sounds wonderful if we could only have them immediately. Instead we are faced with the race of life which is mentioned in **Hebrews 12:1**. God is with us along the way. What he chooses *not* to tell us is how long our personal race will be, nor what obstacles we will meet. We are directed to run with “finishing the race” on our minds, whatever it takes, trusting and resting, abiding and depending upon Him all the way.
 - **Will receive the crown of life.** The first chapter of James teaches us that God’s long-term goal for us is maturity, but his eternal goal is the crown of life.

- The Greek term, *stephanon tes zoes* (the crown of life), is an expression of hope. The believer who endures trials in this life by trusting God will have a life here and now that, though not full of worldly success and honor, is still truly abundant, joyful, and victorious. Enduring the tests/trials of life gives believers even now a taste of eternity. But the struggles also lead to the promise of the victor's crown of life (**Revelation 2:10**). So we run the race (**Hebrews 12:1-2**) and all who finish the race of life, by faith, will be declared winners; looking forward to that wonderful reward of eternity with Him. The one who will present the crown of life to us, can be a source of strength and encouragement in times of trial in this life. (**1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 4:7-8** – "Crown of Righteousness is His Righteousness")
- **Promised to those who love him.** Christians can consider themselves truly blessed, no matter what their outward earthly circumstances, because they have been promised the crown of life (His life in Christ). God enables believers undergoing trials to rest and trust in him. Not only our faith, but our love for God will deepen as we endure life's trials. As we daily recognize and experience God's love for us, our love for Him increases. And as our love for Him increases we will by faith appropriate His promises (the crown of life).

1:13 "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:"

- We must have a correct view of God in order to persevere during times of trial. Specifically, we need to understand God's view of our temptations. Trials

and temptations always present us with opportunities to trust God. God uses hardships to perfect our faith. When we give in to temptation or fail to endure a difficult trial, we often use all kinds of excuses and reasons for our actions. The most dangerous of these is to blame God for tempting us. James turns his attention to this problem.

- **When tempted.** As used here, the Greek word for temptation (*peirasmos*) stands for a direct evil impulse. It can be used to indicate a trial (1:12), a temptation from within (1:14), or a temptation from without, usually relating to Satan's work (**Matthew 4:1**). In Jesus' best-known prayer, he told his disciples to ask God, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (**Matthew 6:13**). It is crucial for us to remember always that God *tests* people for good; he does not *tempt* people for evil. Even during temptation we can see God's sovereignty in *permitting* Satan to tempt us in order to perfect our faith and bring us to a deeper dependence on Christ.
- **No one should say, "God is tempting me."** Instead of persevering (1:12), we may give in or give up in the face of trial. We might even rationalize that God is at fault for sending such a trying experience, and thus blame God for our failure. From the beginning it has been a natural human response to make excuses and blame others for our sin (**Genesis 3:12–13**). Fleshly excuses include:
 - "It's the other person's fault."
 - "I couldn't help it."
 - "Everybody's doing it."
 - "It was just a mistake."
 - "Nobody's perfect."
 - "I didn't know it was wrong."
 - "The devil made me do it."

➤ “I was pressured into it.”

- **For God cannot be tempted by evil.** Because God cannot be tempted by evil, he cannot be the author of temptation. James is arguing against the pagan view of the gods where good and evil coexisted.
- **Nor does he himself tempt anyone.** God does not tempt people with evil. Our failures are not God’s fault. God may test believers in order to strengthen their faith, but he never tries to induce sin or destroy faith. God does not want us to fail, but to succeed. See these examples of God testing his followers: Abraham (**Genesis 22:1**); Israel (**Judges 2:22**); and King Hezekiah (**2 Kings 20:12–19**; **2 Chronicles 32:31**).
- At this point, the question may be rightly asked: “If God really loves us, why doesn’t he protect us from temptation?” A God who kept us from temptation would be a God unwilling to see us mature in faith. In order for a test to be an effective tool for growth, it must be capable of being failed. God actually proves his love by protecting us *in* temptation instead of protecting us *from* temptation. He provides a way to resist: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (**1 Corinthians 10:13**).

1:14 “**But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.**”

- Some believers thought that since God allowed trials, he must also be the source of temptation. These people could excuse their sin by saying that God was

at fault. James corrects this. Temptations come from the flesh within. Here James highlights individual responsibility for sin.

- **But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire.** Behind the idea of the *evil desire* is the Jewish doctrine of the *two yetzers* or *two natures*. This has to do with the Jewish belief that all people have two impulses; an impulse to good and an impulse to evil, and that these impulses or natures war within them. Paul makes this clear in **Galatians 5:17** and **Romans 7:21-23**.
- The NIV adds the implied *evil* to the Greek *epithumia* (desire), which can but does not have to imply an evil craving or lust. Normal desires, such as hunger, can also be the starting point of temptation. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4), the temptation came through a natural desire for food after a long fast. Satan urged Jesus to satisfy that desire in an inappropriate way, at the wrong time. The temptation was real, but Jesus did not sin by giving in to the temptation.
- **When he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.** The enticement of the flesh is expressed in two ways; being dragged away or being lured like a fish to bait, and being enticed.
- So we come to a point where we discover that we have a flesh (an inward desire to do wrong) within us. How can we withstand the attacks we know will come? There is only one way. God's way, which Paul explains in **Romans 6:6**, "Don't you know that the old man has been crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that you are no longer as slaves to sin?" God has only one way to

withstand temptation and that is by faith in the finished work of Christ; faith in the facts of God's Word. **Galatians 2:20:** *I am crucified with Christ.*

1:15 “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”

- James traces the result of temptation when a person yields to it. Desire in itself is not sin, but yielding to its enticement eventually gives birth to sin. Note that the first two steps in the process (desiring and conceiving) emphasize the internal nature of sin (the flesh). The sequence represents the course any sin will take by the time it becomes apparent to others. Since it begins within, the help we need must also be internal. That help comes only from God. The best time to stop sin is at the moment we realize the desire is about to become the focus of my soul, mind, will, emotions, before it has conceived.
- It takes spiritual maturity and a moment by moment, active dependence on God and His grace to know when a desire can be calmly evaluated in the Spirit or when a desire is becoming lustful and controlling in the flesh.
- At first temptation is a fleshly thought confronting the mind; then feelings (emotions) and desires (will) paints it in stronger colors; only after that do we take pleasure in it.
- **And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.**^{NIV} It is not in man to stop sinning. God's way is to know the truth and the truth will set us free (**John 8:32**) The truth we must know to be set free from sin's power is in **Romans 6**. We have been crucified with

Christ (vs. 6) and therefore sin shall not have dominion over us (vs. 14). Sin is *full grown* when it becomes a fixed habit. *Death* is referring to spiritual separation from God that comes as the result of sin (**Romans 6:23; 7:7-12; I John 2:16-17; 3:14**)

1:16 “Do not err, my beloved brethren.”

- The Greek expression “do not err” means “stop being deceived;” deceived about God’s goodness and about the source of temptation and God’s remedy. If life was fully defined by 1:13-15, our situation would be desperate. We might be faced with struggling against sin while God watched, uninvolved. James hurries on to spell out our hope. Not only does God *not* tempt us, he is also actively providing everything good that we find in life. We are not to attribute evil intent to God; God is the source of good gifts, especially the new birth (1:18). He is the author of salvation, not temptation. Verses 1:16-18 is the positive side of the picture painted in 1:13-15.
- The danger behind James’s warning to us not to be deceived is the temptation to believe that God does not care, or won’t help us, or may even be working against us. If we come to believe we are alone, we have been deceived. If we distrust God, we have been deceived. And if we dare to accuse God of being the tempter, we have been thoroughly deceived.
- What more devastating example of deception could there be than seeing the source of all good as the source of evil? Is it any wonder that Jesus leveled this charge at those who had a twisted view of God? “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the

beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (**John 8:44**). Believing in God is important, but it also matters that we know the true character of God. It is this very deception that James is attacking by his entire letter.

- **My dear brothers.** The phrase is literally “my beloved brothers.” It both softens and directs the warning. James mixes even the hard statements that he must write with reminders of the love behind his letter. People will listen to hard things more readily when they are reminded that the one saying them is doing so out of genuine love.

1:17 “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” [or we could translate, “...who does not change like shifting shadows.”]

- So how can we keep from falling into temptation? The way is found in an abiding relationship with God and seeing clearly that every good and perfect gift is coming from Him.
- **Every good gift and perfect gift is from above.** In contrast to the view that God sends evil, James points out here that: (1) God is the source of everything good, and (2) God’s good gifts are perfect. They are given at the right time for good purposes.
- We can be assured that God always wills the best for us; not good things today and bad things tomorrow. Whatever happens is for our good (**Romans 8:28**).

- **Coming down from the Father of lights.** This phrase pictures God as the sovereign Creator of the sun, moon, and stars (Genesis 1; **Isaiah 60:19–22; John 1:1–14.**) The giving character of God is written into his creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (**Psalms 19:1**). God gives us good gifts; and the light by which to see and enjoy them.
- **Who does not change like shifting shadows.** God’s character is always trustworthy and reliable (Malachi 3:6). Nothing can block God’s goodness from reaching us. One of the many things about God that does not change is his giving nature. It is constant and consistent. He is undaunted by our inconsistencies and unfaithfulness. We may be like shifting shadows, but God remains the Father of lights.

1:18 “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

- This is a shining example of the good things God gives (“every good and perfect gift”); he gives us spiritual birth! We are saved because God chose to save us. Our spiritual birth is not by accident or because he was forced to. “The word of truth” is the gospel, the Good News of salvation (**Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:15**). We hear about the gift of birth through the reading and preaching of the gospel, and we respond by faith to it. We apply the message to ourselves and our needs. We receive by faith the offered gift.
- **That we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.** Jewish leaders would be well aware of the

practice of offering the first crops to ripen just prior to harvest as an act of worship and as a blessing on the rest of the harvest (**Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:9–10; Deuteronomy 26:9–11**). Believers are firstfruits because we are a new creation in Christ; we are no longer sinners in Adam, separated from God, but we have a new position in Christ and are God's own children (**Romans 8:19-23; I Corinthians 15:20-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:13**). The rest of all he created must wait for God's plan to unfold, but those who have been given spiritual birth have been welcomed by the first firstfruit, Christ (**I Corinthians 15:20**), into the family of God and are part of the new creation that he has established. As Paul expresses it, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (**Romans 8:22-23**). Though we have been given spiritual birth we live in a world that has not yet been transformed. Living as firstfruits (examples of God's goodness and role models of the life within. The letter of James could be subtitled, "How to live as a firstfruit!")

LISTENING AND DOING / 1:19–27

James has just spoken of the new birth; he now explains that this new birth should reveal itself in the way we live life. He has also connected the new birth with God's Word. The ongoing importance of that Word will be the subject of the next paragraph. The Word that brings us life also guides us in living the life it has brought to us. From the grand scope of God's eternal plan and the unique place of believers in creation, James turns to the painful and practical essentials of living as "firstfruits."

1:19 "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:"

- James begins with a single, attention-getting Greek word: *Iste* (know!), translated “take note of this.” It has the same effect as when we say, “Listen,” before saying something we don’t want people to miss. Verse 19 records the theme for the rest of the chapter. Again James reminds his reader that we Christians are a family (“dear brothers”).
- **Let everyone be swift to hear, or quick to listen.** When James speaks to *everyone* here, he is referring to our need to listen to God’s Word (1:18). The expression “*quick to listen*” is a way of capturing the idea of active listening. We are not simply to refrain from speaking; we are to be ready and willing and interested in listening. *Quick* also implies a readiness to apply what we hear. We often find the attitude among believers that the speaker is entirely responsible for getting the people to listen by being entertaining and engaging. James shifts the responsibility back to the audience. This “quick” listening is obviously to be done with discernment. We are to check what we hear with God’s Word. If we don’t listen both carefully and quickly, we may miss life-changing truth which could be key to God’s maturing process.
- **Slow to speak. Proverbs 10:19; 13:3; 17:28; 29:20** Quick to listen and slow to speak should be taken together as sides of the same coin. Slowness in speaking refers to speaking in the Spirit with humility and patience, not with the fleshliness of hasty words or nonstop gabbing. Wisdom is not always having something to say; it involves listening carefully, considering prayerfully, and often speaking softly. When we talk too much and listen too little, we communicate an insensitivity to others. James wisely

advises us to reverse this process. Christianity is relational, both with God and one another.

- Teachers are especially prone to an imbalance when it comes to speaking and listening. We should take careful note of the way Jesus mixed the two. His speaking tended to be marked by brevity. He asked questions. He listened.
- **Slow to anger.** Fleshly anger blinds our minds to God and His truth (**2 Kings 5:11**).
- When injustice and sin occur, there is such a thing as righteous anger because others are being hurt; but we should not become angry when our taste is offended, our opinions ridiculed, or when we are neglected and pushed aside. Self-focused anger never accomplishes God's purposes (**Ecclesiastes 7:9; Matthew 5:21-22; Ephesians 4:26**).

1:20 “For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

- The anger spoken of here is uncontrolled and leads to erratic uncontrolled behaviors. Our fleshly anger toward others does not come from the Spirit. Anger is inconsistent with Jesus' command to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:43-48; 5:21-26**). Fleshly, vengeful anger usurps God's role (**Romans 12:19**).

1:21 “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.”

- Progress in our spiritual life cannot occur unless we by grace through faith see sin for what it is, quit justifying it, and reject it. James' word picture here

has us, through the grace of God, giving up our evil habits and actions like stripping off dirty clothes. Keeping in mind that this is not something we can do on our own, “for it is God that works in us, to will and to do his good pleasure.” (**Philippians 2:13**)

- **Receive with meekness the implanted word.** Humble acceptance is contrasted with the quick speech and anger from 1:19. James is not asking believers to be converted; that has already been done. To accept the planted word he speaks of here is to hear and receive as truth all that he has said and to live by that truth. To humbly accept the word, we must be “quick to listen” (good listeners), “slow to speak” (thoughtful), “slow to anger” (not hastily jumping to conclusion), and willing to do what it says (1:19). All this comes by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ.
- The word is planted in us when it becomes part of our character, our being. This is a life-long process that begins with the Holy Spirit revealing to us our need for Him.
- **Which is able to save your souls.** Salvation is past, present and future; Christians are not finished with God’s Word once we are saved. Instead, God’s Word becomes a permanent part of our lives, guiding us through each day. We absorb the truths taught in the Word; then these are expressed in daily living. Trials and temptations cannot defeat us if we are understanding and applying and appropriating God’s truth in our lives (**John 8:32**).

1:22 “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

- Simply reading and studying, God's Word does not profit us if we don't believe it (**Hebrews 4:2**); once we believe it, the natural next step is to reckon it so, and then we will have the power and desire to do what it says.
- Keep in mind that obedience is the fruit of faith. (**Romans 1:5**)
- **And so deceive yourselves.** ^{NIV} It is self-deception to congratulate ourselves about our knowledge of Scripture. This is the second kind of deception that James warns against. In 1:16 he tells us not to be deceived about God's character. Here James is concerned that we not be deceived about the character of God's Word. We are not to engage in passive listening, but rather engage in dependence on truth that leads to Godly behavior.
- **Be doers of the word.** Knowledge of truth is a prelude to faith and action; God's Word can only grow in the soil of **Proverbs 24:3-4**. By wisdom is a house built, by understanding it is established, and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all pleasant and precious riches. In order for truth to make a difference in our lives, we must first look at it as God looks at it (wisdom). Then we must apply that truth to our lives to (understand) it and then we experience God's truth in daily living we will (know) that it is indeed truth.
- The emphasis on listening combined with doing is found elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul wrote: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (**Romans 2:13**). Jesus himself said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God

and keep it” (**Luke 11:28**). Here James, is emphasizing the importance of actions as part of true, biblical faith. Later, he will discuss this topic at length (2:14–26).

1:23–24 “For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.”

- These and the following verses show different ways of reading or hearing God’s Word. Some people look at God’s Word, but it doesn’t affect their lives, like the person who looks quickly into a mirror and flaws go undetected and nothing is changed. The other approach is a longer look, the deep and continued study of God’s Word that allows a person to see flaws and change his or her life in line with Biblical principles and truth.
- The kind of **mirror** that God’s Word provides is unique. It shows us our inner nature in the same way that a regular mirror shows our exterior features.

1:25 “But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”

- This man looks with serious attention until the truth is applied and understood and then it just naturally is believed and lived out (experienced).
- What exactly is this *perfect law*? Elsewhere in James he calls it the “royal law” (2:8). It is the foundational principle that the Lord Jesus spelled out: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your

soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (**Matthew 22:37–40**). The perfect law calls us to love God unconditionally and to love others as we would ourselves. It is a law with unlimited applications. Jesus expanded on some of those applications in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), many echoes of which are found in James. In **John 8:31–32**, Jesus pointed out how knowing and obeying his teachings brings freedom.

- It seems paradoxical that a law could give us freedom, but God’s law (the perfect law of liberty) reveals sin in us and gives us, by faith, the power and desire to change (**Romans 7:7-8**). As Christians, we are saved by God’s grace, and salvation frees us from sin’s control. As believers we are free to live as God created us to live. Of course, this does not mean that we are free to do as we please (**I Peter 2:16; Galatians 5:13**); we are now free to obey God.
- **This one will be blessed in what he does.** The person is blessed because:
 - He looks intently at God’s Word.
 - He continues to prayerfully study the scriptures.
 - He does not forget what he has read and heard.
 - He applies biblical truth in life experiences.
 - He then reaps the benefits of living life as God intended life to be lived.

1:26 “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.”

- God's perfect law of liberty should be put into practice in our speech. Here James introduces two major themes that he will discuss at length later: the use of the tongue (3:1–12) and the treatment of the unfortunate (throughout the letter).
- **If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue.** Knowing how to speak well; as a great teacher, is not nearly as important as having control of our speech: knowing what to say and when to say it. If our faith only makes us consider ourselves religious, self-righteous, then it is useless. If we valued our faith, there would be evidence in our daily living. James is repeating the direction giving in 1:19, to be "slow to speak". One way others may know whether or not our faith is real is by what we say and how we say it.
- How, then do we keep a tight rein on our tongue? Based on what James has told us so far, the beginning of developing a tight rein is by putting into action the negative and positive actions that James mentions in 1:21: "Therefore, lay aside all filthiness and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." One of the ways that the "moral filth and evil" become apparent to others is by what flows from our mouth. Jesus explained this fact in refuting the emphasis on mere ritual cleanliness that was so important in his day. Jesus said, "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (**Mark 7:20-23**). God has made a way for us to keep from expressing this evil when we speak, and that way is

through the finished work of Christ (**Ephesians 4:28-32; Romans 6:3-14**).

- **He deceives himself and his religion is worthless.** It is self-deception to have religious practices that do not lead to an ethical life-style. In this verse, James points out a third dangerous deception: (1) we are deceived when we believe a distorted view of the character of God (1:16); (2) we are deceived when we listen to God's Word without applying it (1:22); and (3) we are deceived when we accept our own rationalization that our beliefs can be kept inside or expressed, but with no real life change.
- James does not specify how the tongue offends, but we can imagine a series of ways that our tongue dishonors God; gossip, angry outbursts, harsh criticism, complaining, judging. When our tongue wags, that way, our spiritual pronouncements and practices become worthless.
- James presents a powerful challenge to a world more and more tolerant of the idea that religion is whatever the individual makes it; self-designed faith is worthless. Believing in a God we refuse to submit to is just another expression of self-centered rebellion. In the end, it does not matter whether we consider ourselves religious. The real question is, how does God view us?

1:27 "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

- From a religion capable to rationalizing any behavior, James now turns to a relationship with God where he

is directing the terms of behavior; **Religion ... pure and undefiled.** James explains religion in terms of practical service and personal purity. Rituals done with reverence are not wrong; but if a person still refuses to submit to God in daily life, his “religion” is not accepted by God. What is accepted by God? Acceptable religion is Christ-centered, not self-centered. Outward rituals cannot substitute for Christ’s righteousness reproduced in us. Church services are no substitute for our relationship with God. Telling ourselves that God is not aware of our real attitude towards him and his Word is, as James keeps reminding us, self-deception.

- Pure and faultless religion is not perfect observance of rules and observances; instead, it is the Holy Spirit reproducing the life of Christ in us that pervades our hearts and lives (**Leviticus 19:18; Isaiah 1:16-17**). Like Jesus, James explains religion in terms of a vital inner faith that acts itself out in daily life. Our conduct must be in keeping with our faith (**I Corinthians 5:8**). This verse is not intended to be an exhaustive definition of Christianity. Instead, it characterizes conduct that is a fruit of our faith. It contrasts with mere acts of worship that are commonly called “religion.” In fact, the point becomes clear that the more obviously “religious” a behavior is, the more it becomes meaningless, while some of the most humble and common actions are the greatest opportunities for worship. These are acts that we probably would not do except out of the life of Christ within us. Jesus’ touching lepers when he healed them is a vivid example of this type of action. James presents two simple and practical actions of obedient faith that almost anyone can take.
- **To care for orphans and widows in their distress.** This is an illustration of how Christianity should look.

Orphans and widows are often mentioned in the concerns of the early church because these were the most obviously “poor” in first-century Israel. The widows, because they had no access to inheritances in Jewish circles, were very much on the outskirts of society. This is why Paul had to develop an entire order concerning widows in his own churches, as in 1 Timothy 5. The widows could not get jobs, and their inheritances went to their oldest sons. It was expected that the widows would be taken care of by their own families, and so the Jews left them with very little economic support. Unless a family member was willing to care for them, they were reduced to begging, selling themselves as slaves, or starving. By caring for these powerless people, the church put God’s Word into practice. When we give with no hope of receiving in return, we show what it means to be Christ-like (dead to self and alive to God).

- Even today, the presence of widows and orphans in our communities and cities makes this directive of James very contemporary. To this group we can also add those who have become de facto widows and orphans through the death of families in divorce. These people have complicated lives. The needs always threaten to overwhelm our human resources. Looking after hurting people is a God-given test of our faith. We are called by God to be involved in loving those who are struggling in life. James balances the command to be concerned for others with the command to be concerned about our own life.
- **To keep oneself unstained by the world.** This is a picture of how our Christian *character* should look. To keep ourselves from being polluted by the world, we need to appropriate the finished work of Christ, and by grace through faith commit ourselves to Christ’s ethical and moral system, not the world’s. We are not

to adapt to the world's value system based on money, power, and pleasure. True faith means nothing if we are contaminated with such values. James was simply echoing the words of Jesus in what has been called his "high priestly" prayer (John 17), where Jesus emphasized sending his disciples *into* the world but expecting them not to be *of* the world. The heart of Jesus' prayer was, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (**John 17:15**). The prayer makes two important points: (1) we remain in the world because that is where Christ wants us; and (2) we will have God's protection.

James 2

DO NOT FAVOR THE RICH / 2:1–13

James 1:19–27 encourages us to put our beliefs into practice. In 2:1–13, James gives a practical lesson: we are not to show favoritism. Such discrimination is not from God.

James wants his readers' faith to work its way into all our relationships.

As the Christian faith outgrew its Jewish roots, it was in danger of perpetuating certain customs that might have seemed beneficial but were not Christ-like. In the existing synagogues, it was the tradition to give places of honor to those who had earned them in some way. What may have originally started out of respect for the wisdom of leaders eventually became a system of status and power within local synagogues. James and others realized what a profoundly destructive effect this kind of elitism would have on the gospel. Christ came to set people free. The law to which James refers is not the ceremonial, superficial law of religious people, but the "law that gives freedom" (1:25). Favoritism brings bondage.

James is urging us to be alert about the way that we welcome strangers into the church. He does not want the warmth or honor of our welcome to be determined by the status or apparent wealth of the visitor. It is showing favoritism based on social standing that James specifically condemns. He makes it a cause for questioning the reality of a person's faith in Christ.

2:1 "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons."

- The readers were members of the church and his dear brothers in the Christian faith. James addresses his brothers because what he is explaining is a family issue. Among believers in Christ there exists a common accountability to God's Word. Whenever we remind one another of something Jesus taught, it

must be done in such a way that we remember we are also required to obey. Biblical truth applies to all of us. By saying “my brothers,” James emphasizes the togetherness of real obedience to Christ.

- **As believers in our Glorious Lord Jesus Christ.** James appeals to a single fact that binds these people together; they are all believers. His reference is not to common human values or general goodwill, but rather to the strongest bond that believers claim. The family relationship he is describing is limited to those who believe in our Glorious Lord Jesus Christ.
- Because of their shared position as believers, James’s readers were to follow the instructions he was about to give them. At times all of us need to be held accountable to our claims. If we want to be called Christians, believers in Christ, then our life needs to display the effects of that belief. There may be times when we must act with no other reason than obedience to Christ. We cannot be so identified with our society that we are unable to stand against it for the sake of Christ. Believers have established a history of resisting such evils as the imprisonment of Jews during World War II, discrimination and racism in the sixties, and abortions in the eighties, sometimes in radical opposition to societal norms.
- **Don’t show favoritism.** Another translation would be “Stop showing favoritism.” The construction of the Greek shows that James was forbidding a practice already in progress. This phrase has also been translated, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” The believers receiving this letter were already guilty of practicing discrimination. They apparently were judging people based only on

externals; physical appearance, status, wealth, power; as a result, they were pandering to and being influenced by people who represented these positions of prestige.

- In general, social distinctions did not exist in the early church. Masters sat beside their slaves during worship; sometimes a slave was the leader of the assembly. But from its beginnings, the church had many poor, outcasts, and those of little class or influence. So when a rich person was converted, the church members needed to guard against making more of a fuss over him or her than they would at the conversion of another poor person.
- Upon what grounds did James make this statement? Because impartiality is an *attribute of God* (**Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25**); impartiality was an *attitude Jesus practiced* (**Matthew 22:16; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21**); Scripture had *warned against favoritism* (**Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:17; Psalm 82:2; Proverbs 18:5**). James emphasized two clear points:
 1. Shunning the poor contrasts with God's attitude because he chose the poor to be rich in faith (2:5).
 2. Favoritism goes against God's royal law to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (2:8). Showing favoritism based on external considerations is inconsistent with faith in Christ, who breaks down the barriers of race, class, gender, and religion (**Colossians 3:11**).

2:2 "For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;"

- James launches into a vivid hypothetical case study. Two men were entering a meeting. We can assume that these men were both visiting, since they are described only by appearance.
- **With gold rings, in fine apparel.** One man was rich, as noted by his clothing and jewelry. A ring signified upper class and power. Rings were the same kind of visible status symbols that cars function as today.
- **And a poor man in filthy clothes.** This poor man was dressed in filthy rags; he was most likely a beggar. James makes it very clear that the action about to be taken, if not guarded against, will be based entirely on the appearance of these two guests. The motive or attitude of the visitors does not come into question.

2:3 “And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:”

- The rich man was shown special attention. He became the object of special service and deference.
Proverbs 28:21
- **And say to him, “You sit here in a good place.”** The rich man was singled out and escorted to a comfortable and favored seat.
- **Say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit here at my footstool.”** The poor man gets standing room only, or a seat on the floor; he is given neither dignity or comfort.

- The Jews had a practice of seating the most important people nearest the sacred scrolls. Other people would be seated in the back. This unhealthy practice was still carried on by some Christians. James speaks out against this. It is our relationship with Christ that gives us dignity, not our profession or possessions.
- The Christian answer is not reverse discrimination; treating the poor like royalty and the rich like scum. Our goal is to treat people without consideration for their status.

2:4 “Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?”

- James expected his readers to answer “yes” to his question. He condemned their behavior because Christ had made them all one. Paul later wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (**Galatians 3:28**). These believers were ignoring that fact. They were forced to admit that they were discriminating against the poor person and becoming unjust judges with evil thoughts, making their judgments by worldly standards. As Christians they professed obedience to Christ, but their conduct defied him. **Leviticus 19:15** firmly states: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.” In addition, they broke the commandment of Jesus, who said, “Judge not that you be not judged” (**Matthew 7:1**).
- Why is it wrong to judge a person by his or her economic status? Wealth may indicate intelligence, wise decisions, and hard work. On the other hand, it

may mean only that a person had the good fortune of being born into a wealthy family. Or it can even be a sign of greed, dishonesty, and selfishness. When we honor someone just because he or she dresses well, we make appearance more important than character. James calls this evil.

- Another false assumption that sometimes influences our treatment of the rich is our misunderstanding of God's relationship to wealth. It is deceptively easy to believe riches are a sign of God's blessing and approval. But God does not promise us earthly rewards or riches; in fact, Christ calls us to be ready to suffer for him and give up everything in order to hold on to eternal life (**Matthew 6:19–21; 19:28–30; Luke 12:14–34; 1 Timothy 6:17–19**).

2:5 “Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?”

- Jesus' first followers were common people. Christianity has a special message for the poor. Jesus often spoke of his mission to the poor: “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (**Luke 6:20; Matthew 11:5; Luke 4:18**). In a social system that gave the poor very little, Jesus' message to them was certainly good news.
- Though most agree that James expected this rhetorical question to be answered “yes,” some would argue that the biblical references to *poor* usually have to do with spiritual poverty. This is especially the case anytime the Bible seems to be saying that it might be an advantage to be poor. Their basis is the first Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (**Matthew 5:3**). It is fundamentally important for us to acknowledge our

spiritual poverty before God. But here James is simply making the observation, and expecting us to agree, that the poor in spirit are most often the poor in material wealth.

- God must love the common people because he made so many of them.

—*Abraham Lincoln*

- Elsewhere, Paul reminded believers of their humble roots: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 **Corinthians 1:26**). The poor people may not have mattered in that society, but they mattered very much to God.
- **And to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?** This does not mean that rich people are doomed and that poor people are automatically saved. Christianity offered much to the poor; the common people clamored to follow Jesus. But it demanded much of the rich. After speaking with Jesus, the rich young man “went away sad, because he had great wealth” (**Matthew 19:22**). The poverty of poor believers (those who love him) is only poverty in the eyes of the world, but they are rich in faith and will inherit the kingdom. The rich are not excluded from the kingdom; just as the poor are not “chosen” due to any merit of poverty. However, great riches can stand in the way of a person recognizing his or her need for God (**Mark 10:23; Luke 12:34**). The poor, on the other hand, have nothing about which they can boast before God (1 **Corinthians 1:29**). To continue to show favoritism to those who are only rich by the world’s standards is not only wrong, but shortsighted.

- Rich or poor, believers must believe God and live out their faith. This could be called the heart of James's message.

2:6 “But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?”

- The Greek word for *despised* or *insulted*, which means “dishonored” (see NRSV: NKJV). James's readers had dishonored the poor because they did not treat them as God treats them.
- James showed how evil their actions were by asking three questions.
- First, **Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?** In this society, the rich oppressed the poor. To *exploit* means to use someone for profit; to take advantage of someone and to use him or her selfishly for one's own purposes. As we are reading these questions, we must remember James's original case study (2:2–4). Both the rich person and the poor person in mind here are probably visitors to the church who are unbelievers. At best they are people whose faith is not yet known. James's questions reveal his underlying observation that the believers are treating with great honor those they ought to approach with some reserve (the rich) because there is a high probability that they are not believers, while at the same time dishonoring those whom they ought to approach respectfully because, quite possibly, they are dealing with a brother or sister who is a believer, or who is quite likely to become one.
- The rich exploiting the poor was not a new development; there are references to this throughout the Old Testament (**Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel**

18:7; Amos 4:1; 8:4; Malachi 3:5). If a poor person needed a loan, the rich person might offer it, but often at exorbitant interest (**Exodus 22:25**). In first-century Palestine, landowners and merchants often accumulated wealth and power, forcing the poor people from the land and causing them to become even poorer.

- Second, **Is it not they who drag you into court?** The rich typically showed no mercy or concern for the poor. They would take the poor to court, most likely for not repaying a debt. Wealthy moneylenders often took advantage of the poor. James can ask this question because he takes it for granted that his readers would understand that believers are not to be taking legal action against each other. **I Corinthians 6:1-8** What an amazingly contemporary issue! What statement are we making to the world when it sees, within the church, believers taking each other to court? The Bible does not deny that rightful grievances occur between people. But the options for settlement are broader and healthier. They include forgiveness, reconciliation, restitution—all handled among believers themselves (**Matthew 5:23–26**).
- But economic persecution was not the only oppression these believers faced from the wealthy; James's third question focuses on religious persecution.
- To dishonor the poor is to dishonor those whom God honors, and so to invert the order of God.

—*John Calvin*

2:7 “Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called?”

- These rich people were abusing the name of Christ either by speaking evil of him or by insulting Christians. It hadn't taken long for the followers of Christ to be called Christians by those outside the church (Acts 11:26). To be called a "Christian" was not an honor; it was a reproach heaped upon the believers by unbelievers (**1 Peter 4:13–14**).
- It often happens that those oppressed begin to act like their oppressors. How wrong that this should happen among believers. James pointed out the irony that Christians would show favoritism to those who were known to slander Christ!

2:8 "If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well:"

- Love is the source from which our attitudes toward others should flow. This **royal law** is a law from the king himself, in this case, the King of kings (**Matthew 22:37–40**). This law is God's will for his followers, for he said, "Love one another as I have loved you" (**John 15:12**).
- In the Old Testament (**Leviticus 19:18; Proverbs 14:21**), one's neighbor would be a fellow Israelite; but Jesus' application included everyone with whom we might come into contact; even foreigners (**Luke 10:25–37**) and enemies (**Matthew 5:44**). References by Jesus to Leviticus 19:18 are recorded six times in the Gospels, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (**Matthew 5:43; 7:12; 19:19; 22:37–40; Luke 6:31; 10:26–28**). James was bringing to the attention of his readers the royal law of

love that forbid them to discriminate against anyone who entered their fellowship.

2:9 “But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.”

- James does not trivialize their actions. Showing favoritism according to James is sin.
- Discrimination against anyone, whether on the basis of dress, race, social class, wealth, sex, etc., is a clear violation of the royal law of love. We must treat all people as we would want to be treated. We should not ignore the rich because then we would be withholding our love. But we must not favor them for what they can do for us, while ignoring the poor who can offer us little in return.

2:10 “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”

- Even our attitudes and motives come under the law’s jurisdiction. As Jesus explained in his Sermon on the Mount, “Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.... Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (**Matthew 5:22, 28**). The attitude of favoritism was no different, so James points out to his readers that by their actions toward these wealthy visitors, they were actually breaking all of God’s law.
- Jesus said: “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (**Matthew 5:19**). The believers had not made the connection between God’s command to love their neighbor and their discrimination against the poor.

- James's point here is not that showing favoritism is as "bad" as murder, but that no matter what commandment someone breaks, that person is guilty of an offense against God. He or she has violated the will of God. We cannot excuse the sin of favoritism by pointing to the rest of the good we do. Sin is not simply balanced against good; it must be confessed and forgiven.

2:11 "For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law."

- Here James illustrates his point that the law is a unit, and to break one law is to become guilty of the entire law. Jewish theologians of the day would have disagreed with James, saying some laws were "light" and some "heavy," meaning that breaking some was not as serious as breaking others. It might seem that stumbling on the act of showing favoritism is breaking one of those "least commandments," not nearly as bad as committing adultery or murdering. But God's law was not written with "heavy" and "light" commands so that obedience to some outweighed obedience to others. Believers are called to progressive perfection.
- From our perspective, there does seem to be degrees of sin. The immediate effects of some sins seem much more destructive and horrible than others. This is true. What we must remember, however, is God's perspective. He not only sees immediate effects, but he also sees hidden and long-term effects. And the long-term effect of all sin is rebellion against God.

- By the time Nathan confronted David about his relationship with Bathsheba, David had managed to break most of the commandments (**2 Samuel 11:1–12:23**). Among other things, David had coveted another man's wife, stolen her, plotted the man's murder, and lied repeatedly. Psalm 51 records David's repentant desire for forgiveness: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge" (**Psalm 51:4**). Before God, self-justification is always a wasted effort. We should come openly with and humility, looking for God's mercy and grace.

2:12 "So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty."

- Acknowledging, depending, and abiding in Christ must be a life-style. *Speak and act* covers all human behavior (**Acts 1:1; 7:22; 1 John 3:18**).
- The believers would be judged on the basis of their faith in the finished work of Christ which will produce obedience (**Romans 1:5**) to God's will as expressed in His Law. Although God has accepted those who believe in Him, we are still called upon to live out our faith, but His Law of liberty is not a burden; instead, it *gives freedom* (**Galatians 5:1; Philippians 2:13**) We are grateful that God has given us freedom from sin's penalty and the Spirit to empower us to do His will. Peter adds the special caution, "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God" (**1 Peter 2:16; Galatians 5:13**).
- The specific command is to speak and act as believers. The command implies *chosen* behavior. Christians can be held responsible by the world for

our bad example. Nothing is sadder than believers whose words and actions demonstrate that they are still under the influence of the world rather than under the influence of Christ. One of the basic rights we give to Christ when we surrender to his lordship is the right to speak as we want to speak and act as we want to act. Those choices now must be made under Christ's direction. The freedom we experience in Christ is the by-product of living the way God designed us. There can be no doubt that Jesus had this in mind when he said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (**John 13:35**).

- Without verses 12 and 13, this paragraph would appear little different than the crushing system that many of these Jewish Christians had lived under all their lives: the constant reminders of the demands of the law; the details of keeping the ceremonial laws; the threat of ostracism for overlooking some detail in the tradition; the power of religious figures to control people's lives. In these two verses, James points out once again the radical nature of the Christian message.
- Those who are suspicious of James's references to the law must account for the way Jesus himself treated the law. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill" (**Matthew 5:17**). We can actually say that Jesus did not come to lead people out from under the law, but rather to fulfill it. Our resistance to the idea of law is partly and rightly based on the horror of legalism and what it has done throughout history. But our resistance is also based on a misunderstanding of the law and of grace. Without the law of God, there would be no need of grace. If we remove God's holy standard, we have removed at the same time the framework in which

grace operates. To paraphrase the apostle Paul (**Romans 5:20–21**), the law shows us how much sin abounds; and it isn't until we see how much sin abounds that we are able to see that grace abounds even more!

- Jesus confronted a religious system that had annulled or trivialized God's standards. There was no need for grace because God's standards had been translated into "things that determined people could accomplish with a great deal of effort." Divine purity and perfection had been redefined into human self-righteousness and superficial rule-keeping. Jesus reintroduced the world to the awesome character of God: holy, just, and gracious. The Incarnation was not a revision or change in God's eternal plan; it was God's plan brought to fulfillment.
- As Christians, we are saved by God's free gift (grace) through faith, not by keeping the law. And as Christians, we are given the power and desire to live the Christ-life.

2:13 **"For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment."**

- Mercy is what the believers were not showing when they insulted poor people. If they continued to discriminate, they would be in danger of facing their own judgment without mercy. This is an excellent statement of New Testament ethics: What we do to others we actually do to God, and it returns upon our own heads.
- The relationship between mercy and concern for the poor is made clear in **Zechariah 7:9–10**: "This is what

the Lord Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other’ ” (**Isaiah 58:7–9**).

- We must be merciful because God is merciful:
 - ❖ “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (**Exodus 34:6**).
 - ❖ “Because the LORD your God is a merciful God” (**Deuteronomy 4:31**).
 - ❖ “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.... As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (**Psalms 103:8, 13**).
- But Jesus made it clear that God will show mercy only to those who do likewise (**Matthew 5:7; 6:14–15; 12:7; 18:21–35; 25:31–46; Mark 11:25**). We stand before God in need of his mercy. We can’t earn forgiveness by forgiving others. But when we withhold forgiveness from others after having received it ourselves, we show that we don’t understand or appreciate God’s mercy toward us.
- At salvation, God’s mercy positionally triumphed over His judgment. Jesus took all our punishment. However, conditionally we will always deserve God’s judgment because we can never adequately obey God’s royal law. But our merciful actions are evidence of our relationship with Christ. And it is that relationship that gives us the power and desire to do God’s pleasure. We stand before God, from whom we know we deserve judgment and upon whom we

are depending for mercy. Because of God's loving character, His mercy triumphs over judgment.

- The world is looking for evidence that God is merciful. Being people who have experienced mercy and who express mercy will draw people to us and ultimately to Him.

FAITH RESULTS IN GOOD WORKS / 2:14–26

The remainder of chapter 2 is often cited to show that the teachings of James and Paul were completely contradictory.

- ❖ *James: "Faith without works is dead."* (2:26)
- ❖ *Paul: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (**Romans 3:28**); "A person is justified not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ." (**Galatians 2:16**)*
- However, careful reading and understanding of both Paul and James will show that instead of contradicting, their writings really complement each other.
- First, consider the writers' viewpoints in light of the situations they were addressing in their letters. They were confronting different issues. Paul was responding to the Judaizers, who said works; such as circumcision and observing Jewish ceremonial laws, were necessary for salvation. James was responding to those who believed that mere intellectual agreement was enough to obtain salvation.
- Second, there is a difference in the time frame in the believer's life as they make their statements. Paul began at the very beginning; at conversion. No one can ever *earn* God's forgiveness and salvation. We can only accept it. James spoke to the professing

believer, one who has already accepted that forgiveness and salvation, explaining that the person must live a new life. No one can be saved by works; no one can be saved without producing works. We are not saved *by* good works, but *for* good works. James's point was not that works must be added to faith, but that genuine faith produces works.

- James's teachings are consistent with Paul's teaching that we receive salvation by faith alone. Paul emphasized the purpose of faith; to bring salvation. James emphasized the results of faith, a changed life.
- What James is really asking here is, "If a man says he has faith, but his life does not reveal that he is actually believing, what he says then is that true, genuine faith?"

2:14 "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?"

- Talk is cheap, and so unsubstantiated claims are worthless. Anyone can say he has faith, but if his life-style does not reveal a life of faith, then what good is that faith? We could say it is merely faith that believes about Jesus, not faith that believes in him.
- **Can faith save you?** No, it cannot. The structure of the Greek for this question expects a negative answer. The faith that saves is faith that proves itself in the actions it produces.
- Two images help us remember the importance of genuine faith:

1. On one side are people who project confidence in their standing before God and yet show no evidence that their faith affects their life. They may even take pride in the fact that no one has the right to challenge their faith. After all, “only God really knows for sure,” they may say.
- We can agree that allowing oneself to be forced to prove something can, at times, actually be evidence that we are not sure ourselves. For instance, when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13**), he was challenged to prove he was the Son of God. The proof was easily within Jesus’ ability. Yet Jesus rejected the challenge because trying to “prove” he was the Son of God would have subjected him to the influence of Satan. If Jesus had felt compelled to prove his divinity, that feeling would have betrayed self-doubt. Jesus did not doubt his identity; he demonstrated who he was many times, but not at the whim of others. Similarly, we must not attempt to demonstrate faith at the command of others, but our faith must still result in a life of faith.
 - On the other side are people whose lives demonstrate such a frantic flurry of activity that they literally have no time to think or talk about their faith. Those people, whose lives at first exhibit the marks of someone who believes, turn out to have real doubts. They doubt God’s acceptance and feel compelled to work very hard in hopes of gaining that acceptance. But trying hard to build merit with God becomes a substitute for faith. We first come to God by faith, receiving what we could never hope to earn. Then, out of gratitude, we seek to serve the One who loves us in every way we possibly can. Our faith leads to grateful work.

- James helps us see that genuine faith will always combine deep trust in God and consistent God-produced action in the world. It is not the one who claims to have faith, but the one who actually has faith who is saved.
- Someone may ask, “But what if genuine belief never really gets a chance to demonstrate itself in action?” We may answer by saying first that God sees genuine belief long before it is apparent to us. James’s discussion is not intended to be used to sift the faith of others, but rather as a tool to weigh our own faith. James is telling us that, given enough time, faith will demonstrate its liveliness by action. One instance of genuine faith given little time is the thief on the cross who believed in Jesus (**Luke 23:32–43**). Nearing death, this man truly believed yet was able to do no “works” ... or was he? Did even this man’s short-lived, genuine faith lead to real action? Yes it did! The apostle Paul clearly describes what is probably the first “work” most believers do when their faith is genuine: they verbally confess their faith (**Romans 10:9–10**). The dying thief said a few words of profound eloquence: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (**Luke 23:42**). The thief could not possibly have known how many times his simple trusting witness during his final agony would give hope to others who felt they were beyond God’s help.

2:15 “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,”

- James gives his readers an example of living out our faith.

- There is hardly a church today within whose walls there are not persons who live without adequate food, clothing and shelter.

2:16 “And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?”

- James leaves no doubt that the person in need is a brother or sister in Christ. The argument is strikingly similar to John’s words: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with deeds and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18).
- **“Depart in peace.”** This reflects a standard farewell blessing in Hebrew. The emphasis is on *Go!* It implied that the departing friend’s present needs were met and that one was hoping for the same in the future.
- **“Be ye warm and filled.”** The idea here is that the well-wisher is saying, “Please go, and may God take care of you because I don’t have the means or the time.” This brings out the hypocrisy of those who, in a sense, are asking God to do what God wants *them* to do. Also, one of the key elements of prayer, as in **Matthew 9:35–38**, followed by the mission in Matthew 10, is that when we pray for God to do something there is a very real chance that we may be the ones to fulfill our own prayer request.
- **But does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?** Something could be done for this person. There would be plenty of clothes and food in the fellowship to care for this person, but the person was

sent away empty-handed, with a prayer over his head, but no clothing on his back or food in his stomach.

- Too often, we in the church offer mere words; prayers, advice, encouragement, when we are given the opportunity to act. The need is obvious, and the resources are not lacking, yet the help is not given. Faith that does not result in actions is not true biblical faith. The wish accomplishes nothing. Among Paul's final words to the Galatians were, "therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (**Galatians 6:10**).

2:17 "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."

- A conviction or intellectual belief that does not do what it says it believes is not faith; it is dead. *Action* is the fruit of living faith. If there are no actions, then the professed faith is dead. Actions prove our faith to be real faith.

2:18 "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works."

- This someone considers faith and works to be separate and alternate expressions of Christianity. "You do your deeds, I'll have my faith, and we'll be religious in our own ways." But the two are interdependent on one another and cannot be separated without ceasing to be alive. Faith lives in the action it generates; actions require faith to gain a particular motivation.

- James responded with a challenge: Show me your faith without deeds. It cannot be done! True biblical faith cannot be demonstrated apart from motivating an action. Faith is within us; it can only be seen by the actions it produces through us. Anyone can profess faith, but only action shows its genuineness. If you want to know what I believe, then watch my life.

2:19 “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”

- That God is one was a basic teaching of Judaism: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (**Deuteronomy 6:4**). The Jews were well known for their ardent monotheism. It was even a source of national pride in a world characterized by polytheism. But James points out that acceptance of the fact that there is one God is not enough to save anyone. The demons have complete and thorough conviction that there is one God, but they are terrified by that truth. They believe in God only to hate and resist him in every way they can. Their “faith” even moves them to a negative reaction, while the faith of some of James’s readers isn’t real enough to activate them to depend on God. The demons shudder (an expression of fear, revulsion, and hatred) and demonstrate that their “faith” is real, though misdirected.
- Mere assent to the existence of God often leads only to ignoring or fearing him. Believing that *anything* or anyone exists does not bring us into right relationship with them. It is not satisfying progress for a wife who has been ignored to have her husband suddenly announce that he now admits she exists. The movement might be in the right direction, but it is hardly noticeable. Likewise, we have not impressed

God by grudgingly admitting his existence. At that point, we share the uncomfortable position of being even with God's enemies. Saving faith, then, is not merely intellectual agreement. It starts with wisdom (seeing God as God sees Himself). The next step is to apply what we have seen of God to our life (by faith). This lends to understanding and knowing God. **(Proverbs 24:3-4)**

- Almost all Christian traditions include making vows before God and repeating the historic creeds of the church. But it is not unusual to find adults who admit that they ever gave serious thought to what they were actually saying. It is this kind of thoughtless, actionless, lifeless faith that James repeatedly challenges. He is not contending that believing in one God is trite. What he is urging us to do is to express, with our actions, the kind of life that ought to characterize someone who knows God. He is challenging us with applications of Jesus' words: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" **(Matthew 22:37-39)**.

2:20 **"But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"**

- James again addresses his hypothetical person.
- The foolish person is literally a "hollow man" (*anthrope kene*). If the faith around which we build our lives turns out to be empty, we are truly hollow people.

- **Do you want to be shown ... that faith apart from works is barren?** James prepares to show from the Scriptures that real faith always has works. The phrase here is literally, “But are you willing to know?” indicating that he realizes the problem may reside in his readers’ will rather than in their having good reasons to act upon their faith. There are times when we need more teaching or understanding in order to respond to God’s direction. But most often we know what needs to be done, yet are unwilling to act. **Psalms 4:5** states “Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and trust God.” Righteousness is doing the right thing. But oftentimes, it is a sacrifice because our flesh doesn’t want to do it.
- James now turns to historical figures from the Old Testament that he expects will confirm what he has been teaching about the importance of active faith.

2:21 “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?”

- Abraham was one of the Old Testament figures most revered by the Jews (**Genesis 11:27–25:11**). Abraham’s remarkable willingness to sacrifice his son at God’s command was evidence of the work of faith which Abraham was called righteous.
- What was Abraham doing when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? He was trusting God with all his heart. The lesson we can learn from Abraham’s life is that a dependent relationship with Jesus filled with decisions and conduct that reveal our faith. Eventually, like Abraham, we too will have to answer the question, “Are we truly trusting God?”

2:22 “Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?”

- Abraham had great faith in God (**Genesis 15:6**), but James points out that Abraham’s faith was much more than just belief in the one God—the fruit of Abraham’s great faith was in his deeds.
- **Faith was brought to completion by the works.** The Greek here has a play on words: Abraham’s faith was working (*sunergei*) with his works (*ergois*). His faith produced his works, and his works completed his faith. Faith and works are inter-dependent on one another. Faith without works is dead. Works without faith is leaving God out and is motivated by legalism and self effort.

2:23 “And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.”

- Abraham believed God, and God gave Abraham the status of a right relationship with him; and this happened *before* Abraham’s noted works (such as his willingness to sacrifice Isaac), and even before Abraham was circumcised (**Romans 4:1–17**). But Abraham’s faith and God’s response *fulfilled* Scripture when Abraham “completed” his faith by what he did (2:22). The Scripture to which James is referring is **Genesis 15:6**. Paul emphasized the chronology of Abraham’s life, pointing out that he was called righteous before his noted works. James showed that Abraham’s righteousness was the basis and reason for all those works.
- **He was called the friend of God.** Because of Abraham’s great faith and he held the privileged

status of God's friend (**2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8**). The word *friend* (*philos*) is the same one Jesus used in John 15:14. There Jesus stated that an ingredient of friendship is obedience: "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (**John 15:14**). Please note here that obedience is a fruit of faith (**Romans 1:5**). Among Jesus' commands earlier during that occasion was this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (**John 14:1**). Acting out our trust in God will lead to friendship with him, as it did in Abraham's case.

2:24 "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."

- Many have said that this statement contradicts Paul's position, who wrote: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (**Romans 3:28**). Indeed, if both James and Paul used the word *justified* in the same way, this verse would contradict Paul's teaching about justification by faith alone. For James, "works" (what he does) are the natural products of true faith; for Paul, "works" (observing the law) are what people were trying to *do* in order to be saved. For James, faith alone is the shallow belief in an idea; no commitment or life change is involved. For Paul, faith is saving faith; the belief that brings about an intimate union with Christ and results in salvation.
- Paul made clear that a person enters into God's kingdom only by faith; James made clear that a life of good deeds, for Christians, comes from true biblical faith.

- A person receives salvation by faith alone, not by doing works of obedience; but a saved person does works of obedience because of that faith.

2:25 “Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way?”

- God’s final judgment on a person’s life considers the righteousness that person shows through works. But why would James bring up Rahab? After speaking of the great faith of Abraham, the father of Israel, James cited the example of Rahab, a pagan woman with a bad reputation (**Joshua 2:1–24; 6:22–25**). But these two people, as opposite as they were, cemented James’s argument; both people were declared righteous on the basis of their works that resulted from their faith. The contrast is not between faith and works, but between genuine faith and false faith.
- If Abraham had not had faith, he would not have followed God. If Rahab had not had faith, she would never have decided to side with Israel—“For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Rahab’s words in Joshua 2:11).
- Yet if Abraham had not been willing to obey God, his faith would have produced nothing. If Rahab had not risked her life to help the spies, her faith would have accomplished nothing. But she is listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews: “By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient” (**Hebrews 11:31**).
- Many have pointed out that Abraham and Rahab could represent opposite extremes of society. James

may have used them for that reason, but they were also his relatives; Abraham in a general way as father of the Jewish nation, and Rahab in a specific way as one of the ancestors of David, Jesus Christ, and James (**Matthew 1:5**). Both these heroes demonstrate the fact that real faith can survive in people with “feet of clay.” The Bible describes neither Abraham nor Rahab as perfect. In fact, the spotlight shines on their sins as much as on their trust. Both demonstrated in their own way a tendency to lie (**Genesis 20:1–2; Joshua 2:3–7**). Neither could have pointed to a life of perfect obedience as the reason for God’s acceptance. Rather, each pointed to a life that illustrated their need for God and their trust in God.

- It is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

—*Martin Luther*

2:26 “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

- Faith and deeds are as important to each other as body and spirit. Deeds are not added to faith; instead, the right kind of faith is faith that “works,” that results in good deeds. Otherwise, Christianity is nothing more than an idea. (**I Thessalonians 1:3** – “Remembering without ceasing your work of faith”)

- No one's faith is real unless it moves him or her to action. This draws us back to James's words in the first part of this chapter concerning care for others. The believer is to serve his brothers and sisters in Christ, refuse to discriminate among them, and help them by doing good deeds.
- Understanding how faith and deeds work together still doesn't mean that our life will be different. James is about to continue with a series of life situations that we all encounter. It is in these everyday events that we demonstrate our faith to be alive or dead.

James 3

CONTROLLING THE TONGUE /

3:1–12

In this chapter, James's immediate concern is with the speech of false teachers who are ruining believers with their uncontrolled tongues. From that immediate concern he launches into the wider area of the use of speech among believers.

In the early church, teachers were the point of contact for all new believers because converts needed instruction in the facts of the gospel. The problem, however, was that some teachers had the ability to communicate but were driven by very worldly motivations. They would take leading positions in a church, form cliques, and use their teaching positions to criticize others. In this way, they could maintain their position and importance.

Chapter 3 is an elaboration of 1:19, "slow to speak." Christians need constant diligence and discipline. Nowhere is this more necessary than in the use of the tongue.

3:1 "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation."

- James taught that people should not rush to be teachers. Many of his status-conscious readers would have desired the reputable position of teachers in the community.
- What was so attractive about being a teacher? Becoming a rabbi or teacher was the highest calling of a Jewish child. Teachers had great influence and status in the early church (**Ephesians 4:11**). Because teachers were rare, each teacher had much work to do, and teaching was central to the work of the church. Because teachers taught primarily through verbal communication, it was vital for them to control what they said. Through their positions, teachers could present wrong doctrine and create divisions in

the church by promoting themselves rather than the message of Christ.

- That some will presume they are teachers is implied but not actually stated by the text. Coming hard on the heels of chapter 2, one of the most honorable “works” that would immediately come to the Jewish mind would be the position of teaching.
- **We who teach will be judged with greater strictness.** Teachers will have the greater judgment. Teaching authority carries with it greater responsibility. As works reveal the depths of a person’s faith, so words show the depth of a person’s maturity. The teacher is held to greater accountability because of his or her key teaching role (**Luke 12:42–48**). James is not against teachers; instead, he is alerting us to the great responsibilities that go with teaching and its potential problems. James valued the ministry of teaching, but he knew that its social attractiveness and power made teaching potentially dangerous. The desire to be in the spotlight as the spokesperson and authority was a problem then as it is now

3:2 “For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.”

- We all stumble, but our most frequent failures occur when we are speaking. To “stumble” means to go astray or sin. The fact that we all sin in many ways is illustrated frequently in the Bible (**2 Chronicles 6:36; Psalm 19:13; Proverbs 20:9; Romans 7:14–16; 1 John 1:8, 10**). Because we are prone to make mistakes in our speech, we need to be walking in the Spirit and then God will control what we say. He is

capable of guiding our motivation, our thoughts, our very choice of words, and even the impact our communication has on others.

- **If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man.** *Perfect* here means mature or complete. Many people may think that it is impossible to control the tongue, but most people haven't considered what Christ has done to enable us to control our tongue. The ability to control the tongue is the mark of true maturity for the Christian (1:19). When Jesus confronted the religious leaders about their accusations against him, he said that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks; showing that what is inside of a person affects what they do with their speech (**Matthew 12:33–37**). He also said that we must give account for every careless word we utter (**Matthew 12:36**). (**Proverbs 15:1–4**)
- **Able to keep the whole body in check.** James is saying that anyone who can control his or her mouth will be able to control the rest of the body. Keep in mind that self-control is a part of the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**). As we, by faith believe that at salvation were positionally taken out of Adam and placed into Christ (**I Corinthians 1:30**), and that now we are a brand new creation in Christ (**2 Corinthians 5:17**), the Holy Spirit will hold the flesh in the place of death and the Spirit will control our soul (mind, will, emotions) and we will be able to not only say the right things, but our whole body will be under the influence and control of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:16**).
- One of the greatest forms friendship can take is the willingness of one friend to correct with compassion the speaking of the other. When someone points out something wrong we said, or a hurtful way of

speaking, our first response may be defensive. But we must learn that a true friend cares for us, including the way we talk. Are we willing to genuinely care for that person in the same way?

3:3–5 “Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”

- What do these things have in common? They are all small but very effective controllers; they each direct something much larger than themselves. James is building a case for the damaging power of our words. We see this evidenced in history when dictators such as Adolph Hitler, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Joseph Stalin, and Saddam Hussein used their words to mobilize people to destroy others. We see it evidenced in church splits and in the ruining of a pastor's reputation. And we see how verbal abuse in the home can destroy the very personhood and character of spouses and children.

3:3 Bits ... make them obey us.

- If a person's impulsive speech is uncontrolled, his or her whole life is headed in the wrong direction. Horses are larger and stronger than people, but they can be turned with a small bit in the mouth. From this point on, James shows that not only teaching, but all forms of speech can be powerfully beneficial or destructive.

3:4 Ships ... are so large.

- Ships were some of the largest and most powerful man-made structures known by early Christians. Ships moved tons of cargo across the sea. Reminding his readers that a large and powerful oceangoing vessel could be controlled by a small rudder, James drives home the point of how powerful and pivotal the tongue can be. Small things control much. The use of the tongue has split churches and destroyed lives. We can use our speech in impulsive, automatic, and thoughtless ways, lashing out at others and passing on gossip. Without control, destruction is sure to follow.
- In **Colossians 3:5–11**, Paul associates eliminating sins of speech with the stripping off of the old self. This can only be accomplished by faith in the finished work of Christ.

3:5 The tongue is a small part of the body.

- As the bit, the rudder, and the spark, the tongue is a small but influential part of the body. Paul taught that the whole body, including the tongue, ought to be considered a “living sacrifice” (**Romans 12:1**) to God.
- **A great forest is set on fire by a small spark.** During the dry season in Israel, the grass, low thorn bushes, and scrubs were as dry as explosive tinder. One spark could spread a wild fire. The first two analogies (bit and rudder) were directed at the tongue’s effect on the person. The spark analogy speaks to the effect of the tongue beyond the person. This illustrates the following warnings:
- The fleshly tongue divides people and pit them against one another. Idle words are damaging

because they quickly spread destruction. A few words spoken in anger can destroy a relationship that took years to build. Remember that words are like fire; they can neither control nor reverse the damage they do. For example, a public figure's reputation can be greatly harmed by a quote taken out of context or a false allegation.

3:6 “And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.”

- The tongue is the source of all kinds of evil because of the damage it can cause in the world and bring to the rest of the Christian community.
- **Sets the course of nature.** The uncontrolled tongue can set our entire human existence on fire. The NRSV translates “the course of nature” as “the cycle of nature”. The expression was used in ancient times to indicate “the ups and downs in life,” as well as one’s entire human existence.
- The tongue can destroy all the good that we’ve built up over a lifetime. While we have ministered for years and years and seen abundant fruit, if we fail to control the tongue, we can undo all the good we have built up in our years of ministering to others.
- **Set on fire by hell.** The verb implies habitual action. The tongue keeps on setting on fire and inflaming our passions or temper; it leads us to actions that are displeasing to God.

- Flames of hate, prejudice, slander, jealousy, and envy seem to come from the very lake of fire where Satan will be punished (**Revelation 20:10, 14–15**).

3:7 “For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:”

- Genesis 1:28 states: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground’ ”. **Genesis 9:2** says: “The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands”. **Psalms 8:6–8** also echoes the fact that God has given dominion to humanity over all the animals. Human ingenuity has tamed wild creatures to make them useful. But no person, by his own unaided power, can restrain the tongue.

3:8 “But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

- No person can tame the tongue, but Christ in you, can. We should not try to control our tongue with our own strength; we should rely on the Holy Spirit to hold the flesh in the place of death and give us the power and desire (**Philippians 2:13**) to control our tongue and speak the truth in love.
- **An unruly evil.** *Unruly* means unstable and incapable of restraint. The tongue is very capable of evil; for many people it remains untamed throughout life. Our tongue often lashes out and destroys. Recognizing

the tongue's deadly capacity is the first step to controlling it.

- **Full of deadly poison.** What we say can be dangerous and deadly, carrying poison that drips long after the words are spoken. David said in **Psalm 140:3**, "They have sharpened their tongues as a serpent; adder's poison is under their lips." The following quote seems rather appropriate for such a time as this:
- "He does not say no one can tame the tongue, but no one of men: so that when it is tamed we confess that this is brought about by the pity, the help, and the grace of God."

—Augustine

- Instead of making excuses for sounding off, we can exercise restraint by grace through faith.

3:9 "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God."

- The blessing of God was a common practice in Jewish devotional life. "The Holy One, Blessed is He" is one of the most frequent descriptions of God in rabbinic literature. The "Eighteen Benedictions," a liturgical formula used daily by righteous Jews, concluded each of its parts with the blessing of God. *Lord and Father* is used only here in the New Testament. Paul's favorite reference to God was "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (**Romans 15:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3**).
- **We curse those who are made in the likeness of God.** We should have the same attitude of respect for

fellow human beings as we have for God, because they are created in his image. Yet we have this sharp, double-sided tongue.

3:10 “Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.”

- James knew that followers of Christ are capable of both praise and cursing because of what he had observed in the disciples. Peter promised Christ, “I will not deny you” (**Matthew 26:35**), but then he denied Jesus with oaths and curses (**Matthew 26:69–75**). In **1 John 3:18**, the apostle John says, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth”. Earlier in his life, John was willing to call down fire to destroy a Samaritan village (**Luke 9:51–56**). Because speech reveals a person’s heart, it exhibits the same potential to help or destroy. The tongue reflects the inner person (**Matthew 12:34**).
- The deceitful, dual use of the tongue is the result of double-mindedness, and the instability of a life that is ruled by the flesh rather than the Spirit. The tongue reveals either spiritual maturity or immaturity. It gives a picture of our basic human nature, made in God’s image but controlled by the flesh. God works to change us from the inside out. As the Holy Spirit holds the flesh in the place of death, he gives us the power and desire to speak words that please God.

3:11 “Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?”

- James pictures the inner being, the heart, as a spring. Jesus used the same illustration in his conversation

with the Samaritan woman: “But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (**John 4:14**).

3:12 “Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.”

- Jesus used the same illustration in **Matthew 7:16–20; 12:33–35**; and **Luke 6:43–45**. We should produce the kind of fruit that we’ve been created and regenerated to produce; the fruit of righteousness (**James 3:18**).
- **No spring can yield both salt water and fresh.** The implication from this answer to the question in 3:11 is that only a renewed heart can produce pure speech. Only Christ can change us as God changed the bitter water for the people of Israel at Marah (**Exodus 15:23–25**). This event is used repeatedly in Scripture as an illustration of the danger of complaining.
- If the source of our thoughts and actions is the love of God (**2 Corinthians 5:14a**) in our life, then we will not be able to generate the kind of negative speech that James warns us against.
- If a cup is filled only with good water, it cannot spill even one drop of bitter water, no matter how badly it is jarred.

—*Oswald Chambers*

WISDOM FROM HEAVEN / 3:13–18

Here is a revelation for those who claim to have true wisdom; true wisdom comes from God.

3:13 “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”

- Who is a wise man clothed with knowledge?
- This is a rhetorical question answered by James in the next phrase. The truly wise person, who looks at life from God’s point of view, demonstrates his or her wisdom by the way he or she lives. True wisdom is measure by the depth of a person’s character. *I will show you my faith by what I do.*
- Joseph’s life (Genesis 37–50) is a shining example of wise living. His experience certainly had its share of trials and temptations: sold into slavery by his brothers, sexually harassed, unjustly imprisoned. Joseph could have despaired many times. Yet he trusted God.
- **Let him show it by his good life.** Our works will reveal our faith. Do our attitudes and motives match our actions?
- **Humility that comes from wisdom.** We are not to be hypocrites who pretend to be humble, using “humility” to impress others. Instead, we should take an honest look at ourselves. (**Romans 12:3**) Pride is having an attitude of self-importance. The true essence of Christianity is not to have either high thoughts of ourselves or low thoughts of ourselves, but to not think of ourselves..
- Wisdom, then, involves both actions and attitudes in living. A wise life will display not only goodness, but also humility.

3:14 “But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.”

- Fleshly self-centeredness harbors and becomes saturated with bitter envy and selfish ambition. Bitter envy is misguided zeal that results in contentiousness. It breeds toward anger the accomplishments of others. Whenever we find fault with a leader, we must ask ourselves what is motivating us to feel strongly about that person's failure. Do we imagine ourselves doing better in that role? Or are we in fact, simply envious of the abilities or success God has allowed him or her to have?
- **Do not boast.** When our true motives are exposed, one defense is to become arrogant. Our very pride ought to tell us that our desire to be seen as wise is based on self-centeredness.
- **Deny the truth.** The specific truth to which James is referring is the truth that we might be harboring bitter envy and selfish ambition. But resisting truth in one way can easily lead to resisting truth in general. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. The only thing the flesh will ever produce is more of the same. Denying the truth or speaking against the truth is a chief characteristic of the devil mentioned in **John 8:44**, where he is called the “father of lies.” To talk as if we are wise and good when our life denies it is the lie for which Paul condemned the Jewish Christians (**Romans 2:17, 23**).

3:15 “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.”

- The source and standards of this kind of wisdom are from the world and not God. Its teachers are self-centered and not God-centered.
- This wisdom doesn't come from faith; it is godless, fleshly and **unspiritual**. The term for unspiritual is used in the New Testament for the person who does not accept the guidance that comes from the Spirit of God (**I Corinthians 2:14**). This person teaches only worldly wisdom. His or her wisdom is based on human feelings and human reasoning alone without the Spirit's influence and control.
- **Of the devil.** The real source of these thoughts is the devil. It is foolhardy for believers to assume that Satan does not have access to most of the knowledge available to us. From the devil's point of view, the temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4) was a wise plan, wisely carried out. Satan even used Scripture in making his suggestions to Jesus seem reasonable. He failed; the devil still makes use of the same resources that God has provided for us. But his purposes are destructive; they can produce a climate in the church, at home, and at work that damages relationships. Think of how quickly our words, language, and tone of voice can create a destructive climate. But keep in mind that God has made a way for us to be set free from Satan' influence, temptations, and accusations, and it is found all throughout the New Testament. When we trust Christ as our Savior we are taken out of Adam and placed into Christ. We are a brand new creation in Christ and Satan has lost his influence and control.

3:16–17 “For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and

easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”

- **The wisdom from above.** The following seven characteristics of heavenly wisdom are strung together like pearls. These qualities are seen in Christ’s character and are also embodied in the famous chapter on love (**I Corinthians 13**). **First** indicates that this is a main characteristic and a key to the others, not just number one. **Pure.** Moral and spiritual integrity. **Peaceable.** The Bible speaks of three types of peace: (**Romans 5:11**): Peace with God, which we obtain at salvation; Peace from God (**Romans 1:7**) and the Peace of God (**Philippians 4:7; Colossians 3:15**). **Considerate.** This is the opposite of self-seeking. It does not demand its own right. It goes beyond the strict requirements of justice. To be kindly and considerate is to make allowances for others, to temper justice with mercy. **Willing to yield.** Heavenly wisdom is reasonable, flexible; willing to listen and to change. Just as good soldiers willingly follow orders from their superiors, people with heavenly wisdom willingly follow God’s orders and respond to his correction.

Full of mercy and good fruits. God’s wisdom is full of God’s gracious forgiveness. And his love leads to helping and serving others. **Impartial** means to be free from prejudice toward people and without double-mindedness toward God (1:5-8).

Sincere. This word means “unhypocritical.” God’s wisdom leads people to be genuine.

3:18 “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”

- William Barclay paraphrases this as follows: “For the seed that one day produces the reward that righteousness brings can only be sown when personal relationships are right and by those whose contacts produce such relationships.” (**Psalm 1:3; Proverbs 11:30; Galatians 6:7–10; Philippians 1:11**)

James 4

SUBMIT YOURSELVES TO GOD / 4:1–12

James returns to practical application. His readers need to know what wisdom is, but they need even more to live wisely. Chapter 4 begins with a challenge to behavior that James saw as proof of worldly wisdom; fights and quarrels among them.

4:1 “From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”

- James is describing a condition where a group has come to a state of war, with open skirmishes breaking out among people. Sides have been chosen, positions have been dug in, and anyone seeking to be neutral is looked on with suspicion by both sides. In cases like this, believers have ceased being peacemakers who sow in peace (3:18). Instead, they live in open antagonism toward one another. These conflicts have nothing to do with quarrels with the pagan world; these are quarrels within the church, among believers.
- We cannot brush aside James’s question. He doesn’t waste time saying that these conflicts should not occur. When they do happen, do we know their source? Handles correctly, with godly wisdom, they can lead to growth. Sadly, however, some churches become permanent battlegrounds. Many of us know people who have been alienated from the church because of a conflict that had nothing to do with the gospel. These battles and the issues at stake remind us of Jesus’ words concerning people with twisted religious priorities: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his

neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea”
(**Matthew 18:1–9; Luke 11:37–54**).

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL OF OUR DESIRES

Fights and quarrels are caused, not by some external source, but by internal fleshly cravings or “pleasures.” (**James 1:14-15**) James asks a question, and he expects us to agree. The Greek word for pleasure, *hedone*, is the source of the English word *hedonism*, the philosophy that pleasure is the main goal of life. James uses military imagery to show that we are in a very real struggle. The battle within is expressed by the word *strateuomenon* (warring), a word suggesting a raging battle, fought between the desire to do good and the desire to do evil. Paul gives a personal testimony of this internal warfare in **Romans 7:7–25**.

When we lose the battle and so fulfill our internal, fleshly, evil desires, we create conflicts on the outside. People who are battling to fulfill their own desires eventually begin to compete for the limited amounts of power, prestige, or possessions that promise to bring pleasure. People are suddenly competitors, no longer friends or Christian brothers and sisters.

Desire for the pleasures of the world always threatens our spiritual life (**Luke 8:14; Titus 3:3**). Because believers are unable to divide their loyalty between God and the world (4:4), there will continue to be this battle within them. Keep in mind **Galatians 5:17** which states: “The flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit wars against the flesh, these are contrary one to the other; so that you cannot do the things you would like.” What are they warring over? Influence and control of our soul (mind, will, and emotions). If the flesh is influencing my soul, then it will control my behavior.

4:2 “Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”

- The craving described here becomes so strong that the people “kill and covet” to obtain what they want. Are people actually guilty of murdering others when they fulfill their desires? James’s expression begs a thoughtful answer. People are, in fact, capable of killing in pursuit of desires or as a reaction to frustrated desires. Our shock over the leap from “wanting” to “murdering” must be tempered by remembering how Jesus took the key words of the Ten Commandments and gave them applications that strike very close to home. For Jesus, the commandment against murdering applied equally to verbal assassination as to physical killing (**Matthew 5:21–22; 1 John 3:15**). The word *kill* can be taken as a hyperbole for bitter hatred. But desires, if not controlled, could lead to such extreme violence. Hardly a week goes by without some story in the news of a person who, claiming to love another deeply, ends up murdering that person because the “love” was not returned in kind.
- The people being described by James resort to evil, verbal abuse, jealousy, and worse. Yet, for all their anxious self-seeking and antagonism in getting what they want, they still don’t get it. Why?
- **You do not have, because you do not ask God.** The first readers of this letter were lusting, scheming, and fighting instead of praying.
- We’ve learned from life experiences that fulfilled desires don’t satisfy at the level they advertise. Sometimes we actually do get just what we wanted, only to discover that we still do not have what we really needed; the deep contentment that only comes

from God. Fleshly desires will only lead us to the things of this earth and not to the things of God.

- In summary, James's message is: "You don't have what you desire because you don't desire God." James is preparing us for a crucial lesson: Until we look at life from the perspective of God's plans and priorities for us, our life will be constantly hounded by the awareness that we do not have.

4:3 "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts."

- Almost as bad as not asking is asking with wrong motives. If we understand the correct use of prayer, we might not pray at all, or we might attempt to manipulate God.
- **You do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.** People should not be surprised when their prayers go unanswered because often we ask with fleshly/selfish motives like the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance on himself (**Luke 15:14**). Our desires were so strong that we were fighting, quarreling, and then using prayer to get what we wanted.
- Prayers are not automatically answered with a yes from God. Although God gives many promises about the power of prayer (**Matthew 7:7–11; 17:20; Mark 11:23–24; Luke 18:1–8; John 14:13–14**), these promises hinge upon the attitude of the person praying; how in tune he or she is with God. True prayer must express dependence on God. Especially when we are praying for ourselves, our attitude must be "Your will be done." A fleshly, self-centered person cannot say that to God and really mean what he or she says.

4:4 “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”

- The shocking words *adulterers* (and adulteresses) graphically describes the spiritual unfaithfulness of the people and intends to shock them into facing their true spiritual condition. The concept of adultery against God is taken from the Old Testament (**Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:20; Ezekiel 16:15–19; Hosea 2:2–5; 3:1–5; 9:1**). When God’s people, Israel, turned to idolatry, they tried to combine the worship of God and the worship of Baal. Like an adulterous wife, they wanted the husband and home, but also wanted the lover. James is about to describe these believers as adulterous because they are trying to love God *and* have an affair with the world.
- The struggle of James’s original readers is not unique to their lives. The fact that God would express in the strongest terms possible the importance of faith in God alone ought to unsettle us. Biblical standards of personal, marital, and spiritual behavior are under a constant attack of erosion. We are bombarded with the message to compromise.
- From the world’s point of view, we should be flexible, tolerant of sin, and accommodating. But it won’t work, because **friendship with the world is enmity with God**. For believers, the world and God are two distinct objects of affection, but they are direct opposites. What then is friendship with the world? The word for *world* (*kosmos*) refers to the system of evil under Satan’s control, all that is opposed to God. To be

friendly with the world, then, is to adopt its values and desires (**Romans 8:7–8**; **2 Timothy 4:10**; **1 John 2:15–17**). The believers may indeed love God, but they are also infatuated with the benefits of this world's system. They worship God, but they want the influence, living standards, financial security, and perhaps some of the freedom the world offers. These pursuits will only undermine the generosity, caring, and sharing that should characterize Christians.

- Nothing is wrong with wanting a pleasurable life. God gives us good gifts to enjoy (1:17; **Ephesians 4:7**; **1 Timothy 4:4–5**). But having friendship with the world involves pleasure seeking in place of God. Worldly pleasure that keeps us from God is sinful; pleasure that comes from God is good.
- If we believers are to have no friendship with the world, what then is our proper relationship to the world? Some have used biblical statements like this one from James as a basis for a radical withdrawal from the “world.” But withdrawal is not the answer. Although it is true that we are called to be in the world but not “of the world” (**John 17:14**), we should have compassion for the people in this world and desire to share with them the gospel. To do so, we need to befriend them without befriendng the things of this world that are opposed to God (**1 John 3:15–17**).
- It is those who are acknowledging and depending and abiding in Christ, who have believed in him, who are described as his friends (**John 15:9–17**). It is interesting that in that same context Jesus spoke of the world's hatred: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (**John 15:18**). Real friendship with God will frequently create a sense of alienation from the world. But we are not here as

consumers, users, or pleasure-seeking tourists. We are ambassadors, agents representing the King. We enter our world sponsored by him, equipped to carry out his work and promote his interests.

- **Whoever therefore will be/Anyone who chooses.** Because the world and God are pictured as enemies in this scene, desiring one also means not desiring the other. People who choose friendship with the world naturally become God's enemies; no one can serve two masters (**Matthew 6:24**). For those who are unwilling to accept this indictment, James has a serious question.

4:5 “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?”

- James reminds them what Scripture says, he does not hesitate to remind his readers of their accountability before the whole of Scripture. What we say and teach must be rooted in God's Word. When our applications are challenged, we must be able to prove our point from the principles and truth in the Bible.
- **The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely.** The phrase can be translated in several different ways (the NIV margin lists two other possibilities: “God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us” and “The Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously”). When the Greek text itself offers several alternative renderings, the context must help us determine what the original writer meant. Either James was saying that God, who caused his Spirit to dwell in the believers, is jealous for their friendship, or he was saying that the spirit that God put in man is one prone to jealousy. The point of the statement is to

affirm the believers' friendship with God over against the world.

- We may say that we will befriend both God and the world, but in practice, it will either be one or the other. The more we occupy ourselves with the world, the stronger will be our allegiance to the world. The more we occupy ourselves with God, the stronger will be our bond with Him. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (**Matthew 6:21**), said Jesus.
- To those who occupy themselves with the Lord, and are facing what may seem like a hopeless battle, James adds a wonderful word of hope.

4:6 "But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble."

- This is a quotation of **Proverbs 3:34**. James uses it to offer hope to those who desire friendship with God. We will need God's grace to meet His standard, and that grace is available by faith. God desires loyalty and wants his people to resist the appeal of the evil world; however, His grace is His provision. Grace is God's gift that we don't deserve. It is greater (which is what "more" literally means) than our need and more than we ask. No matter how heavy the awareness of our sinfulness or failure, God's grace is able to lift that burden with forgiveness. As Paul wrote, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (**Romans 5:20**). But we cannot receive that grace until we realize that we need it and then by faith humbly accept it.
- "**God opposes the proud.**" *Opposes* is a military term for an enemy's actions. Part of the battle that

James mentioned in **James 4:1** is God's resistance to our fleshly desires. The inner turmoil is not just a conflict among our desires; it is the spirit warring against the flesh (**Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:23**). By denying our prideful objectives, God often gets our attention. Times of frustration are opportunities to consider whether we are walking in the flesh or the Spirit. Failure is one of God's greatest ingredients for spiritual growth.

- **“But gives grace to the humble.” (Proverbs 16:18–19; 1 Peter 5:5–6).** By God's unmerited favor, the humble obtain special benefits: (1)humble people are in a position to enjoy a personal relationship with God based on the infinite merit of Christ, whose death created this position of acceptance they freely step into. (2)Humble people have the privileges of access to God in prayer, daily fellowship with Christ, guidance by God's Spirit, a future hope in heaven, and the profound sense of being loved by God. Christ's death guaranteed these privileges. (3)Humble people know that God is for them and nothing that comes against them can overcome them. Christ's resurrection demonstrated that power. The key to our own participation in these benefits is humility that comes from knowing and believing in the finished work of Christ.
- How do we discover true humility? How do we become the kind of humble people who find the overflowing grace that God promises? Having revealed our need, James not points clearly to the way.

4:7 “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

- James now introduces a series of commands that both require and produces humility. Humility is among the qualities that we simply cannot force. It, along with such traits as self-control, patience, endurance, peace, and joy, is a by-product of the Christ-life.
- Submission means that all we are and have is available to God. Submission recognizes God's desires ahead of our own. The word *submit* (*hupotageite*) literally means "be subject" in the sense that a soldier carries out the orders of his commanding officer. Submission is living a life that expresses to God, "Not my will, but yours be done." Submission is an act of the will that is influenced and controlled by God's Spirit.
- Although he is not specifically defining the term, James is describing the life of faith. True faith responds to God actively rather than passively. Although God initiates and facilitates all that occurs between us and him, our involvement is never entirely excluded.
- **Resist the devil and he will flee from you.** Although our own fleshly tendencies (1:14) and the fleshly desires battling within us (4:1) are the immediate sources of our problems, to give in to those internal desires is to yield to the devil (**Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 22:31; John 13:2, 27**). Satan knows that as long as he can stimulate human pride, he can delay God's plan, even if only temporarily. But Satan's only influence and control over believers is in his temptations, accusations, and deception. The devil can be resisted; and our resistance will cause him to flee. Conversely, a lack of resistance will practically guarantee ongoing harassment by Satan (**Ephesians 6:10-18; I Peter 5:6-9**). God's way for man to resist

Satan is by faith, hold or stand your ground. Remember, Satan is a defeated foe. The battle is not ours but God's. So by faith, we are to hold our ground.

- We must realize that the devil's power over us is only as strong as the illusion that he is more powerful than God. God never created anything that He cannot control. We must trust that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).
- The commands that follow, and indeed the rest of this letter, are footnotes on the above two statements. Both submission to God and resistance toward the devil are required. James goes on to reveal glimpses of the variety of ways that submission to God and resistance to the devil are carried into the events and relationships of life.

4:8 "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

- Next, James clarifies, expands, and applies his two commands to submit to God and to resist the devil. This and the following phrases emphasize action; our part in responding to what God has done. In **Hebrews 10:19–22** the writer uses the same imagery to picture the dynamics of our relationship with God: "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (v. 22). Hebrews describes the old system, where God was separated from the people in the Holy of Holies, in the temple, by a curtain. But Christ provided a way through the curtain by his own body so that we might approach

God without fear. The idea of submission now includes the added benefit of God's immediate response. As we submit our wills and desires to God, we will discover his care and closeness in ways we cannot perceive when we are in rebellion against him.

- **Cleanse your hands, you sinners.** The command to wash hands means to purify our actions and change our external behavior. The connection of washing to submission can be seen in the account of the Last Supper, where Jesus washed his disciples' feet. They had to submit to his serving them, which Peter found difficult to do (**John 13:3–10**). The picture, then, involves the submission of our exterior lives to God's cleansing. The way we live matters to God.
- As we submit or draw near to God, His glorious presence reveals our sinfulness. Washing our hands pictures the removal of these sinful attitudes and actions.
- **Purify your hearts, you double-minded.** Similarly, the command to purify hearts calls for purity of thoughts, desires and feelings changes on the inside. The people could not remain double-minded. If we allow the world to entice us away from God, we too have become "double-minded." James has already used this term in 1:8. There it refers to someone who can't decide if God is reliable. Here it refers to someone who is trying to maintain a friendship with both God and the world. Purity of heart, then, implies single-mindedness.

4:9 "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness."

- As we draw near to God, we discover a new awareness of our condition and shortcomings, as well as an unworthiness.
- James has described a long spiritual process in the last eight verses. He began by describing people in conflict with each other and within themselves. Then he described the source of those conflicts as fleshly desires to stay close to the world and to God. Unmasking such a life and encouraging believers to a life of abiding in Christ may not be a welcome message. Death to self may not come easy. Long-held desires may respond with defiance.
- These different terms, *lament*, *mourn*, and *weep*, capture the struggle of a soul drawing near to God (**1 Peter 4:1**). There is a dying which takes place. Paul invites us to consider ourselves “dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (**Romans 6:11**). Today, few Bible teachers tell their listeners that they will at some point need to forsake their selfish ways. Instead, they hear about turning to Christ as if it somehow did not involve the rather painful turning away from something that the flesh is lusting for.
- **Let your laughter be changed to mourning and your joy to gloom.** This is a call to deep and heartfelt repentance. The people’s laughter (scornful laughter that refuses to take sin seriously) and their enjoyment of the world’s pleasures need to be completely changed—to mourning and gloom over their sins (**Luke 6:25**). Until this happens, there is no room for the joy of the Lord. The Christian life involves joy; but when we realize our sins, we must be mournful or we will never see our need to believe in the deeper truth that at salvation we were taken out of Adam and placed into Christ. And when He went to the cross,

we went to the cross in Him (**Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20**). Only after mourning can we move on to joy in the grace God gives us.

- The sorrow being described in this verse is not a public show. We should not attempt to impress God with elaborate displays of repentance. There may be a time of public confession, but the grief-work over sin is largely private and interior. But the outcome of this entire process must result in coming to the end of self. The promises of his coming near (4:8), or of his lifting us up (4:10) are sure, but they can only be perceived by those who are humble.

4:10 “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.”

- Echoing the Old Testament words from verse 6, that God gives grace to the humble, James tells his readers to humble themselves before God. God exalts those who are humble (**Job 22:29; Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 57:15; Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14; Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Peter 5:6**).
- Humbling ourselves means recognizing that our worth comes from God alone. It is recognizing our desperate need for Him and desiring his will for our lives. Although we do not deserve God’s favor, he reaches out to us in love and gives us worth and dignity, despite our human shortcomings. According to Luke 18, when Jesus noted those around him who were “confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else” (v.9), he told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who found themselves together in the temple praying. The contrast between the two men challenges the tendency we have towards self-righteousness. The

Pharisee “prayed about himself” (v.11), while the tax collector humbled himself and prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (v.13). Jesus pointed out that only the tax collector returned home “justified before God” (v.14). Jesus’ summary was, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v.14).

4:11 “Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.”

- With an abrupt shift from describing an appropriate attitude towards God, James turns to the proper relations between brothers. The sequence reminds us of the great commandment, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (**Matthew 22:37–39**).
- Verses 11 and 12 form the conclusion to 3:1–4:12. With respect to the improper use of the tongue as described in 3:1–12, James may have been referring to slander and judgment. It seems that James’s readers were having a problem with dissension because certain individuals (undoubtedly leaders, in light of 3:1) were slandering each other and causing problems in the church.
- The Greek word translated *speaking evil* (*katalaleite*) refers to any form of speaking evil against a person. (**Romans 1:29–30; 2 Corinthians 12:20; 1 Peter 2:1**). The tense in the Greek reveals that James is

forbidding a practice that is already in progress. The people were in the habit of criticizing one another.

- **Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.** This verse includes the sixth and seventh times in his letter that James has mentioned the law (1:25; 2:8–10, 12). The specific problem being confronted violates the ninth commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (**Exodus 20:16**). It also violates the more fundamental law of Christ, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (**Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18**). Jesus called this the second greatest commandment (**Mark 12:31**) and illustrated it when he said, “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (**Matthew 7:12**). If a believer speaks against another believer, he is violating this law. This shows disregard for the law, for his is passing judgment on its validity.
- **If you judge the law, you are not a doer of it.** The gospel does not invalidate the law. Those in Christ are not free to ignore the commandments because we live “under grace.” God’s commandments that reveal our inability to live perfectly become, for believers, guidelines for Christian living. Disobeying the commandments is still sin, whether a person is a believer or not.

4:12 “There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?”

- God is both the source and enforcer of the law. We who are accountable to God’s law cannot place ourselves in God’s place. Our rightful role is to keep the law, not use it as a weapon on others, or treat it

as worthless. Behind the law is the awesome and holy God.

- **Who is able to save and destroy.** (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6; Psalm 68:20; 75:6–7; Matthew 10:28).
- **Who are you to judge another?** James takes away any rights we might claim for criticizing our neighbors. Behind the critical spirit is an attitude that usurps God's authority and is full of pride. There should be no critical, harsh faultfinding in the body of Christ. **Romans 14:4** says, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand".
- This verse does not prohibit the proper action of a church against a member who is acting in disobedience to God (1 Corinthians 5–6). Rather, James is concerned with the critical speech that condemns or judges others and he is confronting individuals who might be tempted to set themselves up as personal watchdogs over other believers.
- We might think that just criticizing a church member is not that serious; but the Bible makes it clear that it is serious because it breaks the law of love and usurps God's authority. As we saw in chapter 3, the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. We dare not minimize its danger.

TRUST GOD IN MAKING PLANS / 4:13–17

James maintains the passion of the last section in this new one. The progression has moved from submitting ourselves and our relationships to God, to our future and the need to entrust it to God.

4:13 “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:”

- Addressing this letter to scattered people presumes, at least in part, people moving to establish new lives in distant places. This section most likely deals with those who travel, but it applies to any situation that requires planning.
- Business travel for selling and trading was common in the first century, especially among Jews; for example, Priscilla and Aquila (**Acts 18:2, 18; Romans 16:3**) and Lydia (**Acts 16:14**). Planning is not evil; in fact, businesspeople are wise to plan ahead. Traveling merchants make travel plans, to leave when a ship or caravan is ready, to buy and sell their goods, to probably stay a year, and to return with a profit. They plan in specific detail. The problem that James addresses, however, is that God is not included in those plans. The merchants plan with arrogance, thinking they can go wherever they like and stay for as long as they like. Their way of planning, doing business, and using money may be honest, but it is really no different than the planning of any pagan businessperson.
- James is not even questioning the profit motive in the plans of these brothers and sisters. He is simply confronting living without acknowledging God.
- The fact is that God has a prior claim on our lives. First, because he is our Creator, and second, for believers, this claim is reinforced by the

knowledge that we no longer belong to ourselves: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

4:14 “Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”

- There is a problem with these well-made plans; no one can know what will happen tomorrow, to say nothing of a year in the future (**Proverbs 27:1; Luke 12:16–21**). These people were planning as if their future was guaranteed. James is not suggesting that they make no plans, but to be realistic about the uncertain future. The plans for our lives need to include frequent reminders about God’s role in the future. One helpful, traditional prayer is: “Lord, I know I don’t know what the future holds, but I’m glad I know you hold the future!” Our attitude on any particular day must never leave us open to the response God gave the rich man in Jesus’ parable, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you” (**Luke 12:20**).
- **What is your life? You are a mist.** James illustrates his point that our lives are uncertain by comparing them to a fog that covers the countryside in the morning and then is burned away by the sun. Life is short no matter how long we live. When James asks, “What is your life?” He is referring to the time between birth and death. The Bible uses many metaphors to express the brevity and uncertainty of life. To trust in God is the only way to plan for an uncertain future.

4:15 “For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

- **John 17:18, 20** states: as Jesus was sent into the world, so He is sending us into the world.
- We must never live independently of God; therefore, our plans cannot ignore him. Our plans must always include the clause, *if the Lord wills*. We are to plan, but we are to recognize God's higher will and divine sovereignty.
- James began this chapter by exposing the danger of our fleshly, uncontrolled desires. In the flesh we are prone to demand our will. The way out of this danger involves submission of our wills to God, so that our thinking, desires and feelings become more and more in line with the Lord's will. Then we discover, to our great delight, that those things that we rightly desired are granted after all, only now there is no doubt that God has been the provider. Jesus said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (**Matthew 6:33**).
- This means far more than simply saying the words, "If God wills," whenever we speak about future plans. It means planning with God; we actually acknowledge and depend on Him and not only as we live out the plan, but most importantly, as we make the plan.

4:16 "But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil."

- These businesspeople, instead of focusing on God's will regarding their plans, were arrogantly boasting as though they could control their own destiny. Such boasting is evil because it takes no thought of God.
- The most dangerous moments in life occur when a plan we have engineered succeeds. That moment of

satisfaction can more easily become pride than it can become humility. But the Bible illustrates the truth that even our greatest successes ought to be opportunities to say, “To God be the glory”. Daniel recounts vividly the story of King Nebuchadnezzar’s moment of success. His reflection was entirely self-centered: “He said, ‘Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?’ ” (**Daniel 4:30**). Daniel had warned the king that pride would be his downfall. The prophecy was fulfilled exactly: “Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird” (**Daniel 4:33**). The king was humbled. When he was finally restored, his reflection had a distinctly different tone: “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (**Daniel 4:37**).

4:17 “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

- Verse 17 sums up all of chapters 1–4. It sums up the entire ethical problem in the whole Epistle of James. He may be telling these merchants that they know what they should do; that is, honor God in their business practices. And now he states if they ignore that, they sin. In a broader sense, James adds these words as an admonition for all his readers to do what he has written. They have been told, so now they have no excuse.

- We tend to limit sins to specific acts; *doing* wrong. But James tells us that sin is also *not* doing what is right. (These two kinds of sin are sometimes called sins of commission and sins of omission.) It is a sin to lie; it can also be a sin to know the truth and not tell it. It is a sin to speak evil of someone; it is also a sin to avoid that person when you know he needs your friendship.

James 5

WARNING TO THE RICH / 5:1–6

After taking a deep breath, James turns his attention to the rich. They have been hovering in the background throughout this letter. Chapter 1 included the challenge to see that humble circumstances have distinct spiritual benefits (1:9–11) as opposed to riches, which ends in humility. In chapter 2, James warned about the destructiveness of preferential treatment based on wealth. At the end of chapter 4, James warned against being seduced by the world. He begins chapter 5 by warning wealthy non-Christians of their hopeless end and the worthlessness of their riches. Their wealth will not save them from God’s judgment. Their crimes include hoarding wealth, not paying their workers’ wages, living in luxury and self-indulgence, and murdering innocent people. But they will not go unpunished. This should be a clear warning that they shouldn’t make riches the focus of their desires because, ultimately, riches amount to nothing.

Does James care what happens to the rich? Yes. If he didn’t, he would be violating his own forceful statements about the law to love one’s neighbor. Being rich doesn’t make someone a non-neighbor.

5:1 “Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.”

- James has appealed to several different groups of his readers with helpful applications to show them their need to apply faith to the truth that they have been taught. In 4:11 & 12, a right relationship with God means that brothers do not verbally abuse one another. In 4:13-16, a right relationship with God means that our future plans are made with humility. In 4:17, a right relationship with God means that failing to do what we know God wants us to do is sin.

Here James turns his attention to a group even farther from the truth.

- **You rich people.** These are probably not believers, but rich nonbelievers (perhaps the same people referred to in 2:6), for James does not hold out to them any immediate offer of deliverance as he does for sinning believers. Very likely the wealthy landowners are the objects of James's scathing rebuke.
- **Weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you.** These rich people are not in misery now; they have lavish surroundings, plenty of food, plenty of money. But misery is coming upon them, not earthly suffering, but eternal suffering; and they should be wailing in sorrow for what is to come. The words *weep* and *wail* were often used in the Old Testament by the prophets to describe the reaction of the wicked when the Day of the Lord (the day of God's judgment) arrives (**Isaiah 13:6; 15:3; Amos 8:3**). Jesus said that those who would be excluded from God's kingdom would be weeping and gnashing their teeth (**Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30**).
- While the rich are invited to weep and wail, we are not invited to gloat over their future humiliation. Before demanding justice from God, we must always check our motives. The descriptions of judgment that follow are prescriptions against desiring that life-style ourselves. The lustful desires for riches will be just as shamefully shattered as the riches themselves.

5:2 "Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten."

- The instability of wealth is the clearest warning of the coming misery of the rich. Goods that rot and are ruined and possessions that break and rust all indicate the impermanence of life. God sends reminders along the way (sickness, death of others, disasters) that we need to find security in what is eternal. Misery will be a result of ignoring these indicators of impermanence. As he often does in this letter, James simply gives direct application of the teaching of Christ. Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (**Matthew 6:19–20**).
- **Your clothes are moth-eaten.** These rich people hoarded even their clothing, not willing to give their excess to the poor. They had so many pieces of clothing (a luxury in those days), that before they were worn out, moth larvae had eaten them. Remember, this letter was addressed to people in a society where a poor man probably had only one cloak.

5:3 “Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days.”

- Precious metals have been hoarded away, unused. When it is kept from being used to help others, wealth “corrodes”; in other words, it is wasted. Although silver and gold cannot actually corrode, they can tarnish, and the tarnish testifies to how long the gold and silver have been kept untouched. James warns

that even what seems most indestructible is useless if it is not put to good use.

- Jesus made very clear what the bottom line really is: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (**Matthew 16:26**). Compared to the values of the kingdom of God, the earth’s most precious possessions fade away in tarnish and rust.
- God has not appointed gold for rust, nor garments for moths; but, on the contrary, he has designed them as aids and helps to human life.

—*John Calvin*

- **Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.** The uselessness of hoarded gold and silver will cover them like rust or corrosion. It will be the irrefutable evidence that reveals the greed, selfishness, and wickedness of those who desire to be rich. The truth and shame of that corrosion will lead to many problems (**I Timothy 6:9**). The testimony of wealth hoarded selfishly will not be good.
- Few people in the Western world can read this passage and not be at least singed by its truth. Give some thought to not hoarding in order to preserve for later; rather, we have hoarded in order to waste. Believers today find themselves participating in society’s tendency to consume as much as possible without regard to the conditions elsewhere in the world, or even what we will leave to our children and grandchildren. Will not the corrosion of our accumulated waste testify against us also?
- **You have laid up treasure for the last days.** Jesus repeatedly warned that his return would be

unexpected. His followers were to live in constant anticipation of his return. References to the last days were reminders of the Christian priorities. Their lives were to be spent doing what really mattered; serving Christ (**Mark 1:15; Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:2**). When the last days arrive, the hoarding will all be a waste. The rich will be caught with their hands full, but it will be an accumulation of nothing. These people have chased after earthly treasure to the exclusion of treasure in heaven. Their hoarding will not only demonstrate their wrong priorities, it will also show how their wasted lives had not eternal value.

5:4 “Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth.”

- These workmen worked for rich people during the day and would be paid at the end of the day. They were poor peasants. Many had been forced off their own land by foreclosures, and then they hired themselves out to the wealthy holder estate owner. These folks lived on the verge of starvation; today's wages bought tomorrow's food. If a worker did not receive his pay, his whole family went hungry. (**Matthew 20:1–16**.) If the owner refused to pay; either to hoard it until the end of the harvest in order to keep the workers coming back, or to default completely, there was little or nothing the workman could do. Complaining might mean loss of a job and blacklisting, and the poor worker couldn't afford a lawyer. The money that should have gone to the workers is also evidence against the greedy rich.
- This verse brings the weight of God's work ethic in the Bible to bear on the conditions that James is

confronting. If these rich people are Jewish unbelievers, perhaps they will respond to the condemnations God consistently leveled against those who cheated in their business dealings (**Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14–15; Proverbs 3:27–28; Jeremiah 22:13; Malachi 3:5**).

- Both the withheld wages and the harvesters are crying out to God. This expression recalls God's response to the first act of injustice in Genesis 4:10: "The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.' " Abel's blood cried out to God for justice. The picture emphasized God's awareness of injustice.
- **The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.** There was no excuse for lack of payment; these workmen had harvested heaps of grain that would be sold. But the greedy rich were at times willing to let it rot rather than to pay the workmen. The only resource the poor had was to call out to the Lord Almighty. This name for God is, literally, *Lord of Sabbaoth*; it conveys the sense of awe, power, and majesty of the Creator. The supreme ruler will intercede for the poor. This name is used in Isaiah 5:9, also condemning the rich: "The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: 'Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants' ". This is the almighty God who hears the cries of the poor (**Psalms 17:1–6; 18:6; 31:2**).

5:5 "Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter."

- The fleshly, greedy rich must realize that their worldly riches are earthbound. Their reward is here and now; their loss of eternal rewards will come later.
- **Luxury and self-indulgence.** The life-styles of the rich and famous may make interesting media fodder, but they are noxious to God. These rich, who have taken the land from the poor and then refused to pay their deserved wages, have shown no Christlike love and concern for others. To this they have added an attitude of wastefulness and self-indulgence.
- God is not against pleasure, entertainment, or beautiful things. They are meant to be helps to others, bridges of contact with others, and hints reminding us that God has been very gracious to us.
- **Fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.** Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (**Matthew 6:21**). For these people, their treasure is worldly wealth, "fattened" in ways that were not God's ways.

5:6 "Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you."

- These innocent men are believers, the poor workmen and harvesters mentioned in 5:4. This murder probably was both active and passive. Some may indeed have been murdered; but more likely, the poor people who could not pay their debts were thrown in prison or forced to sell all their possessions. With no means of support and no opportunity even to work off their debts, these folks and their families often died of starvation. God considered this murder. Either way, in the unjust system, it was legal. The poor were

defenseless (**were not opposing you**). Their only recourse against the evil rich was to cry out to God.

- One of the marks of oppression is a dissatisfaction with merely abusing others or taking from them what is theirs. James is confronting a mind-set that treats others without regard for their dignity, conspires to cheat them out of everything, defrauds them of possessions and wages, and disregards the very lives of those who have been mistreated.
- There will always be organizations and institutions that allow this kind of oppression to exist legally. The rich will get richer. The poor will sink more deeply into poverty. But believers must know that God is passionately against oppression. Human law, as contrived as it sometimes is, does not determine right and wrong in God's eyes. Human law does not require charity or genuine concern for our neighbors. But God's law and God's character demand a higher order of living from us.
- Christians can easily fall into this kind of sin by rationalizing and saying, "It doesn't apply to me," or, "What can I do?" Yet Christians can incorporate and tolerate harsh business practices even in their own enterprises.
- The conditions that James is describing may seem hopeless. Many of the rich will not repent. Believers can live with hope, however, because Christ is coming back. He will bring judgment and justice. It is to Christ's return that James now turns.

PATIENCE IN SUFFERING / 5:7-12

The believers, most of whom were poor, were frequently exploited by the rich and were persecuted because of their

faith. James encouraged the believers to be patient until the Lord's return. But the patience he describes is not passive. It is a moment by moment, day by day, active dependence on God.

In this section, James illustrates some helpful sources for personal application. After speaking of the need for patience, he proceeds to reveal a number of different lessons that reinforce and apply his theme. The principle of patience will not mean much unless we can apply it to our lives. By looking at life from God's point of view, we discover there are many ways God gives guidance and encouragement.

5:7 “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.”

- James again directs his remarks to his brothers in Christ. The patience that he calls for requires them to wait under duress. James tells his brothers to be patient, even in the midst of injustice. The believers need to endure, trust in God through their trials, and refuse to try to get even for wrongs committed against them (1:2, 12; Psalm 37). But patience does not mean inaction. There is work to be done; praying hard, caring for one, caring for one another, speaking the truth in love and modeling the Christ-life.
- **Until the coming of the Lord.** There is an end point, a time when patience will no longer be needed; the Lord's coming. At that time, everything will be made right. The early church lived in constant expectation of Christ's return, and so should we. Because we don't know when Christ will return to bring justice and remove oppression, we must wait with patience (**2 Peter 3:8–10**).

- Generations have come and gone, yet the Lord's coming is still on the horizon. Enduring patience is still needed by believers. We are asked in Hebrews to consider the generations of faithful men and women who lived before Christ: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth" (**Hebrews 11:13**). The faith of those people was based on Jesus and His finished work. Knowing that Christ has come once, just as promised, we should be able to wait patiently and actively for his next coming.
- As an example of patience, James talks about the farmer who must wait for his "valuable crop." He prepares the field, waits for the "autumn rain" as part of sowing the seed, cares for the growing crop, and then waits for the "spring rain" as the crop ripens. In Israel the autumn rain comes in October or November after the seed is planted; the "spring rain" comes in March or April just before harvest time. Those who live in arid places understand the remarkable effect of a single rain. The seasons can change in a day, almost before someone's eyes. As the rain falls, dried trees come to life and parched ground springs into bloom. James actually calls these the "early" and "latter" rains, using an expression for an ideal growing season. Patience is what must be exercised and developed between the rains. Even nonfarmers have plenty of opportunities to develop patience. The waiting for the arrival of a baby, starting a new job, finishing school, waiting for a loved one's visit, slowly improving health during a prolonged illness; all these situations try our patience. We will exercise patience as we concentrate on the end result of our waiting. God's way is seldom the quick way, but it is always the complete way.

5:8 “Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.”

- Standing firm is difficult in the face of temptation, persecution, problems, trials, and suffering. This challenging phrase literally means “be patient and strengthen your hearts” (**1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:17**). Instead of being like the rich people of verse 5 who have “fattened” their hearts on the wealth of this world, believers are to have the assurance that Christ’s return will strengthen their hearts. Again, consider the heart: a strong, steady heartbeat characterizes a healthy person; a racing or erratic pulse rate is a sign of physical trouble. Whatever the circumstances, James encourages us to be rock solid in our faith and to have a faith-inspired joy that permeates every part of life (1:2-4).
- **The coming of the Lord is near.** Like the farmer who is at the mercy of the weather; it is outside his control. Likewise, the timing of the Lord’s return is beyond our control. James believed that Jesus could return in his lifetime. We ought to live with the same conviction. Christ may come back today; at any time, his return may be “near,” for we do not know when it will occur (**Matthew 24:27, 37, 39; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10**). But we do know that it *will* occur.

5:9 “Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.”

- These believers, facing persecution from the outside and problems on the inside, may naturally find themselves grumbling and criticizing one another. James doesn’t want them to be filled with resentment

and bitterness toward each other; that would only destroy the unity they so desperately need. To refrain from grumbling is a fruit of the Spirit (patience), **Galatians 5:22; James 5:7**

- James combines the highest standard of expected behavior with a true understanding of how people often behave. Each time he focuses on a significant pattern of behavior, he almost immediately turns to a human reaction that will undermine the process. In a similar passage (4:11), James follows his appeal about the importance of submitting to God with a warning about brothers slandering one another. Here he turns from the importance of patience to the danger of grumbling. Is it not profoundly human to avoid facing a weakness in ourselves by pointing to the same weakness in others? In this case, people who are struggling with their lack of patience can always find an example of someone who is even less patient than they are! But blaming others instead of facing our sins leaves us open to the judgment of God.
- **So that you may not be judged.** Jesus said, speaking of judging and being judged by one another, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (**Matthew 7:1–2**).
- **The Judge is standing at the door!** James has already mentioned the Judge (4:12). This Judge is not far away, but is rapidly approaching; He is already standing at the door! Christ’s return in majesty and glory could happen at any moment, but he is also very much present in believers by his Spirit. James is warning believers not to be in the middle of judging,

quarreling, criticizing, or gossiping. He returns (**Matthew 24:33; Mark 13:29; Philippians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–2; 1 Peter 4:7**).

- James's imagery here is strikingly similar to John's picture of Jesus confronting the churches in Revelation: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (**Revelation 3:20**). In that context, Jesus repeatedly questioned the lives of those who claimed to be his followers. How much better it would be for believers and churches to open up to Him.

5:10 "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience."

- Jewish Christians knew the stories of the prophets, many of whom suffered greatly or were killed for proclaiming God's message (1 Kings 19:1ff; Jeremiah in Jeremiah 38; Amos in Amos 7). James is reminding his readers that even those who spoke in the name of the Lord had to endure suffering. Part of his point is that God does not preserve *from* suffering those he has called; rather, he preserves them *in* suffering. They are an example to all believers because of their faithfulness despite the hardships they endured.
- When our fleshly response to suffering is grumbling and complaining, we reveal our misunderstanding of what God promises to do. When we are tempted to believe that patience is impossible, God reminds us of those who did endure with patience the trials he allowed into their lives.

5:11 “Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.”

- What we know, we can remember; what we can remember, we can use for encouragement and application. When we lack an awareness of the history and teaching in the Bible, we have little to fall back on in suffering. History is filled with accounts of those who have suffered extreme deprivation and had to rely on their memories of the Scriptures. Many have confessed that they wished they had learned more of the Bible while there was leisure to learn. Here James is leading his readers to apply the lessons from Old Testament lives. For instance, Job may offer us a fascinating look at ancient history and an interesting biography, but Job’s best work is as a teacher: one who has suffered and can help us cope with suffering. His life is a great example for all believers.
- **We consider blessed those who have persevered.** The perseverance of God’s prophets may have led them to horrible deaths, and the people of the time may have seen them as cursed; but we now consider them blessed. Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (**Matthew 5:11–12**).
- What does it mean to be blessed? The background to the English word is almost entirely religious, having to do with thoughts of God’s approval. In this way, we could paraphrase this verse: “We consider approved

by God those who have by faith persevered.” Remember **Hebrews 11:6**; without faith, it is impossible to please Him.

- James seems to shift his emphasis in this verse from patience to perseverance, but the shift is a natural one. Perseverance is patience expanded. Only tested patience deserves the title of perseverance. James is coming full circle to the original thoughts in this letter. Perseverance is an advanced result of the testing of perfection of faith (1:2–4, 12). Throughout Scripture, perseverance is required of all believers. For example, “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (**Matthew 10:22**); “By standing firm by faith you will gain life” (**Luke 21:19**).
- **You have heard of Job’s perseverance.** Job may have complained, but he did not stop trusting or obeying God (**Job 1:21; 2:10; 16:19–21; 19:25–27**). And the Lord did deliver and restore him (**Job 42:12**). The believers, after all the suffering they had endured thus far, were encouraged not to give up; They knew, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3, that their God would deliver them, whether He would take them out of the fire, or usher them into His presence.
- **What the Lord finally brought about.** In an age of instant solutions and results, how the word *finally* grinds against our will. We would much rather read “quickly” or “immediately” than be reminded again that God’s timing and priorities are different from ours. But perseverance is never instantaneous. There are no shortcuts to what the Lord brings about; the pathway before us is perseverance. Any explanation of the

Christian faith that overlooks or denies the importance of perseverance will disappoint those who believe it.

- We can see clearly from Job's life that perseverance is not the result of understanding. Job never received an explanation from God for his suffering. This is partly because pain is often a part of life that must be endured beyond explanations. There are many things we can intellectually understand, but not everything. God's purpose is not that we just develop a mind full of explanations and answers; his purpose is to bring us to a place where we spiritually abandon ourselves to Him. Quite often, these times are very dark days and we see no light, but He is right there and will see us through to the end if we believe.
- **The Lord is very compassionate and merciful.** God does not enjoy watching his people suffer. He allows them to face such pain because a greater good will be produced. Some who have suffered a great deal more than any of us have unashamedly praised God: "Because of the LORD'S great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail" (**Lamentations 3:22; Psalm 103:8; 111:4**). In the meantime, James encourages his readers to trust in God, wait patiently, persevere, and remember God's incredible love, compassion, and mercy for his people.
- Here, as in 2:13, when James has led us to a place of real challenge, he makes the challenge possible by adding the hope of God's mercy. Left with our own resources, perseverance is beyond us. Our trust in God must combine a God-given desire to persevere and the God-given power to persevere. "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will

and to work to do His good pleasure” (**Philippians 2:13**).

5:12 “But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.”

- James is referring to Jesus’ words in **Matthew 5:34-37**. To swear means to make an oath. Making oaths was a common practice, and James wanted it discontinued among the believers. People made disrespectful or prideful verbal guarantees. These oaths were intended to create an impression of truth; but those who uttered them did not really expect to be held to them. Christians are not to use oaths in order to guarantee the truth of what they say. Our honest and true words should be unquestionable.
- Should we take oaths in court? The oaths forbidden here are those used in casual conversation, not formal oaths taken in a court of law. Legal oaths are intended to bind those who make them. Perjury is a serious offense. Most scholars conclude that James does not require us to refuse to take oaths in court. The swearing that concerned Jesus and James made a mockery of the truth.
- The foundational principle behind these concerns is rooted in the third commandment, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (**Exodus 20:7**). We can see the danger of judgment in the flippant use of God’s name in our society. The blatant lack of respect for God and for Jesus is crystallized in their names’ being reduced to expletives.

- **Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned.** Believers should not need oaths, for their speech should always be truthful. There should be no reason for them to have to strengthen a statement with an oath.
- A person with a reputation for exaggeration or lying often can’t get anyone to believe him on his word alone. For example, this person might say, “I promise!” or “I swear!” Christians should never become like that. Always be honest so that others will believe your simple “yes” or “no.”

FAITHFUL PRAYER / 5:13–18

James closes his letter as he began it, with a call to prayer. In 1:5, after an opening challenge about joy in trials, he urges believers specifically to pray for the wisdom needed in becoming mature. The sold requirement is a faithful trust in God’s supply. Later, in 4:1-3, James addresses the kind of selfish prayers that God does not answer. His confrontation is unmistakable: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (4:3). Pray is essential, but it cannot be used to manipulate God.

James uses his closing words to describe effective prayer. If we can say that James’s letter summarizes the work of faith, his conclusion focuses on faith’s finest work; believers effective in prayer.

5:13 “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.”

- There are many responses to trouble. Some of us worry; some vow revenge against those who have caused the trouble; some grumble and let anger burn inside. But James says the correct response to

trouble is to pray (**Psalm 30; 50:15; 91:15**). This is not necessarily a prayer for deliverance, but rather for the patience and strength to endure it.

- There are three main reasons for not praying when we realize we are in trouble: ignorance, arrogance, and shame. If we do not know that God wants us to pray when we are in trouble, we are simply ignorant of Scripture. If we do not pray when we are in trouble because we are trusting in our own resources to get ourselves out, we are being arrogant. And sometimes we may want to pray but are ashamed because the trouble we are in is our own fault. James gives encouragement to those who are ignorant, to pray. He urges submission to God to those who are arrogant. And he reminds those who are ashamed that God is full of compassion and mercy (5:11). To all of us he commends prayer.
- **Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.** James says that if we are joyful, we should thank God by singing songs of praise (**1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16**). Because our praise is directed to God, singing is actually another form of prayer. These songs of praise can be the formal Psalms from the Old Testament, or spontaneous personal creations that express some aspect of God's character or our response to him.

5:14 “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:”

- One characteristic of the early church was its concern over and care for the sick. Here James encourages the sick person to call for the elders of the church for prayer. The elders were spiritually mature men who

were responsible for overseeing local churches (**1 Peter 5:1–4**). These men would **pray over** the sick person, calling upon the Lord for healing. Then they would **anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord**. Jesus himself instructed us to pray in his name (**John 14:14**). As the elders pray for this one who is sick, they are to voice clearly that the power for healing resides in the name of Jesus.

- Many of the details in this passage should be applied in our lives and churches today. James wrote to people in rather small communities, bound tightly by language and culture. We live in communities marked by isolation; even from people living next door. The early church practiced house calls. Contact, prayer, appeals to the presence and power of God, expectations of God's direct intervention, and healing were part of daily life. The life of faith really was a lifestyle, not a weekend component of a compartmentalized life that fits God into one's weekly schedule for a couple of hours on Sunday mornings. A literal practice by church leaders of James's guidelines for healing prayer would make churches much more personal and effective.
- The sick person here is incapacitated physically. Anointing was often used by the early church in their prayers for healing. In Scripture, oil was both a medicine (see the parable of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:30–37**) and a symbol of the Spirit of God (**1 Samuel 16:1–13**). Thus the oil may have been a sign of the power of prayer, and it may have symbolized the setting apart of the sick person for God's special attention.

- More important than the oil itself, however, the key function of the elders is their prayer for the sick person, as evidenced in the verses that follow.

5:15 “And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.”

- The prayer must be from the heart, sincere, with trust in and obedience to God behind it, and with no doubting, as in 1:5–8. The believing is the role of the elders who are praying, not the sick person’s (nothing is said about his or her faith). It is possible that the sick person’s faith is exercised in calling the elders. Also, if there is need for confession, the elders will be able to minister to the individual. The process insures dependence of believers on each other.
- Keep in mind that James may also have in mind spiritually sick people who are in desperate need of prayer.
- **The Lord will raise him up.** Not the elders or the oil, but the Lord himself does the healing. Does this mean that every prayer for healing guarantees that God will make the sick person well? It must be emphasized here that the prayer offered is a prayer offered in faith; not only the faith that believes God can heal, but also the faith that expresses absolute confidence in God’s will. A true prayer of faith will acknowledge God’s sovereignty in his answer to that prayer. It is not always God’s will to heal those who are ill (**2 Corinthians 12:7–9**). A prayer for healing must be qualified with recognition that God’s will is supreme. Spiritual healing is a great need in our churches.

- It is shameful to find Christians hesitating to pray because God might not heal the way they wish. It is not our role either to decide how God will answer our prayers or to excuse him if our human desires are not met. Trusting God only as long as he cooperates with our plans is no trust at all. The prayer offered in faith gives God a free hand to work. Because believers have an eternal viewpoint, we can claim the absolute certainty of this promise—God can and will heal, though not always in this world. In the afterlife God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (**Revelation 21:4**). To limit God’s answers only to this world would indicate that we are trying to make God submit to our needs and desires in this life rather than submitting to him.
- Jesus chided human attempts to measure faith. He pictured the strongest faith as no bigger than a mustard seed. To the disciples’ questions about unanswered prayers Jesus replied, “Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (**Matthew 17:20**). Clearly the size of our faith in God is not important; rather, it is the character of the God in whom our faith rests that makes the difference.
- An overemphasis on our faith’s involvement places too much responsibility on our capacity to know God’s plan in the matter. But if we have a small faith that simply trusts in a wise, merciful, and powerful God to do what is best, we will see miracles happen.

- **If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.** ^{NIV} Sin may or may not be any cause of the illness, but an opportunity for confession is given, and the elders are there to receive it. No demand of confession is given; James uses the word “if.” This condition is important because all too often we are prone to assume that sin is the cause of someone’s suffering. The Bible teaches that sin can cause sickness (**Mark 2:1–12; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 11:27–30**), but it also notes clearly that this is not always the case (**John 9:2–3**).

5:16 “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”

- It is not God’s plan that his people be alone. Members of Christ’s body should count on others for support and prayer, especially when they are sick or suffering. The elders are on call to respond to the illness of any member, and the church to pray for the healing of any who are sick.
- Fellowship in our churches could be vastly improved if we could follow James’s formula here. Confessing our spiritual faults, such as resentment, a grudge, lack of forgiveness, etc., can and often does lead to the healing of physical ailments. Unresolved anger and guilt create real spiritual and physical stress. If a believer could freely confess to someone whom he or she has wronged, confess publicly to the entire church if needed, or confess in private (if more appropriate), and then have the church pray for him or her, the barriers that are erected between people could be torn down. There would no longer be the internal conflicts, and fellowship would be strong and supportive. Those who are sick **may be healed**

physically and spiritually, and the church would be unified in its prayer efforts.

- The recent emphasis on small groups within churches has risen largely from a need to recapture some of these basic features of life in the body of Christ that have been neglected. When Christians are really “carrying each other’s burdens,” the world does take note, and we come closer to fulfilling “the law of Christ” (**Galatians 6:2**). Loving your neighbor as yourself does include, above all else, praying for him or her.
- In Christ, every believer is a priest to other believers (**1 Peter 2:9**).
- **The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** The prayer is effective because the person who is praying is declared righteous at salvation. The person is not sinless, but he or she is walking in the Spirit and is abiding in him. This person gets what he or she asks for in prayer because God’s will is his will.
- The Christian’s communication with God through prayer is an instrument of healing and forgiveness and is a mighty weapon in the spirit. The results are often greater than we thought were possible. Some people see prayer as a last resort, to be tried when all else fails. Prayer should come first. Some see prayer as a way to obligate God to give whatever they claim in faith. God is pleased to use our prayers to accomplish his purposes and he delights in answering our needs, but he is never bound by our prayers. God’s power is infinitely greater than ours, so it only makes sense to rely on it; especially because God encourages us to do so.

5:17–18 “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”

- Prayer is indeed powerful; remember Elijah? The story is found in **1 Kings 17:1–18:46**. A drought came as a sign to evil King Ahab of Israel that the idol Baal did not have power over the rain, God did. And when Elijah prayed, **it did not rain on the land for three and a half years**. Then he prayed for rain, **and the heavens gave rain**.
- James uses Old Testament people to illustrate each of his major themes:
 - ❖ The nature of faith is found in the lives of Abraham and Rahab (2:21–25).
 - ❖ Perseverance is exemplified by Job (5:11).
 - ❖ Effective prayer is exemplified by Elijah (5:17–18).
- These lives are examples to us. They made their mistakes, persevered, and are now testimonies that life can be lived depending on God. Hebrews reminds us, “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (**Hebrews 12:1**).

RESTORE WANDERING BELIEVERS / 15:19–20

Behind this question about the identity of the wanderer is a pastoral concern. In practice, it makes no difference whether the wanderer was actually a believer or not—we are exhorted to turn people back to the faith (**Ezekiel 3:18–21; 33:9; 1 Timothy 4:16**). If the wanderer should die while

wandering, the pastor or group is left to wonder about the eternal state of that person. Families sometimes agonize over the fate of a loved one who has wandered away from the faith. Frankly, we cannot know. To determine what was really occurring within that person we would have to be God. If we have done what we could to reach out to wanderers while they were still living, we must then turn their eternal destiny over to God.

5:19 “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;”

- By saying *one among you*, James is referring to a believer who has fallen away from the faith. He also reminds us that no one is immune from wandering. The *one* could be us. To *wander* means a serious departure from the faith; otherwise known as “apostasy.” The Greek word is *planete*, (from which, we get our word “planet”); it suggests wandering away from the correct path. *Truth*, as used here, does not refer to peripheral doctrinal concerns, but to central truth of the Christian faith; namely, Jesus the Son of God. Jesus said, “I am the way, I am the truth.”
- **And someone should bring him back.** When someone does wander, the church or Christian community ought to try to bring him back, not for judgment, but for repentance and restoration. But this phrase also has a distinct personal application, for the group is represented by *someone*. When a believer is aware of another believer’s wandering, that knowledge carries with it responsibility. All these images portray a community where people care deeply for each other, and wanderers are not allowed to slip through the cracks unnoticed.

5:20 “Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

- The error of the wandering sinner is so serious as to lead to physical death; spiritual death, if he or she is not brought back (**1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 John 5:16**). But when the believer repents and returns to God, God will forgive, cover over, and forget that person's sins (**Psalms 32:1; 1 Peter 4:8**).
- The context is somewhat unclear about the identity of the wanderer. Is it a person who is a believer wandering away, or is it a person in the group who has not truly believed and is wandering away? Those who move away from their faith or who are not genuine in their profession are in serious trouble and need to repent. Since we know that a believer cannot lose his or her salvation, the wandering believer will not have eternal death, but they certainly will experience death like consequences in life.
- What began with a challenge to endure hardship with joy now closes with an appeal to watch out for each other. Believers are to pursue their faith, together. It is God who saves and keeps, but he allows us to be involved in one another's Christian life.
- It is an unforgettable sight to witness the Christian welcome of someone who has strayed and returned, watching God's forgiveness work through the body of Christ as believers accept the person who is repenting. From the view of eternity, it must really be like a cover being pulled over a “multitude of sins.” James has repeatedly instructed us that Christians should not grumble against each other and judge each other. When we pray for each other and speak

God's forgiveness to each other, we, the church, experience and demonstrate the life Christ gave us. God promises that what has been covered by forgiveness will be remembered no more. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (**Jeremiah 31:34**).

- The letter of James is Christianity with its sleeves rolled up. It is the working person's practical guide to living the Christian faith. It spells out what it means to follow Jesus day by day. James emphasizes faith in action. Theories are for theologians, but James is interested in life! Right living is the evidence and result of faith. The church must serve with compassion, speak lovingly and truthfully, live in obedience to God's commands, and love one another. The body of believers ought to be an example of heaven's principles applied on earth, drawing people to Christ through love for God and one another. If we truly believe God's Word, we will *live it* day by day. God's Word is not merely something we read or think about, but something we apply daily.

