

Faith Foundations Study Guides

An Undivided Heart for God

A Journey of Discovery in the Book of James

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How to Use This Book

Welcome to the Faith Foundations study guide on James! Whether you are just beginning your new life with Christ, or have been a Christian for many years, this study guide is for you. It is designed to help you discover, through personal study and group discussion, the incredible riches of God's Word, and to help you grow in your walk with God by applying what you learn. This book is divided into 10 lessons, each of which contains the full NIV text of the Scripture passage, several study and discussion questions, and a verse-by-verse commentary. So, together with a Bible to look up cross-references, you have everything you need for your "journey of discovery" in James.

Why Small Groups?

These materials can be used profitably in personal study or in an adult Sunday School class. But their value will be best realized when they are used in small groups, meeting either at church during the Sunday School hour or in homes during the week. There are several reasons for this.

First, no one has perfect insight into every passage of Scripture; we can all benefit from hearing the perspectives of other believers as we seek to understand and apply the Bible. A small group gathering, using the discussion questions included in this book, is an ideal way to stimulate a sharing of observations and ideas.

Second, a small group provides a community of fellow travelers who, along with us, are seeking to follow Christ in the midst of family responsibilities, job pressures, and personal struggles. In today's fragmented and mobile society, the natural networks of neighborhoods and family no longer provide the support they once did. We need some way of making connections with others for mutual support, people with whom we can share our joys and sorrows—people who will listen, who will pray with us, who will offer a helping hand and a word of encouragement, and who will confront us in love when we've gotten off track.

Finally, a small group combines the benefits of Biblical insight and community support by keeping us accountable. If we only study the Scriptures alone, or listen to them taught in a large group, it's easy to let them go "in one ear and out the other". But when a small group of people are learning the same things at the same time, they can help one another to apply the things they are learning.

How Are the Groups Organized?

The groups should be composed of 6-14 people: if they are smaller, any absences can make it difficult to maintain the discussion; if they are larger, not everyone can participate. You can meet from two to four times a month; if the group meets less than twice a month, the members aren't spending enough time together to build relationships. Some groups find that meeting three times a month during the school year, with a break during the summer, provides a good rhythm of involvement and time off.

You may choose to include a mix of married and single, older and younger members, or you may organize your groups by age or marital status. There are benefits to homogeneous groups in which the members are going through similar life experiences, but there are also benefits of a diverse group in which the younger members can benefit from the experience of the older.

Each group needs to have a recognized leader, preferably one selected and trained by the pastor or church leadership. This person's role during the meeting is not primarily to teach (although preparation of the lesson is a must), but to guide the discussion and keep the group from getting bogged down on side issues. He or she does not need to be the host; in fact, it is preferable that group responsibilities, such as providing a home in which to meet and organizing refreshments, be shared among the members.

Finally, membership in the group should be based on three commitments: To prepare for each meeting by completing the lesson in advance, which takes from 1/2 to 2 hours (but come to the meeting even if you haven't done the lesson); to place a high priority on regular attendance and come to the meetings except in case of emergency; and to keep confidential anything of a personal nature which is shared during the meetings (except when it is necessary to communicate concerns to the pastor).

What Is the Group Meeting Like?

Each group meeting should last from 1 1/2 to 2 hours, and provide time for discussion of the lesson, prayer, and fellowship. A problem in many groups is for the lesson to take up most of the time, with only a few minutes left over for prayer and fellowship. This must be avoided for the goal of building relationships to be achieved.

Here is a suggested schedule:

15 minutes:	Gathering
30-45 minutes:	Discussion of the lesson
20-30 minutes:	Prayer
15-30 minutes:	Refreshments

As for child care, experience has shown that in order to receive the maximum benefit from time spent in the meeting, all members of the group need to be free to focus on the discussion, rather than caring for children. Therefore, with the possible exception of infants under one year, parents should make arrangements for child care during the meetings. Some options include "trading" child care with parents whose group meets on a different night, having a baby sitter care for children in another room during the meeting, or providing child care for all the groups at the church.

Introduction to James

Author

The traditional view is that the author of this letter was James, the brother of Christ according to physical birth (Gal. 1:19). This judgment is supported by two main arguments. First, the author identifies himself only by his given name. This indicates that he was a well-known and authoritative figure in the early church, as was James the Lord's brother (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-19; Gal. 2:9), who was considered an "apostle" (1 Cor. 15:7). Other possible candidates, James the father of Judas and James the son of Alphaeus (Acts 1:13; Mt. 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15), were not prominent figures. And although James the son of Zebedee, as one of the Twelve, did meet this criteria, he died in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2), early enough to make his authorship less likely. Second, as a leader in the Jerusalem church, we would expect James to concern himself with the spiritual needs of those who had been driven from that city by persecution (1:2; see Acts 8:1; 11:19).

Objections to this view rely on alleged inconsistencies between the content of the letter and what is otherwise known about the historical James. Typically, those who reject his authorship claim that it was written by an anonymous person who called himself "James" in order to gain greater acceptance for his writings. Three such arguments follow.

First, that James fails to mention a fraternal relationship with Christ in the letter. Surely, it is claimed, such an important fact would have strengthened its authority, and would not have been omitted if it were true. On the other hand, if an impostor had written the letter, wouldn't he have claimed such a relationship, for that very reason? And so this proves nothing one way or the other. Moreover, the fact that James was related to Christ was very likely so widely known as not to require explicit mention.

Second, it is argued that James, the son of a carpenter, would not have had sufficient education and experience to have produced a letter such as this, in which the quality of written Greek is high, and in which the author demonstrates a knowledge of Greek culture. However, recent scholarship indicates that a familiarity with Greek language and culture was more widespread in first-century Palestine than previously assumed.

Third, some assert that the author's attitude toward the law here is at variance with James' words and actions in Acts. The James of Acts is concerned with dietary regulations and ritual cleansing (Acts 10:28; 21:20-25; Gal. 2:12), while this letter focuses instead on the moral and ethical requirements of God's law. However, one cannot be expected to address every issue in every circumstance. Here, James is dealing with the topics which matter most to those to whom he is writing. Consider also that James' conduct in Acts was not primarily theological, but pragmatic: an attempt to maintain peace and avoid schism in the young Jerusalem church. A similar flexibility can be seen in the actions and writings of the apostle Paul (Acts 15:12-29; 16:3; 21:26).

Date

If this view of authorship is accepted, the letter must have been written before A.D. 62, when James was martyred. But given the lack of references to specific historical events, anything beyond that is speculative. Some have suggested that James' discussion of faith and works in 2:14-26 represents his response to an imperfectly understood version of Paul's teaching on justification by faith, which had come to James via hearsay. If so, the letter was likely written before the Jerusalem council in A.D. 48 or 49 (see Acts 15), at which time James would have had the opportunity to speak with Paul directly and understand more clearly his teachings.

Destination and Recipients

Unlike Paul's epistles (see 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2), this letter is not addressed to a single church or person, but to a geographically dispersed group. If the phrase "twelve tribes" is literal, it indicates ethnic Jews; in this case, Jews who had come to faith in Christ and who had been dispersed from Jerusalem by persecution (Acts 8:1; 11:19). The beliefs which they share concerning monotheism (2:19) and the importance of the law (1:25; 2:8-12) make this likely. However, if the phrase "twelve tribes" is figurative, it refers to all the people of God under the new covenant, both Jewish and Gentile Christians, who together are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (see Rom. 4:16; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:16; 6:16). In that case, the "scattering" would be our present exile from heaven, which is our true home (see 1 Pet. 1:1; Heb. 11:9-16).

Occasion and Purpose

The structure of James is not apparent, making an overall theme and its relationship to subordinate topics difficult to discern. However, following commentator Douglas J. Moo, we can identify as central James' concern for authentic Christian living; that is, practicing a religion of wholehearted and undivided devotion to God, rather than attempting to find a middle way between God and the world (see 4:4-8). In order to do this, we need to live according to a comprehensively Biblical world view, with a right understanding of trials, suffering and temptation (1:2-15; 5:7-11); right conduct vs. mere doctrinal agreement (1:19-27; 2:14-26); appropriate speech (3:1-12); true wisdom (3:13-18); humility and pride (4:1-17); and poverty and wealth (2:1-13; 5:1-6).

Given these emphases, it seems likely that the occasion of the letter was a time of persecution and suffering in this expatriate Jewish Christian community, which had produced in them a weariness with their struggle against sin, resulting in a willingness to compromise with, and even embrace, the values of the world.

Unit 1 – Joy, Perseverance, and Wisdom

James 1:1-8

Text

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:
Greetings.

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work

so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Open

If you could spend a weekend doing anything you pleased, entirely for your own enjoyment, what would it be?

How would you define “wisdom”? Who would you consider to be a wise person?

Discover

1. The author of this book is (likely) James, the brother of Jesus. What do we know about this James from other passages in the New Testament?

Mark 6:3

Acts 21:17-19

Mark 3:20-21, 31-35

1 Corinthians 15:7

Acts 12:3-17

Galatians 1:19

Acts 15:13-21

Galatians 2:9

2. Do you think it matters who the author is? Why or why not?

3. How does the author identify himself? Why is this significant?

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4. James urges his readers to “consider it pure joy” when trials come. What does it mean to “consider”? Is this an emotional or intellectual process, or both?

How is it possible to do what James asks, when we are in the midst of a painful or difficult situation? Is this realistic?

What will be the result of doing this? Is it worth the cost? Why or why not?

5. Look up the following verses and summarize what they teach about the source of true wisdom: Proverbs 2:6; 1 Kings 4:29-30; Psalm 51:6; Proverbs 15:33; Daniel 2:21; Eph. 1:17.

What should we do if we lack wisdom? Why?

6. What condition does James identify for receiving answers to prayer? What do you think this means?

Apply

Think back to a recent time of suffering or difficulty. Did you respond in the way James advises? If so, how were you able to do this? If not, how might you be able to do so in the future?

Where do you tend to look for wisdom, both in making big decisions and in managing life day-to-day?

Commentary

v. 1 “James . . .” As we begin our study in the epistle of James, the first question we need to address is the identity of the author. His name is “James,” but which James? The prevailing view, from the time of Origen of Alexandria (184-254 A.D.) until the 19th century, was that the author was “the brother of the Lord”, “James the apostle”. (Although not one of the Twelve, James the brother of Jesus was considered to be an apostle in the larger sense of the term; see 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19).

There are good reasons to accept this traditional judgment. First, in order for the author to identify himself only by his given name, “James”, he had to be well known, and James the Lord’s brother was a leader in the early church (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-19; Gal. 2:9). This criteria excludes James the father of Judas and James the son of Alphaeus (Acts 1:13; also Mt. 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15), who do not play a central role in the New Testament narrative. The other major candidate, James the son of Zebedee, was one of the disciples closest to Christ and thus quite prominent (see Mk. 5:37; 9:2). However, his death under Herod Agrippa in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2) makes his authorship less likely. Second, as a leader in the Jerusalem church, James would naturally wish to minister to those who had been “scattered” from there by persecution (1:2; see Acts 8:1; 11:19).

Attempts to overturn this view assert that James of Jerusalem could not have written the letter, and that therefore the author must have been an unknown person who adopted the pen-name “James”; either deceitfully, to give his views more weight, or openly, to indicate that the letter was in agreement with the teaching of the historical James. Here are three such arguments:

- a. *If the letter were written by the Lord’s brother, he would have mentioned this relationship.* This is an argument from silence, which attempts to find significance in what the letter *doesn’t* address. Against it is the fact that James’ family relationship with Christ is never mentioned in Acts, nor do we have any evidence that his position and authority in the early church were due to this connection. And if someone wanted to claim James’ authority for his own work, wouldn’t he have explicitly claimed to be “James, the brother of the Lord”?
- b. Another argument against the authorship of James, the brother of Jesus, is the high quality of Greek that is used, and the author’s evident familiarity with Greek culture. *The son of a Hebrew carpenter could not have written such a letter,* it is claimed. However, to reliably make such a judgment would require a knowledge of James’ background and education that we simply do not possess. Also, recent scholarship indicates that it would not be uncommon for an educated Jew in Palestine to be fluent in the Greek language, and to be conversant with Greek philosophical and religious ideas.
- c. Some assert that the letter’s stance toward the Jewish law is at variance with that of James in Acts. This is because the letter doesn’t mention the ritual aspects of the law, focusing solely on its ethical demands. In contrast, James is one of the leaders who request that Paul participate in Jewish purification rites to demonstrate his loyalty to Judaism (Acts 21:20-25). Also, it was men “from James” whose arrival in Antioch caused Peter to withdraw from eating with Gentiles, because of the Jewish prohibition against doing so (Gal. 2:12; see Acts 10:28).
In response, this is really another argument from silence. Such questions as dietary regulations and ritual cleansing were presumably not an issue for the recipients of the letter, and so James focused his instruction on more urgent matters. But in addition, one could argue that James’ conduct in Acts was not theologically motivated, but was aimed at maintaining peace between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul, after all, was very clear on justification by faith, and yet he complied with the request concerning purification rites (Acts 21:26; see Acts 16:3). Similarly, Paul accepted the ruling of the Jerusalem council, which, among other things, directed Gentile believers to abstain from the eating of blood (Acts 15:12-29). So the narrative of Acts and the teaching of James (and Paul) are not truly in conflict.

“To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” This letter is not addressed to an individual church or person, but to a geographically dispersed group. If the phrase “twelve tribes” is literal, it indicates ethnic Jews; in this case, those who had come to faith in Christ. This term for the Jewish people refers to the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob, or “Israel” (Gen. 32:28; 49:1-28). From the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles in 722 and 586 B.C., the Jews had been “scattered” from their homeland in Palestine. More recently, many Jewish Christians had been driven from Jerusalem by persecution (Acts 8:1; 11:19).

If the phrase “twelve tribes” is intended figuratively, it would refer to all the people of God under the new covenant, both Jewish and Gentile Christians, who together are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (see Rom. 4:16; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:16; 6:16). In this case, the “scattering” would refer to our present exile from heaven, our true home (see 1 Pet. 1:1; Heb. 11:9-16).

vv. 2-4 In these verses, James exhorts his readers, not merely to accept or stoically bear with their trials, but to welcome them as friends. Persevering in faith will result in spiritual maturity, which is greatly to be prized (see Rom. 5:3-4; 1 Pet. 6-7). Behind this message is the implicit conviction that suffering is not random and meaningless, but purposeful; that trials come from the hand of a sovereign and loving God who is accomplishing a good and necessary work in our lives through them (see Rom. 8:28).

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds”

James is not saying that our trials should produce no other reaction but joy; trying to deny one’s grief and sadness in loss, or pretending that suffering is not painful, is ultimately futile. Nor does God condemn us as unspiritual when we experience normal human emotions. Instead, what this means is that our joy in the midst of trials should be genuine and sincere. When these uninvited visitors arrive, we should “consider” them (i.e. choose to regard them as) reasons for gladness. We are able to do this because of the certainty that our difficulties, setbacks, and struggles are producing a result that is worth the cost in tears and sorrow. That result is a steadfast faith that honors and pleases God.

The trials experienced by the first readers of this epistle included poverty and economic exploitation (Jam. 2:5-6); however, James makes clear that this principle applies universally to the “many kinds” of struggles they (and we) face.

“because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

The word “testing” (*dokimion*) is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, to describe the process of refining precious metals in a furnace (Ps. 12:6; Prov. 27:21). This is an apt metaphor for the suffering, often intense, which produces the pure gold of proven and lasting faith. Such endurance is repeatedly praised in the New Testament (Lk. 8:15; 2 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:3, 12; Heb. 10:36; 12:1-11; Rev. 2:2-3).

“Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

James is not claiming that sinless perfection is attainable in this life (note that even Paul declined to claim this for himself; Phil. 3:12). Rather, as we persevere in faith, we look forward to the day of Christ’s return, when the work that God is doing in us will be brought to completion (Phil. 1:6) and we will finally be made “like him”, without moral blemish or imperfection (1 Jn. 3:2; Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:22).

The present result of such perseverance will be spiritual maturity; that is, having a mind and heart which are whole and undivided in devotion to God, rather than being torn between the things of this world and the world to come (see Jam. 4:4; 1 Ki. 18:21; Mt. 6:24; Col. 3:1-2).

v. 5 Wisdom “from heaven” gives us a true perspective on life, one which is contrary to the wisdom of the world (Jam. 3:13-18; see 1 Cor. 3:19). This wisdom enables us to rejoice in the midst of suffering.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

There are two key ideas here. First, that true wisdom is found, not in secular philosophy, or in personal experience, or in the communal judgment of any human culture, but in God. He alone is the source of all true wisdom (Prov. 2:6; see 1 Ki. 4:29-30; Job 33:33; Ps. 51:6; Prov. 15:33; Dan. 2:21; Eph. 1:17). Therefore, it is to Him that we must appeal if we desire it.

Second, that whatever God provides us is given “generously”. The focus here is not on the quantity of the gift, but on the fact that it is given without reluctance or hesitation; God does not give with a divided heart, but freely and gladly. This is the same attitude we are to have when we give back to him, for God loves (and is!) a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7; see Deut. 15:10). Nor does God scold or shame us for being needy in the first place; he gives “without finding fault”.

vv. 6-8 These verses add a condition to the promise of answered prayer in v. 5; that of faith. The mere act of praying is not sufficient; it is necessary also that one’s heart be in accord with the request. When we pray, we must believe that God is able to grant what we ask, and that in love, he desires to give us good things (Mt. 7:7-11); although in his wisdom, he may also refuse our request. God does not respond to “covering the bases” prayers, or “it couldn’t hurt to pray” prayers, but only to prayers which reflect a wholehearted dependence and reliance on him (see Ps. 119:2, 10; Deut. 6:5; Jer. 29:13; Mk. 12:30). Note that it is not the strength or intensity of one’s belief, but its clarity and simplicity, that matters (see Mt. 17:20).

The opposite of such faith is spiritual inconsistency, or “double-minded”-ness, which stems from a fundamental uncertainty concerning God’s existence, his goodness, his power, his love, or his trustworthiness, and which produces an unwillingness to place oneself solely in his hands. Such a person is “unstable”, constantly vacillating between God and the world. The prayers which result are nothing more than empty words.

Unit 2 – Humility and Temptation

James 1:9-18

Text

⁹The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

¹¹For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

¹²Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

¹³When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

¹⁶Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. ¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Open

Do you tend to plan far in advance, or are you more likely to just take each day as it comes?

If you could do something that would still be remembered in a hundred years, what would it be?

Discover

1. In what sense does someone in humble circumstances have a "high position"? Why is this something to take pride in? (see vv. 12, 18; also 2:5)

2. What should the wealthy person keep in mind concerning his or her position in life? (see Isa. 40:6-8; Psalm 90:5-10; 103:15-16)

3. Why is this important to remember?

4. What do these verses tell us about the source of true worth and value?

Matthew 19:30

Luke 16:15

Luke 20:46-47

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Galatians 6:14

5. What do verses 13-15 teach about the source of temptations? Compare this to what you find in the following passages: 1 Corinthians 10:13; Exodus 20:20; 2 Peter 2:9

6. How can you keep from losing your footing on the “slippery slope” James describes in vv. 14-15? What works? What doesn’t work?

7. In the space below, list some of the “good things” you have received from God in the last week. Take a few moments to thank him.

Apply

Do you consider yourself someone “in humble circumstances” or someone who is “rich”?

How does the knowledge that life is short affect how you live day to day?

Commentary

v. 9 ***“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.”***

In this verse and the next, the poor and wealthy are each instructed to “take pride in” their status; however, in a manner that is in direct opposition to the values of the world. The follower of Christ who lacks this world’s goods, and who is thus despised and looked down upon, is encouraged not merely to persevere, but to actually exult in his lofty status! In truth, he is not poor, but rich, for he has been chosen by God to receive the crown of life and to inherit an eternal kingdom (see vv. 12, 18; also 2:5).

The worth which the world assigns to people, based on temporary and external factors, is often completely off the mark. However, the truth will be revealed and rewarded at the proper time. As Jesus taught, in the final judgment, *“many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first”* (Mt. 19:30), and *“What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.”* (Lk. 16:15; see 1 Sam. 16:7). For example, in Jesus’ day the teachers of the law were respected by men and received *“the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets;”* however, their ultimate fate was to be severely punished, rather than praised, by God (Lk. 20:46-47).

Note that the pride which James endorses is not arrogance or self-centered boasting, but rather a kind of humility that looks to God as the source of one’s true worth (see Ps. 20:7; Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Gal. 6:14).

vv. 10-11 ***“But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position . . .”***

The key question here is whether the “one who is rich” is also a Christian (a wealthy one), or an unbeliever. The syntax of the passage favors the first option, with “the one” in this verse corresponding to “the brother” in verse 9. This would be consistent with 4:13-14, which implies that some of those to whom James is writing are prosperous businessmen, and also with 2:2, which envisions someone with a “gold ring” and “fine clothes” joining their gatherings. On the other hand, the wealthy are portrayed in James as oppressors who oppose the gospel (2:6-7), and who are destined for judgment (5:1-6), favoring the view that James is addressing an unbeliever.

Either interpretation is possible, but the first seems preferable. The recipients of this letter appear to have been an economically mixed group which, although predominantly poor, did include some wealthy persons. Those believers are here being exhorted to acknowledge, and even revel in, their true status; not as “masters of the universe”, but as those whose earthly life and riches are no more lasting than a flower wilting under the hot sun. Just as with the poor, their true

worth and value come not from gold or silver, but from their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

“because he will pass away like a wild flower.” The fleeting nature of man’s life and accomplishments, as contrasted with the word of God and the things of eternity, is a common theme in Scripture. As the prophet Isaiah states (Isa. 40:6-8; see also Ps. 90:5-10; 103:15-16),

“All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers
of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD
blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands
forever.”

Similarly, the warning that the rich man will *“fade away even while he goes about his business”* echoes the parable of the rich fool, who, after filling his storehouses with abundance, was in suddenly taken in death from this world to the next, to find himself standing before God (Lk. 12:16-21).

The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley addresses this theme in the haunting sonnet *Ozymandias*. There, a “traveller from an antique land” reports seeing a shattered monument buried in the sand, bearing mute witness to the long-ago greatness of its subject. The poem concludes:

*“And on the pedestal these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and
despair!*

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and
bare*

The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

v. 12 ***“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”***

The imagery of the Christian life as a race, at the end of which we will receive a victor’s crown that lasts forever, is found throughout the New Testament (1 Cor. 9:24-25; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:8; Heb. 12:1-3; 1 Pet. 5:4).

This crown is eternal life. It is not a special reward for those who have borne extreme trials; it is the common inheritance of all who continue in faith and obedience until the end (Rev. 2:10). Thus, receiving this crown equates to entering into eternal life, and failing to receive it, failing to enter into life. Such failure would be evidence, not of losing one’s faith as a result of testing, but of never possessing a genuine saving faith in the first place (see Mt. 7:21-23; 1 Jn. 2:19).

v. 13 **"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.'"** God does not work at cross-purposes with himself; he does not call us to persevere (v. 12) while at the same time setting up roadblocks in our path. If this is true, then what do we make of texts which explicitly state that God tests his people? For example, Gen. 22:1 tells us that "God tested Abraham" by commanding him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (see also Ex. 15:25; Isa. 48:10). The answer is that while God does in fact bring tests and trials into our lives, their purpose is to reveal and strengthen our faith, not to undermine or destroy it. God does not entice anyone to sin; he does not set traps for our souls and lure us into them, nor does the Holy Spirit ever speak to our hearts, calling us away from God. On the contrary, God promises always to provide "a way out" so that we are never tempted beyond our ability to bear (1 Cor. 10:13; see Ex. 20:20; 2 Pet. 2:9).

In the context, the kind of temptations in view are those which accompany testing and trials; for example, the urge to grumble against God, to yield to despair, to withdraw from fellowship, or to accept relief from suffering at the cost of one's spiritual integrity.

"For God cannot be tempted by evil"

For God to draw us into sin would be contrary to his own character. Since he himself cannot be tempted to sin, he has no interest in influencing us to do evil.

Statements that the Israelites "tempted" God (e.g., Ps. 78:41) indicate that they provoked and angered him by their disobedience, not that there was something in God's nature which could have caused him to respond unrighteously.

How, then, do we explain Jesus being "tempted" in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13; see Heb. 2:18; 4:15). We know that he did not sin, but could he have done so? In other words, was the temptation "real"? In the sense that Jesus desired the things Satan offered, and was not constrained by any external force from acting on those desires, the answer is yes. However, there was nothing within him, no "evil desire," which could have "dragged away and enticed" him (v. 13) to accept Satan's unrighteous conditions. His love for God and desire to please him were stronger than his desires for physical nourishment or glory. Farther than that we cannot go; we must submit to the mystery of the *hypostatic union*, the doctrine that Jesus was somehow fully God and also fully (although sinlessly) human.

Note that Satan did not tempt Christ with things which were evil in themselves, but sought to entice Jesus into obtaining those things in an illegitimate way.

v. 14-15 **"but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."** The responsibility for our susceptibility to temptation lies within our own hearts; no person, circumstance, or force can compel us to sin. An opportunity or invitation to sin will produce no result unless it is met with desire, and a willingness to transgress God's commands in order to obtain the thing desired. Only then can an external source of temptation evoke the internal, subjective response of yielding to it.

The progression from desire to sin, and eventually to spiritual death, is a slippery slope (see Gen. 3:6). All desire is not sin, but it becomes so when indulged in beyond the point at which satisfying the desire would mean stepping outside the boundaries of God's revealed will. When that line is crossed, whether in overt deeds or only in the heart, sin takes root and begins to grow. Therefore, we are called to *"abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul"* (1 Pet. 2:11; see Gal. 5:16; Jam. 4:1). Similarly, Proverbs 4:23 cautions, *"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."*

v. 17 **"Every good and perfect gift is from above . . ."** Rather than being the source of temptation or evil, God is in fact the source of every good thing, and of every blessing in our lives. The name "Father of the heavenly lights" is likely a reference to God's providential care over all his creation, including the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14-16; Ps. 136:7-9). Just as he upholds them, so also he sustains us, as well as all plant and animal life, and he reigns over all the forces of nature upon which our lives depend (Job 38:1—39:30).

"who does not change like shifting shadows." Unlike the heavenly bodies, which are in constant change and motion, God is the same from eternity past to eternity future. Neither his character nor his purposes change; He is the timeless "I AM" (Ex. 3:13-14; see Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 6:17). Thus his promises will certainly be fulfilled, and his goodness toward us will never cease.

v. 18 **"He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."** The greatest example of God giving good things is the gift of salvation through his word, the gift of eternal life (Eph. 1:13). Our new birth in Christ, by which we are made a new creation, is only the first of many good things to come in the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; 2 Pet. 3:13).

Unit 3 – Speech and Conduct

James 1:19-27

Text

¹⁹My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away

and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Open

Who in your family tends to be calm and unruffled, cool in a crisis?

Do you consider yourself to be “religious”?

Discover

1. The “word” is central to the message of this passage. What do these verses say about it?

v. 18

v. 22

v. 21

vv. 23-24

2. What do these cross-references reveal about controlling one's temper and tongue?

James 1:19

Proverbs 11:12

Psalms 86:15

Proverbs 17:27

Proverbs 10:19

Titus 1:7

Why is this so important?

James 1:20

James 1:26

3. **Pause for personal application.** Before going on the next question, take a few moments to reflect on times when you have spoken too quickly and regretted it. Ask God to help you guard your tongue more carefully in the future.

4. What does it mean to “accept” the word? (v. 21)

How can we do this?

5. What does it mean to say that the word “can save you” (v. 21)? In what sense is our salvation still future? (see 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; 1 John 3:2; Philippians 1:6)

6. What’s wrong with just “hearing” the word, i.e. reading it, listening to sermons, and doing Bible studies, but not actively putting it into practice in our lives? What do we risk if we do this? (see Luke 7:21-27)

7. Do you think it is possible for someone to be mistaken about whether they are saved? Why or why not? How can we have assurance that we are truly in Christ? (see 2 Cor. 13:5; 1 John 2:3-5; 3:18-24)

8. In light of verses 23-25, what should our spiritual “hygiene” look like? What will be the result?

Apply

What, if anything, surprised you in this passage? What convicted you?

How, specifically, do you plan to respond to what you learned from this portion of Scripture?

Commentary

The verbal link between this passage and the previous one is the reference to the “word of truth” (v. 18). Just as the word of God was instrumental in our spiritual new birth, it is now a guide to which we must listen throughout our life (v. 22); one which will result in the consummation of our salvation in the future (v. 21).

v. 19 **“ . . . Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”**

In contrast to the power and purity of God’s word, man’s words are often ill-considered, overly harsh, and riddled with misunderstanding and half truths. Therefore, we must weigh our words carefully, for what feels like righteous indignation may be nothing more than self-centered bile. Many have demonstrated the truth of the saying, “*speak when you’re angry, and you’ll give the best speech you’ll ever regret*” (Laurence Peter). The immediacy of communications in the modern era presents a special challenge, as it is all too easy to fire off a note without reflection, letting one’s passions dictate the tone and content. Who among us has not regretted hitting the “send” button on an email, a fraction of a second too late?

On the other hand, we should be “quick”, i.e., eager and willing, to hear what others have to say; to consider alternative explanations and points of view. Things are not always as they first appear, and pausing to listen before drawing conclusions can often save us from responding in a way that is destructive to relationships.

Exhortations of a similar nature are found throughout James, suggesting that intemperate speech was an area of sin for the recipients of the letter (see 1:26, 3:1-12, 4:11-12). This is not surprising, since suffering and persecution, if not received with a godly attitude (1:2-3), can easily produce interpersonal conflict and angry outbursts.

This theme is also found throughout Scripture; the ability to master one’s tongue and temper is viewed, not merely as a desirable character trait, but as an indication of spiritual maturity and wisdom. As Proverbs 17:27 teaches:

²⁷ *A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.*

²⁸ *Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.*

(see Ps. 86:15; Prov. 10:19; 11:12; 13:3; 14:29; 16:32; 17:27; 18:7; 19:11; 22:24; 29:22; Eccl. 7:9; Titus 1:7).

v. 20 **“for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”**

In general, anger does not produce God-honoring conduct; it is more frequently

associated with such acts as slander, murder, and bitter quarrels (Mt. 5:21-26; Jam. 4:1-3). Although, in the manner of wisdom literature, this truth is stated without qualification, there are some exceptions (see Mk. 3:5; Mt. 21:12-17). Caution is needed, however, as we tend to be overly generous in applying those exceptions to ourselves.

v. 21 **“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”**

The “therefore” here likely points back to verse 18; i.e., since we have experienced the new birth, we ought to purge from our lives any conduct which is inconsistent with it (compare 1 Pet. 1:23-2:2; also Rom. 6:4-14; 8:11-12; Col. 3:3-9).

The imagery of the phrase “get rid of” (Gr. *apotithemai*) is that of stripping off a set of clothing (see Acts 7:58), and implies that such things are no longer an essential part of us, but something external to be removed and discarded. The injunction to put off those practices which are contrary to a godly lifestyle is common in the New Testament (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Col. 3:8; Heb. 12:1, 1 Pet. 2:1).

This is one of the main themes of James: that to receive or “accept” the word of God requires more than merely agreeing with it intellectually. Active obedience to the word is required; we must do what it says, otherwise, we have not truly accepted it at all, but are only engaged in self-deception (see vv. 22-27). In this case, the response of faith is to purify oneself from the immorality and evil which surround us and suffuse our culture.

Note that for the believer, the word is not merely external, but internal; it has been “**planted**” within us through the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit (see Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 3:3, 16; also Rom. 8:9, 11; 1 Cor. 3:16). Therefore, the command to “accept” it is not a call to conversion, but rather to submit to the ongoing influence of the Spirit as he applies God’s word to our lives (Rom. 8:4-5; Gal. 5:16, 25).

The statement that the word “**can save you**” refers to the future aspect of salvation, our final transformation and glorification at the return of Christ (1 Cor. 15:50-54; 1 Jn. 3:2). Justification is an event in the past, sanctification is both an event (being set apart by God for his purposes) and a process (becoming progressively more like Christ in our daily experience), and glorification is yet to come. Thus, the word of God implanted in our hearts has the power to ensure that the work which God began in us in the past, and which he is now continuing in the present, will certainly be brought to completion in the future (Phil. 1:6; see also Jn. 6:39-40; Rom. 5:9-10; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5, 9).

v. 22 **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”** The danger that James warns against here is insidious and real: that of equating knowledge with life, and theory with reality. What form of self-deception is in view? Convincing ourselves that we know God, when in fact we know only about him; persuading ourselves that we have spiritual life, when we possess only the appearance of it. Such is the condition of those who “listen” to the word, who read, study, discuss, and even preach it, but who fail to submit to it in practice.

This echoes the words of Christ, who said, *“Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and obey it”* (Lk. 11:28), and also, *“My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice”* (Lk. 8:21). Likewise, concerning *“one who hears my words and does not put them into practice”*, Jesus taught that he would be *“like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”* (Lk. 6:49).

To many, the idea that a person can be mistaken about whether they have come to know God is disturbing and hard to accept. And yet the Scriptures are clear that our intuitive judgments concerning even our own spiritual condition are not infallible. Thus, Paul exhorts, *“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.”* (2 Cor. 13:5). What is the test Paul is referring to? It is whether our conduct is consistent with our profession of faith. Likewise, Jesus states (Mt. 7:21-23):

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

Another difficulty for some is that the necessity of obedience in the life of the believer seems to imply that justification is by works, rather than by faith. But this reverses the sequence of events. Our good works do not cause or merit our salvation; only the work of Christ on the cross can do that. Instead, works (i.e. a holy and obedient life) are always the *result* of the salvation which Christ accomplishes for, and in, us. Thus, if a professing Christian is indifferent to the claims of Christ on his or her life, it casts doubt upon the reality of the faith they claim to have.

vv. 23-24 These verses use an analogy to describe how senseless it is for someone to hear the word, but then fail to respond to it by altering their behavior. To look at one’s reflection in a mirror and then forget what one has seen, to walk away without making any adjustment, such as combing one’s hair or adjusting one’s tie, would be pointless. And yet in a spiritual sense, people do this repeatedly. They hear a sermon or read a Bible passage that reveals something about themselves, but choose to ignore it rather than act upon it.

v. 25 **“But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom . . .”**

Since James’ readers were primarily ethnic Jews, one might conclude that he is making reference here to the Old Testament law. However, the Old Testament legal code (*Torah*) is never portrayed in the New Testament as bringing freedom; in fact, just the opposite is true: that law is viewed as an instrument of bondage to sin, from which the “law of the Spirit of life” has set us free (Rom. 7:23-25; 8:2; Gal. 3:23; 5:1).

In the immediate context, the “law that gives freedom” is parallel to “the word” (vv. 22-23). This is the word by which we received the new birth (v. 18), which is able to ensure our salvation (v. 21), and which has been implanted in our hearts (v. 21). Thus, the “law that gives freedom” is the word, or teaching, of Christ, including both his commands and his promises (see 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; Jn. 5:24; 8:51; 2 Pet. 3:2).

The greatest difference between this “law” and the Old Testament legal code is not in their moral content, but in the fact that Christ has now fulfilled all of God’s requirements on our behalf. Christ’s law is “perfect,” i.e., not limited by our weakness; therefore, God’s holy demands can never be a cause for judgment against one who trusts in Christ (Rom. 8:1-4). His word has set us free, free from the power of sin and free from condemnation (Jn. 8:31-36).

v. 26 **“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself . . .”**

This effectively raises the stakes regarding the issue of controlling one’s speech (v. 19); failing to do so not only indicates a lack of wisdom and maturity; but calls into question the validity one’s profession of faith; such a person is deceived (see v. 22) and his religion has no value whatsoever.

v. 27 Here James reinforces the point that true religion consists not merely in holding to a correct set of doctrines, but living in harmony with those doctrines; for example, by caring for the helpless and by striving for moral purity.

Unit 4 – Love for the Poor

James 2:1-13

Text

¹My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.

²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," ^a you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," ^b also said, "Do not murder." ^c If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

^a8 Lev. 19:18 ^b11 Exodus 20:14; Deut. 5:18 ^c11 Exodus 20:13; Deut. 5:17

Open

Have you ever met anyone famous? What were the circumstances?

If you could have dinner with any living person, who would it be and why?

Discover

1. James condemns showing favoritism on the basis of wealth. What are some of the forms that such favoritism might take? Why might people be tempted to give the rich special treatment?

2. Could this prohibition against favoritism be applied to any worldly criteria other than wealth? If so, what?

3. What truth about our identity in Christ is contradicted by the practice of giving special treatment to the wealthy? See Matthew 6:19-20; Luke 18:22; Ephesians 1:18; 3:16; Hebrews 11:26

4. Why would showing favoritism on the basis of wealth or other worldly criteria be contrary to the character of God? See Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Leviticus 19:15; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9

5. What do these passages teach about God's judgments versus man's?

1 Sam. 16:7	Mark 12:41-43
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6. According to these passages, what kind of people does God usually seek after?

Deuteronomy 7:7	Luke 9:48
Judges 6:15	1 Corinthians 1:26-28
1 Samuel 9:17-21	Matthew 11:25
1 Samuel 16:10-13	Luke 6:20

Why do you think this is?

7. What would you say to someone who believes that God will accept them into heaven because they keep all the "important" commandments? (vv. 10-11)

8. What will be the basis of God's judgment on the last day? (vv. 12-13; see Luke 6:49; 9:26; John 12:47-48)

Apply

Think about the people you meet in a typical day. Do you show favoritism to some? How?

How do you typically show respect to people? How do you show disrespect?

Commentary

v. 1 ***“My brothers . . . don’t show favoritism.”***

James now provides a counter-example of the “pure and faultless” religion that God deems acceptable. If caring for the neediest and the most helpless of society, i.e. orphans and widows, was a signal example of doing what the word says (1:25, 27), then the opposite would be giving preferential treatment to the wealthy.

This passage is provocative, because it seems to prohibit making any positive distinction whatsoever based on wealth. If something as relatively minor as offering reserved seating is condemned as “evil” (v. 4) and as a violation of God’s law (v. 9), then what about other practices? Would God consider it appropriate to name a building after a large donor? Would God approve of populating church and ministry governing boards disproportionately with those who give significant sums? Such actions may be justified by arguing that it is not the money itself which is being honored, but rather the donor’s devotion to God, as demonstrated by their financial sacrifice. However, Jesus taught that such judgments reflect man’s standard, not God’s (Mk. 12:41-43; Lk. 21:1-4).

The connection between showing no partiality based on wealth, and our identity as believers in ***“our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”*** may reside in the fact that the splendor and worth of Christ are far greater than any earthly treasure. We have great riches in Christ (Mt. 6:19-20; Lk. 18:22; Eph. 1:18; 3:16; Heb. 11:26), but giving special honor to those who possess worldly goods implies just the opposite: that what really matter are earthly riches. In addition, by making judgments based on externals, we are failing to reflect the character of our God, who does not show favoritism (Deut. 10:17-18; Lev. 19:15; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9).

The term rendered “glorious Lord” could also be translated literally “Lord of Glory,” (see 1 Cor. 2:8). This was a title for God in the Old Testament (Ps. 24:7-10; 29:3; see Acts 7:2), and its use may be an implicit reference to Christ’s deity.

- vv. 2-3 ***“Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.”*** Note that the identification of the wealthy and the poor person are based on their clothing. As God told Samuel, *“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”* (1 Sam. 16:7). Although this precise scenario may be hypothetical, they had apparently been guilty of this kind of behavior, as verse 6, *“But you have insulted the poor”* indicates. Perhaps the discriminatory conduct of which they were actually guilty was subtle, and this example was used to render the injustice more starkly apparent.

“If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes . . .” The point of this example, in which a person of high economic status is given overtly preferential treatment over someone of low status, is that any hierarchy of honor in the church that is based on worldly criteria is odious to God. Unfortunately, it is in the nature of men to create such caste distinctions.

Although James focuses on matters of economic disparity, it does not require a great interpretive leap to apply these principles to race, ethnicity, nationality, and other such characteristics.

v. 4 ***“have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”***

The discrimination, or division, which James refers to could be one of two kinds: either a distinction between rich and poor Christians in the body of Christ, or the interior spiritual division within the person who is guilty of making such judgments, who is vacillating between the value systems of God and the world (see 1:6). The term rendered “thoughts” could also be translated as “motives” or “standards”; in any case, the criteria used to make such distinctions, and the reasons for applying those criteria, are condemned as ungodly.

v. 5 ***“. . . Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”***

Why is it wrong to discriminate in favor of the wealthy and powerful? Because it contradicts God’s own actions. Throughout redemptive history, he has sought, not the high and mighty, but rather the lowly, the outcast, the least and the smallest, to be the recipients of his grace (see Deut. 7:7; Judg. 6:15; 1 Sam. 9:17-21; 16:10-13; Lk. 9:48; 1 Cor. 1:27-28). Thus Paul wrote, *“Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth”* (1 Cor. 1:26; see Mt. 11:25; Lk. 6:20). Does that mean the rich are excluded? No; Paul says “not many,” not “not any”. But it is difficult for those who are rich to enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 19:24), because they tend to be proud and self-sufficient rather than “poor in spirit,” (Mt. 5:3), i.e., humble and needy before God.

vv. 6-7 ***“. . . Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? . . . dragging you into court? . . . slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”***

Although there are obviously many exceptions, the rich as a class are more likely to be hostile to God and to his people. They oppress the poor through their manipulation of the legal system, and they utter blasphemies against Christ while they are doing it. Such conduct is not novel, but is typical of the wicked in every era (Ps. 73:1-12; 94:1-7; Prov. 14:31). All the more reason why they should not be given preferential treatment in the church!

vv. 8-9 ***“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”*** Here is another reason why showing favoritism on the basis of worldly criteria is inconsistent with a profession of faith in Christ, and inconsistent with God’s character and commands: it violates the requirement that we love one another as ourselves. Would we want to be discriminated against, or treated with contempt, because of our economic status? Of course not. Then neither should we treat others in this way.

This passage raises several questions. In what sense is the law “royal”? Some, having in mind Jesus’ response when asked to identify the “greatest commandment” (Mt. 22:36-40), take “royal” as describing an intrinsic quality of the law of love; i.e., that it is the “supreme” or “highest” law. However, in the New Testament passages where this term is used, it has the connotation of belonging to, or coming from, the king (Jn. 4:46, 49; Acts 12:20-21), and that is likely the meaning here. It is “royal” because it comes from God and characterizes his reign and kingdom.

Is the law which is being referred to here a single command, or is it the whole body of God’s ordinances? James makes the point in vv. 10-11 that the law of God is indivisible, so that each individual statute carries the weight and authority of the whole. Also, Jesus teaches in Mt. 22:36-40 that this command is one of those on which “All the Law and the Prophets hang” (see Gal. 5:14). Thus, it is likely that, although the primary reference is to a single command, the entirety of God’s holy requirements are in view.

The more fundamental question is the extent to which Christians are to “keep” the Old Testament Law, to consider it as a rule, or guide for life, in the current dispensation under the new covenant (Heb. 8:13). The question is difficult because, on the one hand, many Scriptures speak of the Old Testament (Mosaic) law as being abolished and cancelled (Eph. 2:15; see Col. 2:14; Heb. 7:18). On the other hand, passages such as this one seem to indicate that at least some Old Testament laws (e.g., Lev. 19:18), continue to have validity.

The answer is that the legal code of the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law, has no validity in the current era *in and of itself*. However, this is not to say that Christians have no “law”, no moral principles or clear statements of right and wrong, to guide them. As Paul states, although he is completely free of the law of Moses, he is still required to obey God’s law (1 Cor. 9:21):

“To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law)”

What does this mean? That under the new covenant, Christians do have a set of rules, or precepts, for conduct: the teachings of Christ and his apostles (Gal. 6:2; 2 Pet. 3:2). It is not the word given through Moses which we must obey, but the word given through Christ (Jn. 14:15, 14:23-24; 15:10, 14). When Christ or his apostles affirm commandments originally given to the ancient Israelites (e.g., Lev. 19:18 / Mt. 22:39), those obligations also apply in the church age; they indicate the kind of life that is consistent with God’s character and kingdom. When Christ reinterprets prior commandments, they remain in force, but in modified form (“You have heard . . . But I tell you”; Mt. 5:21-48). Old Testament laws which are not affirmed or restated in the New Testament are obsolete and no longer in effect. The same holds true for laws which are explicitly abrogated (Mk. 7:14-19; Acts 10:9-16). And finally, when Christ or his apostles deliver a new commandment, that commandment is binding on believers (Jn. 13:34; 1 Jn. 2:7-8).

vv. 10-11 ***“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”*** This is one of the most powerful verses in the Bible to refute those who think that God will accept them because they are better than some others. The truth is that God does not grade on a curve; to violate any of his commands makes us just as guilty as if we had broken every one. We cannot pick and choose the ones we consider to be important or worth keeping; what makes them such is the fact that they come from God and bear his authority. Therefore, to violate any command is to disobey God himself.

vv. 12-13 ***“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom . . .”*** There will be a judgment on the last day, and the basis for that judgment will be the word of Christ, in which freedom is offered to all who repent and believe (Lk. 6:49; 9:26; Jn. 8:47; 12:47-48; see 2 Cor. 5:10). Only those whose conduct validates their claim to faith (including showing mercy to the poor, Mt. 5:7) will themselves be shown mercy (see Jam. 2:14-26); all others will be judged and condemned. When that day comes, no pleadings for leniency or forgiveness will be heard by God. As the author of Hebrews writes, *“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* (Heb. 10:31).

Unit 5 – Faith and Deeds

James 2:14-26

Text

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Was not

our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"^e and he was called God's friend. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

^d20 Some early manuscripts *dead* ^e23 Gen. 15:6

Open

Does your family tell stories of previous generations (e.g., "the time your grandfather did such-and-such")?

If you have children, what stories do you tell them about your own youth and childhood?

Discover

1. In verses 14-16, James asks three rhetorical questions. Restate the questions in your own words, and give the answer to each.

Question	Answer

2. When should someone's claim to have "faith" be received with skepticism, rather than accepted at face value? Why?

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3. What example does James give of empty words that benefit no one? What would you think of someone who acts like this? What would you say their true attitude is? (vv. 15-16)

How is "faith" without works similar to this? (vv. 17, 20, 26)

4. From verse 19, what could you conclude about the value of affirming a creed or statement of faith?

5. When was Abraham first considered righteous? Why? (Gen. 15:1-6)

6. Read Genesis 22:1-18. How did Abraham's faith and actions "work together" in this narrative? How was his faith "made complete" by what he did? (v. 22).

7. What does James conclude that Abraham's actions in Gen. 22 demonstrated? (v. 24) How can this be reconciled with Paul's statement in Rom. 3:28? (See Heb. 11:17-19)

8. Read the story of Rahab in Joshua 2:1-24 and 6:20-25. How was Rahab's faith demonstrated? What was the result? (v. 25; see Heb. 11:31)

Apply

How would you apply James' words to the poor in your own church or community? To Christians in poverty-stricken areas around the world?

In what kinds of "deeds" is your faith typically expressed? Do you think James would consider your faith useful or useless?

Commentary

This passage is the most theologically significant, and the most controversial, portion of James' epistle. Why? Because many, including Luther, have mistakenly read it as advocating a view of faith and works which contradicts that of the apostle Paul. In fact, however, James and Paul are not in opposition, but are addressing different issues.

The question James is concerned with is whether authentic faith can be separated from a life of obedience to God. Is it possible for one to have experienced the new birth, repented of one's sins, and embraced Christ as Savior, and yet continue to live just as before, with no essential change in conduct, speech, attitudes, motives, and desires? Is it possible to possess a genuine faith which exerts no transformative influence on one's behavior? James' answer is a resounding "No!" Such a separation between faith and works is contrary to the very nature of a living, saving faith, and therefore cannot exist; it is a purely imaginary concept.

To be clear: James is not arguing that works must be *added* to faith in order to accomplish salvation. Nor is he arguing that works *in and of themselves* have saving power. Instead, he is teaching that works are the necessary and inevitable consequence of a faith that goes beyond mere intellectual assent; just as a tree's visible fruit testifies to the life within it (see Lk. 6:44).

- v. 14 **"... if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds"** Note that James does not say this person "has" faith, but that he "claims to have" faith. James refuses to accept at face value this profession of faith, but instead views it as something doubtful which must be examined.

Note also that the person being described has "no" deeds. James is not concerned here with the relative quantity or quality of one's works; rather, he is dealing with a person who considers themselves to be in the faith, but whose life gives no evidence whatsoever of regeneration.

The term rendered "deeds" ("works" in some translations) is neutral; it can have either a negative connotation (Jn. 3:19-20; Rom. 13:12), or a positive one (Mt. 5:16), depending on the context. Here it refers generally to actions taken in obedience to God's word (see 1:22).

"What good is it . . . ? Can such faith save him?" Can the kind of faith just described (i.e. one which does not produce works) save anyone? The question is rhetorical; it expects the response "no".

Some, in an attempt to safeguard the doctrine of salvation by faith, have argued that "save" refers only to escaping some earthly peril. And in fact the Greek word, *sōzō*, likely has this meaning in 5:15, where it is rendered, "will make well"; i.e.

will save from illness. However, in the immediate context it is clearly the eternal salvation of our souls which is in view (1:21; see 4:12; 5:20).

- vv. 15-16 **"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food."** James now provides another example of the kind of works that give evidence of genuine faith: caring for the basic physical needs of other believers who are in poverty (see 1:27). Perhaps he has in mind Christ's teaching that failing to do so reveals a self-condemning lack of love, not only for the poor, but for Christ himself (Mt. 25:41-46).

However, that idea is only implicit here; James' main point is the uselessness and hypocrisy of offering mere words of comfort, when what is actually needed is to take action to relieve suffering. And in fact, the speaker's inaction belies his words and calls into question their sincerity. Does a person who wishes others well, while refusing to lift a finger to help them, genuinely care for their welfare? No. His pious words are not only ineffectual, they are false. Perhaps they represent his desire to think of himself as a caring person, or perhaps they are an attempt to induce the poor person to "move along" so that their inconvenient need can be put out of sight and out of mind. But of all the things such empty words could represent, true love and concern are not on the list of possibilities (see 1 Jn. 3:17-18).

- v. 17 **"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."**

James now applies the prior example: any so-called faith which does not produce the fruit of active obedience to God is likewise "dead". It is barren in both an external and internal sense: not only does it produce no benefit to anyone, but it fails to do so because it is without life; it is inherently defective. Therefore, it is inauthentic and false (see vv. 14, 20, 26).

- v. 18 Here, with the phrase, **"But someone will say"** James invents a debating partner as a rhetorical device to carry forward his argument. The difficulty is in knowing where the words of this imaginary disputant end and where James' response begins, since there are no quotation marks in the Greek text. In addition, it is unclear who the "you" and "I" refer to, since the opponent, "I", seems to be agreeing with James' view.

One solution is to understand the pronouns "You" and "I", not as referring specifically to James and the imaginary speaker, but as indicating two persons in general; i.e., "One person has faith, and another person has deeds. Both are equally valid options for a believer". In response to this, James issues a challenge: can you prove the validity of your faith-without-deeds? No. But I, James, can demonstrate my faith, through my deeds.

v. 19 **“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”** In verses 14-18 James dealt with one kind of false “faith” – one which produces no deeds. Now he addresses another kind of so-called faith: mere intellectual assent, or agreement with a set of theological propositions. Even the demons believe what is fundamentally true about God, i.e., that there are not many gods, but only one (Deut. 6:4; Mk. 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:4-6). And yet it does them no good; they are still condemned to eternal torment, and they tremble in fear at that knowledge (Mt. 8:29; 25:41). Likewise, for someone to recite and believe the Apostle’s Creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, or any other statement of doctrine, is not in itself sufficient for saving faith.

v. 20 **“You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?”** In the style of an ancient form of rhetoric known as *diatribe*, James questions the “someone” with whom he is conducting his dialogue, a kind of verbal shadow-boxing. The word translated “foolish” means literally, “empty”; the person who continues to maintain the validity of faith-without-works is not only empty-headed, but “empty” in a spiritual sense; i.e., lacking in true saving faith.

The term “useless” makes a play on words. In Greek, the word is *argos*, which combines the words “not” and “working” (*a + ergos*). So a faith without works “doesn’t work,” i.e., it is useless.

vv. 21-24 **“Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?”** For Jewish Christians, there could be no more powerful example than Abraham. Not only was he the physical progenitor of the Jewish race, but he is also the spiritual father of all, both Jew and Gentile, who share in his faith (Rom. 4:11-17; Gal. 3:7, 16-17; Heb. 2:16). Abraham was revered by Jews as a man of great righteousness, and his obedience when commanded to offer Isaac as a sacrificial offering (Gen. 22) was viewed as the supreme example of his faithfulness to God.

These verses pose a difficulty, since another translation of the term rendered “considered righteous” is “justified,” and Paul quotes Gen. 15:6 to prove that it was Abraham’s faith, rather than his works, which was “credited to him as righteousness” (Gal. 3:6; see Rom. 3:28; 4:1-9). To resolve this, we must realize that Paul and James are using the terms “faith,” “works” and “justify” in different ways, and with different purposes.

For Paul, the justification in view is primarily legal, or forensic; he is concerned with the question of how a sinful man can stand before the judgment seat of God and receive a verdict of “not guilty”. The works which he rejects as having no saving value are “works of the law”, i.e., acts done in compliance with Torah, in order to merit God’s favor. And the faith which he views as the sole grounds for God’s pronouncement of “righteous” is a genuine faith, one that involves repentance from sin, and embracing Christ in his words and his works.

For James, however, the question is different: what constitutes genuine faith? His answer is that a “faith” which produces no works, or which consists only of cognitive assent, is not really faith at all. The works he has in mind do not earn salvation, but rather confirm the authenticity of one’s faith. Therefore, to be pronounced righteous, or justified, on the basis of these works is not to assert that they have saving value in and of themselves, but rather to see them as demonstrating the validity of the faith which produced them. And so Abraham was considered righteous, or justified, not on the basis of the offering of Isaac in itself, but on the basis of his faith (Gen. 15:6), a faith to which that act of sacrifice gave irrefutable proof. His faith was confirmed, and thus he was vindicated as righteous, by this “work” (Heb. 11:17-19).

It is worth noting that Paul also insisted on the necessity of works as confirming one’s profession of faith (see Titus 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:3; Gal. 5:6).

vv. 22-23 **“You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”** Abraham’s faith, and the actions which revealed it, were not in opposition, but cooperated with one another. This is not *synergism*, in which faith and works both are viewed as contributing to salvation; rather, works are the natural expression and fulfillment of saving faith. Thus the faith of Abraham, on the basis of which he was graciously declared righteous (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3-5), was confirmed by the later offering of Isaac, which brought that faith to fruition (see Gen. 22:12).

v. 24 **“You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”** This is true for the simple reason that the “faith alone” which James is referring to (i.e., “faith” which stands by itself with no accompanying works) is not true faith at all, but an impostor. As the Reformation slogan puts it, “faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone”.

Unit 6 – Control of the Tongue

James 3:1-12

Text

¹Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

⁵Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the

whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt^f water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

^f11 Greek bitter (see also verse 14)

Open

What pets have you had in our life? Which were your favorites?

Have you every been responsible for any animals? How easy or difficult were they to control?

Discover

1. Major theme: Throughout the book of James, our words are implicated in many of the ills which undermine spiritual life and threaten the peace of the community. What kinds of unrighteous speech do these verses address?

1:13

2:3

2:14, 18

2:16

3:14

4:11

4:13-16

5:9

5:12

2. What does Christ teach about the significance of our words?

Matthew 12:34-35

Matthew 12:36-37

Matthew 15:11, 16-20

3. What examples does James give to illustrate the power of the tongue? Restate them in your own words.

4. According to James, is the power of our words a positive or negative force? Why?

5. What inconsistency is James pointing out in verses 9-12? What illustrations does he use to make his point? (compare with Matthew 7:16-18)

6. According to this passage, what is one qualification for someone who aspires to teach others? (v. 2) Why is this a criteria (i.e., what does it reveal)?

Why should we be cautious about taking on the responsibility of teaching?

Apply

Are you currently involved in any kind of teaching ministry? Do you need to reassess whether you should be?

After reading this passage, what about your own speech is most in need of correction?

Commentary

James now returns to the theme of controlling one's speech, first introduced in chapter one: "If anyone . . . does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." (1:26; see 1:19). In the previous section, the link between faith and actions was examined. Here, the significance of one kind of action is stressed: the use of words for good or evil. This focus on speech echoes James' exhortation that his readers both "speak and act" according to the law of freedom (2:12).

Throughout the book, unrighteous speech is implicated in many of the ills which undermine spiritual life and threaten the peace of the community, i.e., falsely identifying God as the source of temptation (1:13), speaking differently to the rich and poor (2:3), claiming to have faith without deeds (2:14, 18), offering empty words to those in need (2:16), boasting and denying the truth (3:14), slandering other believers (4:11), making presumptuous statements about the future (4:13-16), grumbling against one another (5:9), and taking oaths (5:12). Controlling the source of these evils, the tongue, is critical to our life in Christ, both as individuals and as a body.

Note that Christ also identified our words as having great significance: we will have to answer for "every careless word" on the day of judgment, and will be condemned or acquitted on their account (Mt. 12:36-37). This is because our words reveal what is in our hearts (Mt. 12:34-35).

v. 1 **"Not many of you should presume to be teachers . . . we who teach will be judged more strictly."** This sobering warning is directed to those who aspire to a ministry involving writing, public speaking, or private instruction. They will be judged "more strictly," meaning that they will be held to a higher standard, or that the consequences for failing to meet that standard will be more severe, or both (see Mk. 12:38-40; Lk. 12:48; 1 Cor. 3:10-15). The reason for this is implied in vv. 2-6: because of the great power of words, those who wield them can accomplish much good—or can cause much mischief and confusion. Thus, teachers of all kinds incur a grave responsibility every time they open their mouths or take up a pen. Those who seek such a position prematurely, perhaps for its perceived status or honor, would be well advised to wait until their moral, spiritual, and intellectual maturity have rendered them fully qualified (see v. 2).

Note that the responsibility in view is to ensure, not merely that one's teaching is faithful to God's Word (Acts. 20:26-27), but that one's life is faithful to the Word as well (see 1:22). C.H. Spurgeon, in "Lectures to My Students" writes of a pastor who,

"preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said that he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again".

Such a disparity between teaching and living is anathema to the spirit of this passage.

v. 2 **"We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."** This verse helps to explain the previous warning:

because the tongue is so difficult to control, it is almost inevitable that we will sin in our speech from time to time (see Prov. 10:19). Therefore, a person whose words do not exhibit this tendency, but whose speech is consistently temperate and appropriate, demonstrates the ability to govern, not only his speaking, but the rest of his conduct as well. Such a person is spiritually mature, i.e., "perfect". Note that this word (Gr. *teleios*) can mean either "flawless", or "complete, fully developed". In this case, the note that "we all stumble" indicates that the second meaning rather than the first is in view.

vv. 3-5a In both of the examples James uses, the tremendous discrepancy between the size of the thing being controlled (a horse, a ship) and the size of the controlling instrument (a bit, a rudder) testifies to the incredible power which the smaller item must possess in order to effectively direct the larger. In the second case, it is not only the great size of the ship itself, but the strength of the winds directed against it, which the rudder is able to control and direct. In the same way, a small part of our body, the tongue, can boast of having an impact on our lives which is far out of proportion to its relative size.

v. 5b-6a **"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire"** James reinforces his point with another illustration of something small, i.e. a tiny flame, having an effect greatly disproportionate to its size, setting off a conflagration that may consume thousands of acres of vegetation. While the prior examples were neutral, this one is negative, carrying the implication, not merely of outsized power, but of power which is greatly destructive. Likewise, our words, if allowed to rage out of control, have the potential to create disastrous and far-reaching consequences.

This comparison is not unique to James; the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo expressed a similar idea: "nothing escapes desire . . . like a flame in the forest, it spreads abroad and consumes and destroys everything." [*On the Decalogue* 173].

v. 6b **“. . . a world of evil among the parts of the body.”** Throughout James (1:27; 4:4), the term “world” (Gr. *kosmos*) has a negative connotation, indicating not merely the created order, but creation in its fallen state, ruined by sin and (temporarily) controlled by ungodly forces (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2; 6:12; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Jn. 4:4; 5:19). Here, James identifies the tongue with that “world”: as if possessing a will of its own, it resides within us as the embodiment and instrument of that corrupt world system (compare with Paul’s personification of sin in Rom. 7:8-20).

“It corrupts the whole person . . .”

The word translated “corrupts” means literally, “stains” (see Jude 23; also Jam. 1:27 [ESV], “unstained”); like a dye, sin infiltrates and deeply colors every part of our being, and here the tongue is the conduit through which it flows. Only the work of Christ can permanently and fully remove this stain (Eph. 5:27).

“. . . sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” The destruction wrought by sin is not only internal, but external: after it stains and corrupts our inward thoughts, desires, motives, judgments, and beliefs, it inevitably proceeds outward to the ruination of every aspect of our lives, including our relationships with people and with God (see Prov. 26:28).

The energy which kindles and fans this flame comes from hell and from those destined for hell; i.e., Satan and his demons (Mt. 25:41; 2 Pet. 2:4). The term rendered “hell” is *Gehenna*; the name comes from the valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem. In this valley, children were sacrificed to the false god Moloch and their bodies burned (2 Ki. 16:3; 21:6). Prophetic warnings of judgment for these practices resulted in the association of Gehenna with eternal punishment (see 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 7:32; 19:6; 32:35; Mt. 5:22, 29-30; 8:12; 10:28; 18:9; Mk. 9:43; Lk. 16:23). In addition, the use of this valley in New Testament times, as a garbage dump where refuse was continually burning, provided a visual illustration of the fiery torments of eternal damnation.

Thus, the source of the tongue’s consuming and destructive force is also the place to which the uncontrolled use of the tongue ultimately leads.

vv. 7-8 **“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.”**

This is a restatement and expansion of the idea that the tongue is extremely difficult to bring under control. In contrast to mankind’s mastery over creation; i.e.

“all kinds” of animals (see Gen. 1:26), he cannot completely subdue the unruly and hell-inflamed tongue.

“It is a restless evil . . .” The word translated “restless,” is used in 1:8 to describe someone who is double-minded and *unstable*. The image there is of a person who is never at peace, but always in flux, his loyalties alternating between God and the world. Likewise, the untamed tongue is unable to find peace or rest; it is continually going from one thing to another, wreaking havoc wherever it passes.

The imagery of the tongue as “**full of deadly poison**” brings to mind the serpent (Ps. 58:4; 140:3), an animal associated with sin, judgment, and death (Gen. 3:1-14; Num. 21:6; Jer. 8:17; Rev. 12:9-15; 20:2).

vv. 9-12 **“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.”**

James now returns to his theme of the man who is double-minded (and double-tongued), who is trying to follow both God and the world. Here, he makes the point that using the same tongue for both praise and cursing is inconsistent and nonsensical. It is just as contrary to God’s design as a spring which produces both salt water and fresh water, or a tree which produces fruit of a different kind than itself. And in fact, such a thing does not happen in nature; plants reproduce according to their kind (Mt. 7:16, 18).

Consider a church service, in which those who claim Christ as Savior come together to worship him with the “fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb. 13:15), and then, once the service is over, turn to savaging one another with their words. How foolish this is! How it grieves the Spirit of God! And yet, sadly, how common as well.

Note that the contrasting opposites of blessing and cursing both concern our response to God. By praising God, we exalt Him. But by cursing men (contrary to the command of Christ, Lk. 6:28; Rom. 12:14), we are in effect cursing God’s likeness. Such conduct is inconsistent with a genuine love for, and worship of, God.

One is reminded of Jesus’ teaching that it is not what goes into a person’s mouth (i.e. what he eats) that causes spiritual defilement, but what comes out of it (Mt. 15:11, 16-20). Let us therefore exercise care, lest we corrupt ourselves by what proceeds from our mouths.

Unit 7 – True Wisdom and Humility

James 3:13-4:3

Text

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

¹⁴But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving,

considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

¹What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.

You do not have, because you do not ask God.

³When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Open

What would you identify as the most common characteristics of our national political leaders? Would you regard them as "wise"? Why or why not?

How would you describe a person who is "wise"?

Discover

1. According to this passage, how can we judge whether someone possesses genuine wisdom? (v. 13; see Mt. 11:19; Prov. 2:20)

2. Where does this wisdom come from? (v. 17)

3. What does it look like; i.e., what are its characteristics? (see vv. 17-18; paraphrase each one in your own words)

4. What is its result? (v. 18)

5. What is the opposite of true wisdom? (v. 14; see 2 Cor. 10:12)

6. Where does this wisdom come from? (v. 15)

7. What does it look like; i.e., what are its characteristics? (see vv. 14-16)

8. What is its result? (v. 16; vv.1-3; see also 1 Cor. 1:11-12)

9. What does this passage tell us about possible reasons for unanswered prayer? (vv. 2-3)

10. What do these verses reveal about the principle of sowing and reaping?

James 3:18	Hosea 8:7
Job 4:8	Hosea 10:12
Proverbs 11:18	2 Corinthians 9:6
Proverbs 22:8	Galatians 6:7-8

Apply

As you examine your own heart and life in light of this passage, do you possess true wisdom? Why or why not? Do you need to make any changes?

Who do you look up to as an example or inspiration? Do they exhibit true wisdom? Why or why not?

Commentary

The key topic in this portion of the letter is the havoc which jealousy and envy can stir up in a body of believers. From the tone of James' admonitions, it appears that a struggle for dominance, or at least prominence, had afflicted the communities to which he was writing. Along with this unseemly ambition came boasting and contention. Those who presumptuously sought the role of teacher (3:1) exemplified this self-promoting ethos.

Why is this so poisonous to church life? Because it is a zero-sum game; if one is to "win," others must lose. Thus it creates divisions and a partisan spirit (as at Corinth, 1 Cor. 1:11-12). The antidote? To reject the world's view of significance, power, and control, and to embrace instead a kingdom ethic, one characterized by peace, submission, and prayer. In such a church, wisdom will not be something that is loudly claimed, but quietly demonstrated; likewise, influence will be gained through a holy life rather than power plays or political maneuvering. Most importantly, Jesus Christ, rather than any of his servants, will receive all the honor, glory, and praise.

- v. 13 ***"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."*** James begins by directly addressing those in the community who have, in their own estimation, attained to a superior degree of spiritual insight and discernment. As in the previous discussion of faith (2:14-26), he challenges them not to claim wisdom, but to **"show it"**.

Here, one can imagine James' readers boastfully taking up the challenge. "Sure, I'll show you! Listen to this!" But confounding their expectations, he insists that they cannot do this through eloquence of speech, nor by demonstrating a mastery of Greek verb tenses, nor by expounding on church history and doctrine. In short, not by doing anything which might glorify or exalt themselves. Rather, they must prove the genuineness of their wisdom by the manner in which they live (see Mt. 11:19, "*wisdom is proved right by her actions*").

In contrast to the values of this fallen world, in which prideful arrogance and self-assertiveness are respected, God's word presents a different view, that "with humility comes wisdom" (Prov. 11:2). What are deeds **"done in the humility that comes from wisdom?"** They are works done for the purpose of serving God and serving others, rather than bringing attention to ourselves or advancing our own interests (Mt. 6:1-18; 23:5-7). They are works which display a willingness to abase oneself for the good of others, rather than an attitude which deigns to serve only in ways we deem consistent with an exalted view of ourselves (see Lk. 22:27).

Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet (Jn. 13:1-14) is a striking example of this kind of humble service. But even greater were his acts of humility at the beginning and end of his life, taking on "*the very nature of a servant*" in becoming man, and then submitting to the ultimate human indignity, crucifixion. He willingly accepted the death of a common criminal in place of, and on behalf of, sinners (Phil. 2:5-8; 2 Cor. 5:21). Such deeds, which seem foolish to the world, in fact display a wisdom that is beyond the world's understanding (1 Cor. 1:18).

- v. 14 ***"But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth."*** The meaning of this statement is clearer if the word "or" is translated "and" (as in NASB, ESV). The logic is as follows: Humility is essential to true wisdom. To boast, then, about one's wisdom, one's spiritual attainments, or one's qualifications for church leadership is to speak falsehood, because the act of boasting is self-refuting. In other words, to boast that one is wise proves that one is not wise at all!

The apostle Paul understood that comparing oneself to others is unwise (2 Cor. 10:12), and was therefore reluctant to tout his own qualifications for leadership. He did so when the gospel message itself was being attacked by association (2 Cor. 11:3), but even then, he found such self-commendation to be repugnant, as seen in 2 Cor. 10:7-12:21: "*In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool*", 11:17; "*Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on*", 12:1; "*I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it*", 12:11).

For a Christian, the only kind of boasting which is appropriate is that which exalts God, i.e., which praises the person and works of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Father (2 Cor. 10:17; see Jer. 9:23-24). Unfortunately, such is the perversity of the human heart that even some Christian "testimonies" manage to put self on center stage.

- v. 15 ***"Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil."*** There is a kind of so-called wisdom which is available to those who do not know or serve God: skill in "getting ahead;" savvy in gaining for oneself power, prestige, and possessions. That kind of wisdom is valued and sought by the world. But it is fundamentally proud and thus opposed to God (Jam. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). It does not proceed from Him, but is instead characteristic of Satan (see Ezek. 28:12-17; Isa. 14:12-14). It is not that God desires us to be naïve; but as Jesus instructed his disciples, we are to be "shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Mt. 10:16).

- v. 16 **“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”** James condemns these qualities, not only because they are contrary to the character of God, but because they have predictable and highly destructive effects on the community.
- The word translated “disorder” is used also of “revolutions” (Lk. 21:9) and “riots” (2 Cor. 6:5). In addition, in 2 Cor. 12:20, it is associated with “*quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance*”. Which is to say that this is no trivial matter. A church in which the people, or even worse, the leaders, are driven by private agendas will continually be in a state of low-grade conflict which periodically erupts into open warfare (4:1-2).
- James’ prediction that the result will be “every evil practice” further drives home the point; when those who profess Christ are animated by self-interest, any kind of wickedness is possible, even murder (4:2). Given the consequences James warns of, there can be no question as to the importance of God’s people diligently guarding their tongues and their hearts. It is a short path from one harsh word or one selfish act to a place where the church is convulsed with destructive controversy and becomes utterly ineffective in its gospel mission.
- v. 17 **“the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”** Here James provides very useful criteria for evaluating the source of any so-called wisdom: what results does it produce in the lives of those who possess it? True wisdom does not consist of the ability to craft fine arguments or inspire ardent followers; rather, it reveals itself in a life which reflects the character of God (v. 13).
- Note the similarity between these characteristics and those identified by Paul as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), reinforcing the point that this wisdom is “from heaven” (i.e. from God); it is not natural or innate, but comes from the Spirit of God living within us. Therefore, we must go to Him if we desire it (1:5).
- Are there times when controversy is unavoidable, in order to maintain the doctrinal and moral purity of the church? Yes, Paul’s letters provide many examples of this. But the ultimate goal must always be peace and reconciliation rather than “victory”, and submission to God rather than to any human being. In addition, the conflict must be joined reluctantly, with an abundance of caution regarding one’s own heart and motives (Gal. 6:1). Wisdom from God is certainly needed in making such judgments.
- v. 18 The result of such a life, dedicated to peace rather than self-advancement, is righteousness, both in the individual and in the community. This is an example of the law of “sowing and reaping” which is found throughout the Scriptures (Job 4:8; Prov. 11:18; 22:8; Hos. 8:7; 10:12; 2 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 6:7-8).
- v. 1 **“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”** The question here is whether the “fights” and “quarrels” involved physical violence, or whether these are metaphorical descriptions of verbal and political struggles. The word translated “fights” (*polemoi*) refers to literal warfare almost exclusively (see Mk. 13:7; Lk. 14:31; 21:9; Heb. 11:34; Rev. 9:7). The term “quarrels” (*macha*) is used of verbal disputes (2 Tim. 2:23; Tit. 3:9), but it can also denote physical struggles (2 Cor. 7:5, “conflicts on the outside”). Therefore, although not conclusive, the lexical evidence points to a literal, physical meaning, or perhaps to some mix of physical and verbal disputes. Although difficult for us to imagine, the religious and political world of the first century was volatile, and it is not inconceivable that such cultural violence had made its way into the church.
- In any case, James is more concerned with the cause of strife in the church than in the specific forms it was taking, and he assigns the responsibility for it to sin in the heart of the individual, rather than to the influence of society or any external spiritual force (see 1:13-15; also 1 Pet. 2:11). It is “desire” (*hēdonē*), not in the neutral sense of the term, but as a grasping, selfish urge for personal pleasure and power (see Lk. 8:14; Tit. 3:3; 2 Pet. 2:13), that is the cause.
- vv. 2-3 The sense of this verse is better rendered, “*You want something but don’t get it, [so] you kill. You covet, but you cannot have what you want, [so] you quarrel and fight.*” This makes clear that the external conflicts are the result of internal desire and coveting, and is more consistent with the previous verse.
- As for the assertion that they “kill,” most interpreters reject the normal, literal meaning of the word, on the grounds that if actual murders were taking place, James would have said much more about them. If this is true, then James is listing murder as the (hypothetical) end result of the conflicts in which they were engaged. Rather than seeking wisdom and influence from God, they were seeking power by worldly means and for selfish purposes. The ultimate end of such an approach is death.

Unit 8 – The World or God?

James 4:4-12

Text

⁴You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁹⁶But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

*"God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble."*

⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change

your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

¹¹Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

⁹5 Or that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us; or that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously ⁶6 Prov. 3:34

Open

What do you value in a friend?

Do you stay in contact with friends from high school? College? Other places you've lived? If so, how?

Discover

1. James uses a harsh phrase, "you adulterous people" (literally, "you adulteresses") to describe the recipients of this letter. What is he communicating by the use of this term? (v. 4; see Jeremiah 3:1-25)

2. Review the letter so far. What in James' previous words would support the accusation of "adultery"?

3. What does it mean to be "friends" with the world? (v. 4; see 1 John 2:15-17)

4. Why is it impossible to be "friends" with both God and the world? (see Exodus 34:14; Matthew 6:24)

5. What do these verses tell us about God's attitude toward the proud versus the humble?

Psalm 18:27	Psalm 72:4
Psalm 34:1-3	Psalm 101:5
Psalm 51:17	Proverbs 3:34

6. How does one "resist the devil"? What does it mean to "submit" to God? How are they related? (v. 7)

7. What do these passages indicate about why Satan must "flee" when we resist him?

1 John 4:4	Luke 10:17
Matthew 4:10-11	John 12:31
Matthew 8:28-32	Revelation 20:10

8. What is the appropriate response to the realization that we have been unfaithful to God? (vv. 8-10; see Joel 2:12; 1 Corinthians 5:2; 2 Corinthians 7:10).

9. What reasons does James give as to why we should not speak against one another? (vv. 11-12)

Apply

Would you say that you treat God as a friend?

Looking back over the past week, was your conduct more indicative of humility or pride?

Commentary

v. 4 **“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?”** James now dramatically intensifies his indictment of his readers, labeling them “sinners”, “double-minded” (v. 8), and here, literally, “adulteresses”. Their worldly practices and attitudes — their proud, selfish ambition, their divisive speech, their discriminatory treatment of the poor versus the rich — all give ample cause for James to accuse them of being spiritually unfaithful to God. His point is clear: they cannot be joined in a relationship with God while also engaging in dalliances with the world. The two are opposed to one another; there is no middle ground between them.

The term “adulteress” harkens back to Old Testament passages which describe the relationship between God and his people as a marriage, with God as the husband (Isa. 54:5-6; 57:3; Jer. 3:14, 20; 31:32; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 2:2-23). This imagery is taken up in the New Testament as well (Jn. 3:29; Eph. 5:31-32; Rev. 21:2). Just as it would be impossible for a wife to be considered faithful to her husband while consorting with other lovers, so the people of God should not imagine that they can be faithful to him while seeking and serving the things of the world (see Mt. 6:24; 1 Jn. 2:15-17).

The people James was writing to had not overtly abandoned their profession of faith in Christ; they were simply drifting away from a pure and undivided devotion to him as they responded to the seductive enticements of the world (see Heb. 2:1; 2 Cor. 11:1-3). And yet James makes clear that this spiritual compromise is not merely a dilution of their commitment to Christ, but a betrayal of it. They are like a philandering spouse, who seeks to enjoy both the benefits of marriage and the illicit pleasures of infidelity, while deluding herself into thinking that she still loves her husband “in her way”. But God will not be made a cuckold.

v. 5 **“Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?”** This is a difficult verse to translate. As rendered by the NIV, it is a warning against the sin of envy. This is supported by the usage of the Greek word for “envy” (*phthonos*), which in the New Testament is always negative and refers to human beings. However, the verse could also be read as a description of God’s holy jealousy for his people, as in the ESV: “*He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us*”. In the context, following verse 4 in which God demands that his people be wholly and exclusively devoted to Him, this translation seems the more likely.

In that case, the “Scripture” to which James refers would be those passages which speak of God’s jealousy (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 32:16; Josh.

24:19; Ps. 78:58; 79:5; Zech. 8:2). Likewise, the “spirit” for which God yearns would likely be the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:22; 2 Tim. 1:14), although it could also refer to the spirit of life which God breathed into man (Gen. 2:7).

v. 6 **“But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”**

The Scripture quoted here is Prov. 3:34 (see 1 Pet. 5:5). God’s opposition to the proud and his support for the humble is a common theme in the Old Testament (Ps. 18:27; 34:18; 51:17; 72:4; 101:5; 138:6; Prov. 6:16-17; Isa. 61:1; Zeph 3:11-12).

The point of this verse, consistent with the interpretation previously taken of v. 5, is that, although our God is a jealous God who demands fidelity from his people, he himself supplies the grace that we need to remain faithful to him. That grace is available to the humble, i.e., those who acknowledge their need of help rather than proudly seeking to make their own way.

v. 7 **“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”**

This paragraph (vv. 7-10) is bookended by similar injunctions. The exhortation to submit to God in verse 7 is echoed by verse 10, “*humble yourselves before the Lord*”. Marking the end points of a literary unit in this way, by verbal or conceptual parallelism, is called *inclusio*. In these four verses, we see a thematic unity in the commands which delineate what it means to submit to God. The passage is very similar to 1 Pet. 5:5-9, indicating perhaps that one of these writings was known to the other author, or that both were drawing on a common early Christian teaching.

What does it mean to “submit”? The essence of this response to God is not passivity, but obedience. It can take several forms: restraining oneself from sin; actively undertaking to do good or oppose evil; or standing firm against an opponent of the gospel, such as Satan. In every case, the key element is yielding to God and to his word, rather than acting on one’s own initiative or according to one’s own independent judgment. Even Christ did not do that, but willingly yielded to the Father’s authority (Mt. 26:39; Jn. 5:19, 36; 7:28; 8:28, 42; 12:49-50; 14:28, 31; 15:10).

Note that submitting to God and resisting the devil are effectively two sides of the same coin. It is Satan’s desire to stir up conflict and discord among the people of God, and to provoke them individually to pride and selfishness, among other acts of disobedience. Thus, by seeking grace from God to avoid these things (v. 6), we are drawing near to him (v. 8) and at the same time actively rejecting the work that the devil seeks to accomplish in and through us.

v. 8 **“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.”** In the previous verse, the command to resist Satan was joined with a promise: that as a result, he would “flee” from us; that is, would abandon the field of battle in view of God’s far superior power and authority (1 Jn. 4:4; see Mt. 4:10-11; 8:28-32; Lk. 10:17; Jn. 12:31; Rev. 20:10). Here, the command to draw near to God is similarly linked with a promise, that as we approach him, we will find him already extending himself to us, just as the prodigal son found his father joyfully running to greet him when he returned home (Lk. 15:17-20). In fact, the Scriptures tell us that even our decision to approach God is a response to the work he is already doing in our lives to draw us to himself (Jn. 6:44, 65).

The second part of the verse makes clear that repentance is an essential part of approaching God; he will not receive those who are unwilling to leave behind the sinful practices of the world, nor will he tolerate the “double-minded,” those who seek to keep a foot in both camps. Note that both our external actions and internal attitudes need to be cleansed, both our “hands” and our “hearts”. God is not interested in a pharisaical pretense of piety which appears righteous, but which conceals the stench of spiritual corruption (Mt. 23:27).

v. 9 **“Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.”** This command seems in conflict with Scriptures which exhort us to do just the opposite; e.g., *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* (Phil. 4:4; see Ps. 100:2; Mt. 5:12; Rom. 5:2, 11; Phil. 3:1; 1 Thess. 5:16). To the modern Christian, James’ words seem oddly morose. Isn’t happiness a right, even an obligation, for a Christian? Didn’t C.S. Lewis write, *“It is a Christian duty, as you know, for everyone to be as happy as he can.”*¹

Yet the Scriptures also teach that there is *“a time for everything . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance”* (Eccl. 3:4). One of the times for mourning is when we realize that we have sinned against God. Yes, there will again be rejoicing, but it will be on the other side of a repentance which includes grief, sorrow, and perhaps even tears of remorse (see Joel 2:12; 1 Cor. 5:2; 2 Cor. 7:10). But better that we should grieve and mourn now, than at the last judgment, when it will be too late (Lk. 6:25; Mt. 13:40-42).

v. 10 **“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”** Two points can be made from this brief aphorism. First, that our God is personal, and not some remote deity, gazing upon us from afar with bemusement or bland indifference. He interacts with us; he appeals to us; he responds to what we say and do.

Second, that God desires we be exalted, but on his terms and in his time. His eternal plan for us is not abasement, but sharing in the glory of Christ (Rom. 8:17; Col. 3:4; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Tim. 2:10; 1 Pet. 5:1). However, authentic, lasting glory does not come from man, but from God. If we exalt ourselves, or seek glory from men, as the pharisees, scribes, and hypocrites did (Mt. 6:2; 23:6; Lk. 20:46; Jn. 5:4), we are in effect saying the opposite: that what truly matters is not the opinion of God, or the power of God, or the glory of God, but the opinions, power, and glory of mankind. This is an affront to God and a form of false worship, exalting the creature over the Creator (Rom. 1:23).

Therefore, God has promised to exalt, not those who presumptuously or prematurely seek glory from men in this life, but those who look to what God has promised in the next (Prov. 29:23; Mt. 23:12; Lk. 14:1-11; 18:9-14; 1 Pet. 5:6). Such an attitude of faith will naturally be reflected in a willingness to forego temporal status and honor, and indeed, to accept whatever position in life God may be pleased to grant us.

vv. 11-12 **“Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.”** Seeking glory for oneself inevitably leads to criticizing and judging others, because honor among men is relative. If one is to be raised up, others must be diminished in comparison (2 Cor. 10:12). For the worldly person, what matters is not merely whether they are honored, but whether they are more honored than their contemporaries (see 1 Sam. 18:6-11).

How does speaking against other believers constitute judging the law? By denouncing and disparaging one another, by spreading rumors and accusations, we act as independent and self-appointed defenders of faith and morals. This places us in the judgment seat of God and usurps his role as Judge (see Rom. 14:4, 9-14). It also places us over the law, because it replaces the judgment of God’s Word with our own words (Jn. 5:45; 12:48).

Note that such a prohibition does not preclude church discipline (1 Cor. 5:1-13), a process which is subject to the Spirit and the Word, working through the appointed leaders of the community.

¹ In a letter to Sheldon Vanauken, quoted by John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, p. 14.

Unit 9 – The Arrogance of Wealth

James 4:13-5:6

Text

¹³Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

¹Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.

²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ¹

⁶You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

¹5 Or yourselves as in a day of feasting

Open

How would you describe your approach to finances?

What charitable organizations (if any) do you support? Why?

Discover

1. In this passage, James attacks the arrogance and self-sufficiency which can afflict those who have been successful in accumulating wealth. Nebuchadnezzar learned this same lesson. Read Daniel 4:1-37 and answer the questions below.

Why did God judge Nebuchadnezzar? (give specifics)

What was the nature of the judgment? Why do you think God chose it?

What was the result?

2. What does the parable of the wealthy merchant tell us about this topic? (Luke 12:16-20)

What do the rich man's words and actions tell us about his beliefs and assumptions?

How did the events of the parable refute them?

What was the final result?

3. What do these verses tell us about our life in this world?

Psalm 39:5; 144:4

Psalm 103:15-16

Isaiah 40:23-24

4. How would you summarize the point that James is making 4:13-15?

5. What is the fundamental error of those who make plans for the future without reference to God? See Proverbs 16:9; 19:21; Psalm 33:10-11.

6. True or False: James is teaching that Christians should not make plans for the future, because planning indicates a reliance on self rather than God. Explain.

7. In 5:1-6, what have the wealthy done to deserve condemnation?

v. 2-3

v. 5

v. 4

v. 6

8. What will become of their wealth in the day of judgment? What effects will it have on them personally?

Apply

When you make plans for the future, do you (a) seek God's direction, (b) ask God to bless your plans after they have been made, (c) pretty much ignore God.

Are you guilty of "hoarding" wealth, or of living "in luxury and self-indulgence"? What standard did you use in answering this question?

Commentary

- v. 13 **“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’** The phrase, “Now listen” is repeated here and in 5:1, indicating that this paragraph and the next are addressing the same issue; i.e., the tendency for wealthy people to arrogantly suppose that they have full control and authority over their own lives. They often fail to recognize that God is sovereign over their plans, and that they are accountable to Him (see Dan. 4:1-37). As William Ernest Henley wrote in “Invictus,” they say to themselves, “*I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.*” This short poem captures very well the false thinking which James condemns:

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the
scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

In this view, the requirements of a holy God, if He even exists, are irrelevant (“*it matters not how strait [narrow] the gate*”). The poem’s speaker does not fear death (“*the Horror of the shade*”), nor is he concerned with judgment for his sin (“*How charged with punishments the scroll*”). Why? Not because he has a Savior, but because he imagines that the strength of his own determination will allow him to prevail. His soul is “unconquerable,” after all. How foolish! How tragically misguided! And yet, how seductive.

This has been the personal creed of countless people, in James’ day and ours. It seems attractive, because it extols the virtues of courage and perseverance. But it fails to ground those qualities in a foundation of faith and submission to God; thus it exalts man as supreme, rather than his Creator. Although it may lead to worldly “success,” it will ultimately end in destruction. Then, on the last day, proud confidence will turn to horror, and defiant words will dissolve into “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 8:12). Then, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord (Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10-11). But for many, it will be too late.

Note that James is not criticizing planning, or traveling on business, or making a profit *per se*. What he regards as ungodly is rather a self-sufficient attitude that leaves God out of the picture when looking to the future; one which assumes that we have the power to assure a positive outcome for our efforts, that we have both the ability and the right to shape events in any way we desire. Jesus illustrated the foolishness of this view in the parable of the wealthy merchant (Lk. 12:16-20).

- v. 14 **“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”** The brevity of human life, and the need for wisdom to live well in light of that fact, is noted in the Old Testament also: life is a “breath” (Job 7:7; Ps. 39:5, 11; 144:4); it is like grass which withers (Ps. 103:15-16; Isa. 40:6; 1 Pet. 1:24) and like chaff which is scattered by the wind (Isa. 40:23-24; Hos. 13:3). As Shakespeare’s Macbeth laments:

*“Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor
player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the
stage,
And then is heard no more.”*

- v. 15 **“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”** Even our next breath and our next heartbeat are under God’s control. If he determines whether we live or die, surely he also determines whether our plans will succeed or fail (Job. 5:12; Ps. 20:4; 33:10-11; 90:1-12; 146:4; Prov. 16:9; 19:21). Therefore, creatures such as we, whose lives are so vanishingly brief and who cannot ensure even our own moment-to-moment existence, should not make confident statements about the future (Prov. 27:1). Rather, we should acknowledge our dependence on God, in our speech, and more importantly, in our attitude and actions, always committing our plans to him (Prov. 16:3; Acts 18:21; Rom. 1:10; 15:32).
- v. 17 **“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”** As Jesus taught (Mt. 25:31-46; Lk. 19:11-27; 12:35-48), it is not only sins of *commission* which matter (i.e., doing what is prohibited), but also sins of *omission* (failing to do what is required). The logical connection between this verse and its context is not entirely clear, but perhaps it is this: although the plans which the merchants are making are not in themselves evil, they are still guilty of sin, because they have failed to do what they know is right, i.e., to commit their plans to God and to recognize his lordship over their lives.

v. 1 ***"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you."*** An interpretive question for the previous paragraph (4:13-17) and for this one (5:1-6) concerns the spiritual identity of those to whom James' warnings are directed: are Christians in view, or unbelievers? Commentator Douglas J. Moo proposes that the first passage is addressed to Christians, since it contains a pastoral exhortation to do what is right (v. 15), and also an implied call to avoid sins of omission (v. 17). The second passage, however, contains only denunciations and prophecies of judgment, and is therefore directed (rhetorically) to unbelievers. Its function here is to comfort the poor in the knowledge that their oppressors will be held to account, and also to warn the people of God not to emulate or envy them.

An alternate view is that James is not making such distinctions in moving from one paragraph to the next, but is addressing a mixed group throughout, of which some may be believers and some not. Therefore, while appealing to them to turn from their sin, he is also warning of the consequences for those who do not.

The reasons for the condemnation of the wicked wealthy are several: hoarding wealth (vv. 2-3), withholding pay from their workers (v. 4), living in "luxury and self-indulgence" (v. 5), and perverting the legal system to cause the death of the innocent (v. 6). Thus for James, it is not the mere fact of their wealth that brings God's disfavor, but their misuse of it, and the unrighteous means by which they obtain and sustain it.

James' prophetic statement that they should "*weep and wail*" echoes similar calls to mourning in the Old Testament, both in response to God's present judgment, and in anticipation of judgment to come (Isa. 13:6; 14:31; 23:1, 6, 14; Jer. 4:8; 6:26; 9:18-20; 25:34; 51:8; Ezek. 21:12; 30:2; 32:18; Joel 1:5, 11, 13; Zeph. 1:11; Zech. 11:2). Prophecies of God's judgment upon the "rich", with accompanying expressions of weeping and mourning, are found in the New Testament as well (Mt. 19:23; Lk. 6:24-25; Rev. 18:10-20).

vv. 2-3 ***"Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days."*** These verses present a striking vision of the future concerning the riches which the unrighteous value so highly: their beauty and permanence will ultimately yield to corruption and decay. Not only will they lose their value and

become utterly worthless, but they will bear mute testimony to the sin of those who greedily sought and selfishly hoarded them. As a result, they will no longer bring pleasure, but fiery torment (Mk. 9:48). Their accumulated wealth will only serve to increase the weight of their guilt and punishment. By gorging themselves on this world's riches, rather than using their wealth to help the poor, they are like cattle fattening themselves for the "slaughter" of God's judgment (5:5; see Rom. 2:5).

Note that the categories mentioned here cover every kind of wealth in the ancient world: food and grain (which will rot), sumptuous clothing (which will be eaten by moths), and precious metals (which will be consumed by rust). Thus, every means of storing wealth in this world will be proven wanting; the only sure storehouse for wealth is heaven (Mt. 6:19-20; Lk. 12:33).

The foolishness of these wealthy hoarders is all the more apparent because they (and we) are "in the last days," i.e. living in an age that is drawing to a close. At such a time, the truly wise would be looking to eternity, rather than continuing to store up this world's riches, knowing that this world and its paltry treasures will all soon be destroyed.

v. 4 ***"The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you."*** The offense James refers to here could be outright fraud, i.e. using some pretext to refuse payment for services rendered, or it could be the unjust delay of payment; both are condemned in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15; Mal. 3:5). In either case, for a laborer who lives "paycheck to paycheck", or a small businessman who lives or dies by cash flow, such withholding would represent a significant hardship. Many in our day would view these merely as sharp business practices, perhaps used to extract concessions from one's labor force or suppliers. But James labels them clearly as sin. Here again, the wealth which the unrighteous acquire as a result of such actions will itself bear witness; it is "crying out" against them.

v. 6 ***"You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you."*** James accuses the wealthy of using their money and influence to bias the legal system in their favor, in order to deprive others of their property and thus their means of sustenance, in effect causing death by starvation (see Am. 5:12; Mic. 2:2; 3:1-3). As is often the case, those who are unjustly treated do not have the means to adequately defend themselves, and so cannot oppose them.

Unit 10 – Patience and Prayer

James 5:7-20

Text

⁷Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

¹²Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

¹³Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. ¹⁹My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Open

Do you consider yourself to be a patient person? Why or why not?

Have you ever prayed for rain, or for any other change in the weather? If so, why, and what was the result?

Discover

1. What reasons does James give as to why we should be patient? What makes this difficult?

2. What things do people patiently wait for in this world? What should we be patiently waiting for?

3. What does it look like in practice to "be patient and stand firm" (v. 8)? What would its opposite look like?

4. In what sense is the Lord's coming "near" (v. 8)? Is it more "near" for us today than it was for the original readers of this letter? (see Matthew 4:17; Mark 13:4-36; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:3-8)

5. What kind of behavior do you think would constitute grumbling against one another (v. 9)?

6. What kind of judgment will we as believers face? (v. 9; see Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:8-15; 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10)

7. What lessons does James intend for us to learn from the example of Job and the prophets (vv. 10-11)?

8. Why is James opposed to taking oaths (v. 12)? What specific conduct do you think this forbids?

9. In your own words, paraphrase what James' instructions in vv. 14-15. Has your church ever done this? What was the result?

10. What is the point of the example of Elijah in vv. 17-18?

Apply

How can you apply James' teaching on patience this week? Today?

How can you apply James' teaching on prayer this week? Today?

Commentary

vv. 7-8 **“Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming.”** The day for which we wait patiently is the day of Christ’s return, when justice will be done: the wicked will be punished (Jam. 5:1-5; Mt. 24:37-39; 2 Thess. 2:8) and those who have been faithful to Christ will be rescued and rewarded (Mt. 10:22; 24:13; Phil. 1:28; James 1:12). Note that James does not promise relief from suffering in this life. The substance of our hope is not present deliverance, but future vindication and salvation, when God acts with finality to bring human history to its conclusion. Until that time we must “stand firm” (v. 8), bearing up under what Paul describes as “our light and momentary troubles” (2 Cor. 4:17; see Mt. 11:30), while continuing to trust and obey God.

Note also that waiting patiently does not imply passivity or inaction. Jesus taught his disciples to work “as long as it is day” (Jn. 9:4), and warned them not to be found sleeping when he returned, but to always be expectant and watchful (Mk. 13:35-37). The apostle Paul worked “night and day” (2 Thess. 3:8), and frequently described other believers as “fellow workers” (Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1; Phil. 4:3; Col. 4:11; Phmn. 1:24).

“autumn and spring rains” The Old Testament contains several references to the two rainy seasons in Palestine as signifying God’s goodness toward his people (Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24; Joel 2:23-24). God is faithful: as surely as he brings the rains in their season, so also he will fulfill all that he has promised to his people.

“be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.” These words were written two millennia ago; how could something which has still not occurred in our day (the return of Christ) have been “near” for the author’s original readers? The answer lies in understanding that the events of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection inaugurated the “last days”, the final chapter of human history (Acts 2:16-17; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3). Since that time, although no one knows “the day or the hour” (Mt. 25:13; Mk. 13:32), his return has been “near”, or imminent, in the sense that it could happen at any time (Mt. 4:17; 10:7; Heb. 10:25; 1 Pet. 4:7).

In addition, we must take into account that God is timeless. As Peter wrote when addressing the issue of why God had not yet come in judgment, *“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”* (2 Pet. 3:8). In this sense, saying that something is “near” is not a statement of how soon it will occur (i.e. how near it is chronologically), but rather a statement of how certain it is that God will act, and how ready he is to do so. As James points out in the next verse,

Christ’s return is near because God is even now “standing at the door”, preparing to judge the unrighteous.

v. 9 **“Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!”** When we reflect on the common human response to suffering, the connection between this verse and its context becomes clear. External pressures, such as those being faced by this faith community, often cause us to mistreat those closest to us: we tend to find fault, to criticize and complain, even when the real cause of our unhappiness lies elsewhere. This is all the more true when the trials last, not for days or weeks, but for months and years.

What judgment is in view here? Since James refers to his readers as “brothers”, he likely has in mind, not the judgment of condemnation that will be rendered against the unrighteous, but the evaluation of believers’ works and their associated rewards (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:8-15; 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10). As Jesus taught (Mk. 13:4-36), the time of these judgments is imminent; therefore, it is all the more necessary that we strive to make our lives pleasing to him.

vv. 10-11 **“Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”** James exhorts us to follow the prophets’ example of perseverance and faith; the result will be that we are blessed along with them (v. 11; see Heb. 11:32-40). In addition, their experience reminds us that persecution and suffering are a normal and expected result of wholeheartedly following Christ (see Mt. 5:11-12; Mk. 10:29-30; Jn. 15:20; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12).

The citation of Job as an example of faithful endurance is an encouragement to us in two ways: first, because although Job never abandoned his trust in the Lord (Job 1:21; 2:10; 19:25-27), he did question and contend with God. God does not demand from us a stoic, indifferent acquiescence to fate; he understands that we will struggle in the midst of our afflictions. And second, because the ultimate outcome of Job’s suffering was that he was greatly blessed by God (Job 42:10-17), and we will likewise be blessed if we persevere in faith.

v. 12 **“Above all, my brothers, do not swear— not by heaven or by earth or by anything else.”** The similarity between this verse and Matthew 5:34-37 is very close, indicating that James is explicitly referencing the teaching of Christ. What, then, is the point of both passages? The issue was not cursing, i.e. using the name of the Lord in a vulgar way. Instead, it was the practice of invoking the name of the Lord, or some other holy object such as the tabernacle, to add weight to one’s words.

But over time, a whole theology had developed over the question of how relatively binding different objects of swearing were considered to be, with the result that the giving and receiving of oaths had become an exercise in casuistry (finding legalistic loopholes) rather than an emphatic affirmation of integrity (see Mt. 23:16-22).

Interpreters differ as to whether Jesus, and James, intended to forbid all oaths, or only those whose purpose was to cleverly avoid being held to one's word. In any case, the intent is clear: we should be men and women of truth, so that whatever we affirm or deny, even if it is with no more than a simple "yes" or "no", can be trusted and relied upon without reservation.

- v. 14 ***"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord."*** This verse raises several questions. First, is corporate prayer more effective than individual prayer? In other words, is there more power in the prayers of a believing community, than in the prayers of one godly man or woman? The answer would seem to be "yes", at least concerning appeals for healing. Note that in the case of the paralytic who was brought to Jesus, it was not his own faith, but the faith of his friends, that resulted in his forgiveness and physical recovery (Mk. 2:1-12). The elders, then, are to be called, not because they have special powers, but because they represent the church body as a whole.

The second question concerns the practice of anointing with oil. This is otherwise mentioned only in Mark 6:13, also in connection with physical healing. Why is oil to be used? Some have suggested that the purpose was primarily practical; i.e., that the oil had a medicinal effect. It is true that in the ancient world, oil and wine were used to treat various maladies (see Luke 10:34). A modern-day application of this interpretation would be for the elders to employ both prayer and the tools of medical science.

Others hold that the oil had a spiritual purpose, either sacramental or symbolic. Under a sacramental view, the oil, when appropriately administered and accompanied by prayer, functions as a means of grace which conveys God's power to remove sin and illness. Under a symbolic view, in contrast, the oil has no power in and of itself, but represents the prayers being offered up to God.

- v. 15 ***"And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven."*** The reference to forgiveness has led some to conclude that the "sickness" of v. 14 is not physical but only spiritual. This interpretation is refuted by the fact that the term for sickness, *astheneō*, consistently refers to physical illness in the New Testament, except where it is explicitly qualified ("whose faith is weak", Rom. 14:1) or where it is obvious from the context that another meaning is intended. In the gospels, which James draws upon most heavily, the term always refers to physical illness (Mt. 10:8; Mk. 6:56; Lk. 4:40; Jn. 4:46; 6:2). Therefore, we conclude that the restoration to health and being "raised up" (compare Mt. 9:6; Mk. 1:31; Acts 3:7), does refer to physical healing. However, if the illness is a result of sin, as it sometimes is (see Jn. 9:1-3; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Cor. 11:27-30), the guilt of that sin will be purged as well.

Why, then, are anointing with oil and prayer not always effective? Some have suggested that the cause of unanswered prayer is inadequate faith, but the persistence of the apostle Paul's own chronic illness, his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-9), as well as his inability to heal Trophimus (Tit. 3:20), argue against this view. Others have proposed that in fact all will be healed, but that the healing of some must wait for the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:42-54).

The answer more likely lies in the nature of prayer itself. Prayer is not a magical incantation, but an interaction with the living God. We are not in control of the outcome; He is. Prayer which comes from a heart that trusts and relies upon God will result in the ill person being healed – *if it is God's will to do so*. James' statement is true; God does heal in response to prayer. But He has not promised to do so in every case. He is still sovereign; we cannot force his hand, not even through prayer. We can only entrust our needs to a Father who loves us, who knows what is best, and who has the power to bring it to pass.

- vv. 16-18 ***"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."*** It is not only the elders who are to pray for the healing of those who are ill, but the entire church. No special gifts are needed; Elijah was "a man just like us" and yet his prayers accomplished miracles. The qualification that the prayers of a "righteous" man are "powerful and effective" indicates why confession is needed: harboring sin in our hearts will make our prayers weak and useless.

Acknowledgments

The primary commentaries consulted in the preparation of this work were: *The Letter of James (Pillar New International Commentary)* by Douglas J. Moo; *James (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, by Dan G. McCartney; and *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text (New International Greek Testament Commentary)*, by Peter H. Davids.

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