

Study/Devotional Notes on the Book of James

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These notes may be used in whatever way the reader finds profitable, in part or in full. I pray they will be edifying to the people of God in Christ and draw new people into His kingdom by faith.

Note: this document is searchable by chapter, verse, or word.

For those using a PC, press Control+F. For those using a Mac, press Command+F.

James 1:1-4

Getting Started

- James was written circa 44-49, and is the earliest New Testament book.
- James is all about practical Christian living!
- James will help you grow in your faith and in the way you live it out!
- Its writer is James, the half-brother of Jesus, the leader of the church at Jerusalem.
- Known as “James the Just” because of his devotion to righteousness, he himself would be martyred for his faith around 62 A.D.

James 1:1-4

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.

Verse 1: One of the things I love about James is that it’s so practical. It’s written to a group of everyday people just like you and me whose recent history had been on the tough side. Who were they? Jewish Christians, primarily - and because of their faith in Jesus Christ they had been persecuted and scattered abroad by Saul and Herod Agrippa. That’s what James is referring to when he addresses his recipients as “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” The Greek word for scattered is diaspora, an agricultural term which literally means “through a sowing.” Think what a powerful illustration that is of God’s ability to work all things together for good: though the church suffered persecution at the hands of evil men, through the people being scattered the seeds of the Gospel message were sown throughout the world, and more people came to know Jesus Christ as a result! As James’s audience settled into new areas and tried to make sense of their altered way of life, he wrote to encourage them and to remind them of who they were in Christ. We see that come into focus immediately as we move into verse 2.

Verse 2: Though it’s a simple verse with only 13 words (and not even a complete sentence!), the application for your life and mine is absolutely incredible here. To get the most out of it, let’s break it down into three parts:

1) Consider it pure joy. Did you know that the nature of your attitude is important when it comes to facing trials? The Greek word for trial means trouble; something that breaks the normal pattern of your life and trips you up. God calls us to be joyful in the midst of trials because regardless of their shape or size, His promise is to strengthen and mature us as we go through them. And frankly, a lousy attitude will only make things worse...so why not choose joy? As a child of God, you have the power to make that decision. That's important to know, especially as we consider the next phrase:

2) Whenever you face trials. Make no mistake: trials will come in life. It's not a matter of if, but when. We live in a fallen world where brokenness is part and parcel of our existence, and when you think about that truth, it's all the more reason to have a game plan for when those trials come along. How are you doing in that respect? Do hard times throw you into angst and despair, or do they generate a measured response grounded on faith in the promises of God? Jesus, you'll remember, was tempted and tested in every way that we experience ourselves, yet was without sin. He endured trials and temptation of all kinds and beat them. So guess what?

3) Of many kinds. Regardless of the kind of trial you encounter, God knows how to lead you through it! He is with you, and again, He has promised to use your trial as a way to strengthen you and build you up. Look at the next verse:

Verse 3: Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. When we talk about testing in this verse, once again the Greek is helpful: testing is best translated as proof, or proving. You see, as trials come, they give proof to the power of God in our lives because He helps us in our time of need. In turn, we learn to persevere, trusting that He will work the circumstances of our trial for our good and His glory. I've always found that journaling is a great way to chronicle God's faithfulness in the midst of my trials. When I thumb through the pages and look at entries I made months, or even years ago, I'm usually filled with wonder and awe at the presence of God's mercy and grace in my life. It's neat to see how He has led me through the tough times and grown me up spiritually. That, incidentally, is the focus of verse 4. Check out a couple of text notes that I've made:

Verse 4: Perseverance must finish its work. That work is to bring us to spiritual maturity, to a place where we enjoy an ever greater trust in our Lord Jesus Christ. It's a work that is ongoing and never stops!

Verse 4, continued: Mature and complete, not lacking anything. The Greek phrase here comes from a compound word that means all the portions whole. God's ultimate plan in His relationship with you is to bring you to a place of wholeness and completeness, where nothing is missing. Think of what's represented in that statement! The love of God in Christ and power of His indwelling Spirit will most certainly bring that promise to completion – even, and at times especially, through the pain of trials in your life. Trust Him to lead you through for your good and His glory!

Wrapping Up

Think about the trials you're facing right now. Does today's teaching from Scripture prompt you to reevaluate the way you look at them? How does God's promise to mature and strengthen you through your trials change your perspective on them? What trial do you especially need to share with your heavenly Father? Take a moment right here and do it.

Until next time, the joy of the Lord be your strength!

James 1:5-8

Getting Started

Today's study continues on the subject of trials and how to deal with them. The focus? Gaining the wisdom you need to help you through the tough times! The secret? It's no secret at all – read on to see the wonderful “straightforwardness” of God!

James 1:5-8

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.

Verse 5: Sometimes, Bible study can be difficult. Passages can be complex, and principles and concepts can be hard to understand. Other times Scripture is as clear as a freshly washed window. Verse five is one of those washed windows! When you're in the midst of a trying time in your life and you lack the wisdom to see it through on your own (which is most of the time!), what can you do? God's Word says that we are to simply ask. Wisdom is more than mere knowledge; wisdom is understanding combined with practical skill. It's principle put into practice. It's the divinely given help that we need when faced with trials in life. This verse is beautiful because it is so clear:

The Problem – We lack wisdom.

The Prayer – We are to ask God, who gives generously without finding fault with us.

The Promise – We will be given wisdom!

Verse 6: Asking God for wisdom seems like the easiest thing in the world, and it's true: the simplest, child-like prayer uttered in faith brings all the power of heaven to bear on any circumstance. But notice the very clear condition given to us in this verse: when we ask, it must be with a believing heart! To ask for wisdom, yet doubt God's ability or willingness to bestow it, is an exercise in futility. Just like being tossed to and fro by the wind and the waves, seeking God's blessing and help with an unbelieving heart will wear you out, and it won't get you anywhere either! Look at how James finishes this thought in the next two verses:

Verse 7: The unbelieving person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Plain enough! But here's why:

Verse 8: The unbelieving person is double-minded. The Greek phrase here gives us a good explanation of double-mindedness. It refers to the mind being divided between God and the world, a lot like a “fair weather” Christian who trusts God when things are going well, but fails to trust God in the midst of difficult times. Can that kind of inconsistent pattern bring peace or a settled heart to the person living it? Of course not! That's why the Word says that the double-minded person is also unstable...not just in some things, but in all things!

This might sound like a trick question, but really, it's not: do you see the underlying issue here? Wisdom ultimately comes to us in the context of a right relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ!

Once the Lordship question is settled, the wisdom question, when it comes up, is always an automatic “yes.” With Almighty God on the throne of our hearts, all we need in times of trial – including wisdom – is lavished upon us as dearly loved children.

Wrapping Up

So...do you lack wisdom? Have you asked for it? How have you asked for it? Is there an issue of doubt or distrust that needs to be settled today between the Lord and you? If so, right now is a great time to hash it out.

One of the most powerful things about the Word of God is that it is both a treasure house of His promises and a proof text of His faithfulness to keep those promises! God always shows Himself faithful to His people. Take it to the bank: you can ask for wisdom with absolute assurance in your heart that God will give it to you in a most generous way. Why not ask now as a way to close out today’s study? It will stabilize your life and bring peace to your heart. Remember: God is faithful, and He will do it!

James 1:9-12

Getting Started

Today’s study continues on the subject of trials and how to deal with them. Today’s focus: The faithfulness and compassion of God on all of His children in times of trial, regardless of their earthly status.

James 1:9-12

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.

Verse 9: How would you feel if God played favorites? At first glance, it might seem like He’s doing just that in this section of verses! Why the high position for the brother in “humble circumstances?” And why the low position for the one who is rich? When we work through these verses in the proper context – that of facing trials – then the meaning becomes clear. Let’s unpack it a little bit:

The brother in humble circumstances, though he may have nothing in this world, is privileged to rejoice in his high spiritual standing in the grace of Christ. When in the midst of trials, he remembers that he has an inheritance waiting for him that can never perish, spoil, or fade, and he lives in the sure hope that someday he will be with the Lord! It’s a wonderful promise to hold onto, especially when the absence of material things in his life (things the world considers so important) might cause him to despair.

Verse 10: Now let’s take the next step in this line of reasoning. When it comes to the rich man, he also has reason to rejoice; not because of his high earthly position, but because of the fact that trials bring him to the place where he remembers that genuine happiness and contentment depend on the riches of God’s grace rather than earthly wealth. Pretty profound, perhaps, but

it's an important truth: being brought low through trials is a blessing for those of us who may find it easy to make our happiness dependent on material possessions or worldly goods. Only God can truly satisfy! James explains this further in the next verse.

Verse 11: Have you ever seen a wildflower meadow? I love walking through the pasture on our property in spring time, because the flowers are absolutely amazing in their color and fragrance. The wild roses are enough to carry me away! What's interesting, though, is that none of the blooms last very long. Get a warm day with a drying wind, and they're history. That's the picture that James paints here in verse 11 when he talks about the fleeting nature of wealth and its pursuit. As fast as it comes, it can be taken away. When that happens, what's left? What's left is the love of God in Christ - and that's the point.

I love how Dr. John MacArthur summarizes verses 10-11 when he writes, "Trials make all believers equally dependent on God and bring them to the same level with each other by keeping them from becoming preoccupied with earthly things. Poor Christians and wealthy ones can rejoice that God is no respecter of persons and that they both have the privilege of being identified with Christ."

Verse 12: As we come to the close of this issue, verse 12 brings us to a place of transition. A perfect capstone to what has just been discussed, we're also at the entrance of the next topic that James will address. For now, let's use it to tie off our perspective on the rich and the poor. Regardless of our station in life, socio-economic and otherwise, God speaks His Word of promise into our lives. What is that promise? That the person who perseveres under trial will be blessed! Sometimes trials must simply be endured through patience and waiting; other times, we may be able to actively work through them. But always, in God's way and in God's time, our trials will result in a victorious outcome that will be for our good and His glory.

Our ultimate victory, of course, is that though we may have trouble in this world, we take heart, because Jesus has overcome the world through His life, death, and resurrection. And as He leads us on our journey toward an eternal home with Him, we are given yet another great promise: when we have stood the test of our trials, we will receive the crown of life that God has promised to all who love Him! In James's day, crowns were trophies put on the victor's head at the close of a race or other athletic contest. What a terrific picture of heaven: a place not just of rest, but of joy and victory! That victory is yours through a saving relationship with Christ!

Wrapping Up

Have you thought much lately about your status in life? As human beings we tend to think about that question in terms of net worth or social position. But God reminds us that in Him, we are all equal – His beloved children, purchased through the blood of His Son. Sometimes, because He loves us and because He wants us to be mature and complete, not lacking anything, He shapes us, forms us, and drives us to greater dependence on Him by allowing trials. Remember, He has His very best in mind for you, and He will bring you through!

James 1:13-18

Getting Started

Today's study continues on the subject of trials and how to deal with them. Today's focus: Temptation and sin at your door? Discover the reason!

James 1:13-18

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 first-fruits of all he created.

Verse 13: Just because a portion of Scripture happens to be very practical in nature doesn't mean it is void of important doctrinal truth. Many believers today wrinkle their noses at the word "doctrine"; they think of dead orthodoxy or preachers who are stuffy and close-minded. But the Bible itself tells us to watch our life and doctrine closely! Doctrine isn't a dirty word; it's the very essence of God's Word! The reason I mention that here is that in this section of verses from James, we are given a systematic, doctrinal treatment of sin. What's the first thing we are to know? God is not the one who tempts us!

Why do you suppose that James would bring this up in the middle of instructing his readers on dealing with trials? I think the reason is pretty self-explanatory: based on all that we have studied so far, we know that every difficult circumstance has the capacity to strengthen and mature us as we trust God. At the same time, however, if we choose to doubt God and disregard His Word in the midst of difficulty, then that circumstance can serve as an open door to evil. While God will allow trials, temptation in the midst of them does not originate with Him - in fact, He has promised that no temptation is beyond what we can bear, and that He will provide a way of escape for us (1 Corinthians 10:13). If that's the case, then what causes temptation? Let's look at the next verse:

Verse 14: How are we tempted? It's a process that starts within us! Notice that the seed of sin begins with our own evil desires. James uses two vivid pictures here that are best understood in their original context:

Dragged Away: This is a term used to describe wild animals being lured into traps. They enter them to their own demise – as do we when our evil desires lure us toward sin.

Enticed: This is actually a fishing term which means "to catch with bait." I live in Missouri, where fishing is not considered an outdoor activity, but a sacred responsibility in which every true, red-blooded American must take part! When I walk into Bass Pro Shop, there are literally thousands of varieties of bait and lures, all designed to reel in the big one. It's the same with temptation. Our human tendency is to always gravitate to whatever will fulfill the flesh. So while the individual bait may be different for each person or each situation, sooner or later, the hook is set and we're caught.

Verse 15: In verse 15, we're shown the continuation of the process that leads us to sin. It's a lifecycle; one that ultimately leads to death. So often temptation comes in a form that seems to

promise something good, when in reality, it leads us down the garden path. It's true that sometimes we are caught unaware; but if you're like me, then you know it's equally true that we often willfully go where we know we should not! Sin, then, is not the product of God's will; it is the product of our own heart. Jeremiah the prophet said "The heart is wicked and deceitful above all else; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) The Scripture is true!

Verse 16: How, then, are we to see God in the midst of trial and temptation? Is He simply watching from a distance, uninvolved, waiting to mete out consequences? No! As I mentioned a moment ago, His great desire is to strengthen and help us. James makes this clear: rather than being deceived by our own way of thinking, our thinking is to be changed by realizing (as we're told in the next verse) that every good and perfect gift is from our loving heavenly Father.

Verse 17: Father of Lights: This is one of my favorite descriptions of God! It's a Jewish expression that recalls God as the Creator, the One who set the sun, moon, and stars into place. This One true God of the universe is the One who gives us every good thing! And unlike the cosmos, which appear to us in different places in different seasons, with God there is no shifting or changing. He, and His great goodness to us, is changeless.

Verse 18: Once more, let's nail this truth down so that there's no question about it. Is God for us or against us in time of trial and temptation? Absolutely, unequivocally, 100% for us! James reminds us that it was God Himself who chose to give us new birth by the Word of truth – that is, the good news of the Gospel. And if He gave us new birth into a living hope through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, how much more will He sustain us and bring us home safely? After all, in Christ we are His first-fruits – the evidence and promise of the new creation that is to come when this order of things has passed away. God is for you now, and He will continue to be for you until you are safely in His arms.

Wrapping Up

As you end your study time today, take a moment and be sure that your thinking is right. In other words, do a heart check to see if you've been a God blamer instead of a God believer in certain areas of your life. Does your image of God need a reassessment? Do you need to bring some entrenched areas of sin to the foot of the cross? The Lord is drawing you to Himself this very moment, and He would love to give you a clean slate. Don't be afraid; remember, no matter what trial, temptation or sin entangles you, God is for you! Go to Him now.

James 1:19-21

Getting Started

Today we look more into our relationship and responsibility to the Word of God. Our focus: Be a doer, not just a hearer!

James 1:19-21

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.

Verse 19: You've probably noticed that this is a rather short section of verses today, but there's so much good stuff here that I want you to be able to really focus in on what the text is saying. In one sense, James is continuing to talk about the godly way to face trials. At the same time, though, he is moving into the power of God's Word and the way it impacts our lives. Here in verse 19, the subject is actually Scripture itself!

Quick to Listen: This is the manner in which we are to respond to the Word of God. The reference is back to verse 18 in our last study, where we are told that God gave us new birth by the Word of truth. When God's Word is read, spoken, or taught, we are to make the most of the opportunity!

Slow to speak: This is a reference to becoming a preacher or teacher of God's Word. While we all have the joyful responsibility and privilege to share our testimony about God's grace in our lives, to become a teacher of the Word is another matter. Here we are to be cautious about assuming such a role too quickly – we are to be “slow to speak.” Once we have acquired appropriate knowledge and study skills, have shown that we are cultivating a life of obedience, and exhibit the gift to teach, then steps may be taken to enter a teaching ministry. We are to show ourselves approved.

Slow to become angry: Let me say it once more: this is a direct reference to how we are to interact with, or receive, Scripture! Paul wrote to Timothy that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Did you catch the first part of that? It's true: God's Word will faithfully rebuke and correct us when we are living in sin. Rather than angrily denying its truth or disregarding its loving instruction through continued disobedience, we are to humble ourselves to the authority of what it says. Why is anger and rejection of the Scriptures so serious? Read on to the next verse.

Verse 20: Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Have you ever been angry at someone? In your anger, how soft was your heart to that person? About as soft as a rock! So it is in our relationship with Christ. If we continually reject the Word of God and harbor anger and rebellion in our hearts toward what it says, our hearts become harder and harder to the things of God. And you know what? That's not what God wants for you! He desires that you be righteous...not just because that is His holy standard, but because He knows that a righteous life will richly bless you and the people around you!

Verse 21: I'd like to take this verse piece by piece:

Therefore: Want a great Bible study tip? Whenever you see the word “therefore” in Scripture, you always want to find out what it's there for! In this case, James is saying “In light of all that I've just finished telling you...” do what?

Get rid of all moral filth: The Greek phrase here gives us the picture of taking off dirty clothes. If we are to “clothe ourselves” with God's Word, we must first take off what we were wearing before and lay it aside.

And the evil that is so prevalent: This is a reference to the wickedness and evil desire that springs from our hearts. How do we get rid of this stuff? By daily confessing it, and by becoming stronger and stronger as new creations in Christ! Remember, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new

creation...the old has gone and the new has come! How do we become stronger? By submitting ourselves to the Word! That's what James is talking about when he says that we are to humbly accept the Word planted in us, which can save us.

Wrapping Up

In these three short verses, we've just begun to scratch the surface of the power and efficacy of God's Word in our lives! I'm filled with reverence and awe when I remember that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh...that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1). As you close your study today, think about how your life could be different if it was more fully controlled, equipped, and empowered by the Word. What would it take to move more in that direction? Pray and ask God to do a great work in you by giving you a hunger for the Scriptures. It will change your life more than you ever thought possible!

James 1:22-25

Getting Started

Today we look more into our relationship and responsibility to the Word of God. Our focus: Be a doer, not just a hearer!

James 1:22-25

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.

Verse 22: Last fall I had an electrician run electricity to my barn. He took down an old overhead wire and ran a new line underground. I was really looking forward to having power inside, but just as I thought he was going to hook up the outlets, he quit and said he'd be back another time to finish up. That wasn't what I had in mind! Have you ever had a similar experience? James reminds us of a simple point today: that we're to be doers of the Word of God, and not hearers only. If we don't follow through with this straight forward teaching, God says that we've deceived ourselves. It's like having a wonderful electrical grid designed for great power, but never hooking it up! The Greek word used for "deceive" in this verse is a mathematical term, meaning "miscalculation." In other words, failure to do what the Scriptures say is actually a great spiritual error. Look at how this is explained in the next verse.

Verse 23: When I think of a mirror, I automatically think of the one in the downstairs bathroom. It's cheap, but it's big. It's chipped and the backing is coming off in some places, but the reflection is true. It gets the job done better than I'd like it to! But think about this: if you lived in the first century, your mirror wouldn't be like the one in my bathroom, made of glass and free of distortion. Your mirror would be made out of some kind of beaten, hand-worked metal. And while it would be highly polished and more attractive than my mirror, it wouldn't be distortion-free. In fact, you'd have to look at yourself pretty closely to see what you wanted to see, and you'd need to do right then and there whatever cleansing or cosmetic thing you wanted to do. Why? Because if you were to walk away, your mind would quickly forget the image it had seen.

Verse 24: That's the way it is for people who hear the Word of God, but don't follow through by doing the Word of God. They go away from the place they heard it - church, Bible Study, personal devotion time – and because they don't purpose in their hearts right then and there to do what the Word says, they quickly forget all about it. So Cleansing doesn't happen. Changes aren't made. People are not ministered to. Advances for the kingdom of God are not made. They've been given the entire power grid of heaven, but sadly, they never plug it in. Do the Word, we are told! Because when we do, things come alive for the cause of Christ, and we are blessed!

Verse 25: When James talks about the perfect law that brings freedom, he's talking about Scripture in a special way, reminding us that it is the message of the Word – Christ's perfect life, complete sacrifice for our sins, and victorious resurrection over sin death, and the devil himself – that gives us the power to continue in the things He has called us to do. And that's really key here: in our own strength, we are powerless to be doers of the Word. (Good grief, in our own strength we are hard pressed to be hearers of it!) Yet the One who has set us free from our sins is also the One who has regenerated and empowered us by His Spirit to both hear and do His Word. So...can you be a doer of the Word all by yourself? Nope. But borrowing from Paul's letter to the Philippians, can you be a doer of the Word through Christ, who gives you strength? You bet! And that's what this passage is all about.

Wrapping Up

One of my pastor friends and mentors in life has a pet peeve about people sitting around getting fat on his preaching, but who never exercise or put into practice what they hear. One day after he was done with his message, he told his congregation, "We're not going to have church again until you all go out and actually do what the Word of God said this morning!" He went home that day and told his wife, "Honey, I don't think we're going to have church again until next Christmas!" It's a humorous story, but think about the serious implications behind it. What would happen if the church of Jesus Christ, lock stock and barrel, rose up as one at one synchronized moment in history and actually became en masse doers of the Word of God? Awesome...and you know what? It can start with you. The joy and strength of the Lord fill you up! Amen!

James 1:26-27

Getting Started

You'll recall that yesterday we focused on "being doers of the Word and not hearers only." But what does that look like? How does it play out in our everyday lives? Today's brief but important focus: God's idea of True Religion!

James 1:26-27

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.

Verse 26: What do you think of when you hear that someone is a religious person? If you're like a large percentage of the population, that probably comes across as a loaded question. And really, when you get right down to it, it is a loaded question. Religious means a lot of different things to people today. For some it describes a person who's holier-than-thou and hypocritical.

For others it typifies a fanatic, someone who is so immersed in their belief system that they've lost touch with where it intersects with the real world. Some of us associate being religious with families who have an exacting moral code or a particularly restrictive set of social practices. And then there are those of us who have a generally positive concept of what it means to be religious. We think of special people in our lives who were, on the whole, devout and sincere in what they believed ("My grandmother was a deeply religious woman."). Here in verse 26, the term religious takes on a specific meaning.

If anyone considers himself religious: The reference here in the Greek pertains to the act of external, ceremonial public worship. Now, there's nothing at all wrong with that; in fact, the public worship life of the church is an extremely important part of our individual lives of faith. But the point that James is about to make is that a lot of us may think that by going through the motions and "doing our duty" we've got everything covered. Does that fly with you? Think about it: someone who focuses solely on the externals of religious life is likely to be very different from someone who has cultivated an inner character of godliness through a genuine relationship with Christ. It's form versus faith. You may know people who fit the category: they're at every service rain or shine, big on ritual, know the routines backwards and forwards, and can tell the pastor every place he deviated from the service book or the printed order of worship for the day. If the denomination ever sprung a Sunday morning pop quiz in its churches as to what is good, right, proper, fitting, presentable and acceptable, these men and women would nail it.

Are these things bad in and of themselves? No. But if you're ever in need of a word of forgiveness or a little bit of help or need someone to carry your burden, you just might be out of luck with some of those self-proclaimed religious folk. You see, the problem is that many people who focus on the externals of religious life do so to the exclusion of any personal impact or heart transformation. They go through the motions and fulfill their "religious duty," but that's about as far as it goes, and frankly, most of the time it's pretty evident to people around them that the outside doesn't match the inside. James makes the keen observation that what comes out of a person's mouth is a pretty good indicator of what's truly in his or her heart. That's why the Word of God says here that if we think we are religious and yet don't keep a tight rein on our tongues, we are deceiving ourselves and our religion is worthless. More than that, we are disgracing what we are purportedly trying to represent to others.

Verse 27: It's quite clear that what we have in verse 26 is a picture of someone who has made the mistake of thinking that mere external religious observation can be equated with a godly life; that to go through the motions of an outwardly religious life is all there is to the path of genuine discipleship. But in actuality nothing could be further from the truth, and that's what James addresses here in verse 27. So what, then, is true religion? How is it to be sincerely practiced? Or to refer back to the beginning of this line of argumentation, what does it look like to be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only?

Religion that God our Father accepts: Notice that true religion is, first of all, something that is to be acceptable to God! If this is the case, then true religion is necessarily going to be God-centered rather than man-centered, and therefore focused on doing the revealed will of our heavenly Father rather than satisfying the whims of our own human invention. That's great news, because if God is the One who begins with us rather than the other way around, we're in a much better position to be about His business than we would be otherwise! Let's look at two descriptive terms as we move forward:

Pure & faultless: In the Greek, these adjectives are synonyms used to describe something spotless or without blemish. Some of our English translations use the phrase “pure and undefiled.” So what we’re about to see here is both the ultimate description and perfect example of how true faith is lived out (or how “true religion” is most fully embodied): it’s by a life lived and measured by compassionate love for others in the name of Jesus Christ. Look at the next phrase.

Look after orphans & widows in their distress: Certainly, there are many other activities that express pure and faultless religion in addition to what is mentioned here, but I believe there’s an important reason that orphans and widows are used as the supreme example. In early Christian culture, a child without parents or a woman who had lost her husband (and thus all her means of support) were among the poorest and neediest segments of society. No Social Security back then, no orphanages to speak of, no government assistance available, so it was left to God’s people to be the hands and feet of Christ in their communities. Theologians will be quick to tell you that there would be no way for an orphan or a widow to give anything in return for being cared for. In other words, anyone taking the time to look after these neediest of the needy would clearly be demonstrating true compassion and Christian love; love that would expect nothing in return; love sacrificial in every way and full of genuine mercy. And that, James says, is what acceptable religion in the sight of God our Father is: sacrificial love in action, in everything we do.

Keep oneself from being polluted by the world: Here’s one last component to acceptable religion, and it is simply the exhortation or the command that we are to keep ourselves from being drawn in and polluted by the evil world system around us. We’ll have much more to say about that concept when we study chapter four of James, but for now, we can do well by simply remembering that we are called by God to be in this world, but not of it, because our true citizenship is in heaven. The things of God and His kingdom are to be our focus.

Wrapping Up

Having gone through these two verses today, there’s a lot for you to be thinking about as you take steps to apply the Scriptures to your life. How would you describe your religious sensibilities? Are they characterized by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and focused on cultivating godly character, ongoing growth, and a true transformation of the heart? Is your faith characterized by love in action? Are you willing to sacrifice for others and put their needs ahead of your own without expecting (or desiring) anything in return? And are you able to do these things with joy? If so, then you’re on the right path! Praise God for His mercy in your life and ask Him to keep conforming you to the image of His Son!

If, however, you find yourself describing your life of faith by outward things...things that hint at duty rather than devotion, ritual rather than relationship...perhaps you might spend some time in prayer today asking the Lord to give you wisdom and understanding in this area of your inner life. Jesus Christ’s greatest desire is to have deep, abiding fellowship with you as you go through your journey! He went to the cross to take the punishment of your sins. He rose from the grave to give you victory over sin, death and the devil. And He has gone to prepare a place for you in heaven that you may be with Him for all eternity. Don’t cheat yourself of all He has done for you by limiting your idea of faith to man-made ceremonies or institutional structures. God is alive, and He so much wants for you to be alive in Him! Come to Him believing today and ask Him to begin a new work in your heart. He is faithful, and He will do it!

James 2:1-4

Getting Started

Today we begin the second chapter of James.

Our focus for the next several days: the issue of favoritism in the church. This is a great study for your small group or Sunday school class!

James 2:1-4

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?

Through the course of my pastoral ministry, I've served several different churches. There was the quaint rural church in northern California, the gritty city church in southern California, and the wealthy suburban mega-church in southern California's Orange County. I loved them all, because they were all quite different. But as diverse as each congregation was in its demographic, cultural, and socio-economic makeup, there was a common thread that bound them all together: street people freaked them out. I got in trouble for housing transients in my office on cold rainy nights in the north, was scolded for the way I welcomed homeless people into our pews in the south, and when it came to my beloved Orange County church, the common practice during office hours was to try and send "those people" to the Episcopal church next door.

Please don't get me wrong: each church had a wonderful emphasis on ministries of mercy in its overall scheme of missions and outreach. God's people gave away thousands of dollars and visited soup kitchens and supported inner-city missions and passed out blankets and food in the parks year after year. The only time things became difficult is when people on the street came to church. Why? Because when that happened, the congregation wasn't in a position to define its terms of service. When a babbling, dirty, mentally ill homeless person came wandering into the sanctuary for worship, the church people had to talk to them. And look at them. And more often than not, smell them. At those moments, writing a check to the local social service agency or bringing a bag of food to the food pantry or signing up for a mission trip to help poor people in Haiti didn't do anything to make the babbling, dirty, smelly person go away. What I found was that with the exception of a few people, my churches never came to a place of welcoming and accepting the least of those among us.

Verse 1: As we open the second chapter of James, God's Word speaks to this very situation. The teaching point can't be any more straightforward for the Christian than James makes it: don't show favoritism. Favoritism refers not simply to elevating a person in stature, but in the Greek it connotes giving special treatment to someone based on things like wealth, rank, or social status. Among God's people, this is not to be! Let's see how James develops this in the next several verses.

Verse 2: The setup here is designed to show a very clear contrast between one kind of person and another. The setting is a place public worship. The reader can't miss what James is getting at.

Gold rings & fine clothes: Jewelry was common among the Jews, but not very many (especially among those who had been scattered by persecution) could afford real gold. Likewise the case with expensive clothes. And while there's nothing wrong with having and wearing those things, some people would do so for the express purpose of being noticed or to broadcast their status. Some things never change!

Shabby clothes: Not necessarily dirty, but certainly old and worn. This would be common dress for the majority of James' readers. Think of a common, everyday person in common, everyday clothes.

Verse 3: Here, the act of favoritism is laid out; the rich man is chosen over the poor man, creating an embarrassing situation for the poor man, not to mention a general sense of uneasiness among the rest of the congregation. Here's how it would look:

Here's a good seat for you: In the typical synagogue, there weren't a lot of seats; maybe a few benches along the wall. They were considered places of honor. This is where our rich man is placed.

You stand there; sit on the floor by my feet: Maybe not as bad as it sounds, but still not very good in the optics department, let alone the heart department. Since there were few benches, most people would either stand through the service or sit "crisscross applesauce" on the floor. While there was nothing inherently dishonorable about standing or sitting through the time of worship, to be publicly put in one of those places so that a person of greater means could have a seat of honor would be hurtful and demoralizing.

Verse 4: In this verse, James follows the next logical step of instruction. Having told the story to his readers and having given them a strong picture to hold in their mind's eye, he now explains the problem with it.

Have you not discriminated among yourselves...: Is the problem here that of a rich man being rich? No. Is the problem here that of a rich man being given a good seat for worship? No. The problem is not with the rich man at all. The issue at hand, the sin which has been committed, is that the rich man has been shown favoritism over the poor man because of his wealth and position in the world. To Christ's people, those things are not to matter. When we play favorites as God's people, look at how we are characterized by Scripture:

...And become judges with evil thoughts?: Some commentators say that this phrase is better translated "judges with vicious intentions." The point is that to show favoritism in any area of our life together as Christians is to set ourselves up as judges. And when people are judged, some will come out on top...while others will be relegated to the dingy, neglected corners of our world. You and I both know that this is not God's will for us, for anyone, in Christ Jesus.

Wrapping Up

Can you remember a time when you were subjected to the corners of your world because the favoritism of others passed you by? How about all those value judgments people at school made without even knowing who you were or what you were about? So often there was no rhyme or reason to it; you were either in or out. When you were in, there was exhilaration, but it was mixed with fear because you never knew when the ride would end. If you were out, then

you knew better than most the kind of loneliness and sense of worthlessness that could consume your days.

Folks, the love of God in Christ excludes no one. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has conquered the petty judgments of this world. The impartiality with which God lavished His saving grace on you and me has shown us that there is no room for favoritism in our own lives. Because of the shed blood of your Savior, you have been judged to be “in” once and for all, and guess what? There’s no need for the exhilaration of that truth to be mixed with fear, because Christ’s judgment is one that cannot be broken. Think about that this week as you interact with the people around you – even if they’re the babbling, dirty, smelly type. God will show you how to love them without partiality...and you will be blessed!

James 2:5-9

Getting Started

Today we continue our study on favoritism among God’s people. Our focus: The dishonor favoritism brings. Again, this is a great study for your small group or Sunday school class!

James 2:5-9

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," you are doing right. 9But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

If you were with us yesterday, you’ll remember that James introduced his teaching on the issue of favoritism by giving us the example of a rich man and a poor man being treated differently in a house of worship. The rich man was treated well and given honor, while the poor man was forced to stand or to sit on the floor. Today’s section of verses continues with the same illustration...but through the change in tone and the things that are said, we come to see that perhaps the illustration wasn’t so hypothetical! Here, James comes back to the issue of the poor.

Verse 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?” This is an appeal on James’ part that the church would remember God’s concern for the poor. With favoritism comes the danger of leaving the lost, lonely and lowly out in the cold, both literally and figuratively. This is also our first hint that the situation being described is one that is actually taking place within the church. James feared that by catering to the wealthy, the prominent, and others with certain social status, God’s people would be swayed by worldly influence and prestige and thus forget about the people who most needed help.

Verse 6: Now the full weight of the issue is brought to bear: no mere example of what might happen if they show favoritism, it becomes clear that James is talking about actual events.

You have insulted the poor: “Insulted” is certainly an accurate rendering of the Greek, but perhaps a better translation is, “You have dishonored the poor” (NKJV). By shunning the poor man in order to give attention to the rich, a judgment has been made, and the implication is that the poor man is less worthy of honor. To shake his readers up and bring them back to their senses, James now points out a cultural truth that they have seemingly forgotten:

Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Let’s put the disclaimer right up front: God’s Word is not saying that the wealthy are evil people who take advantage of the poor. But in this particular setting, where Jewish Christians had resettled into new lands due to persecution, they often found themselves on the bottom rung of the cultural and economic ladder. Nor were they always welcome in their new communities. Sometimes they were taken advantage of and harassed, and it was often done at the hands of the wealthy, influential people in town who had a vested interest in keeping the status quo. A couple of text notes:

Exploiting: Literally, “tyrannizing.” It was about power and control.

Dragging you into court: The Greek reference is to civil lawsuits, perhaps dealing with property rights or business issues.

Verse 7: Not only are certain wealthy people tyrannizing the Christians by dragging them into court, but they are also slandering the name of Christ. Now we have a hint at who these wealthy people might be: prominent Jews in the community who reject the message of Christ and seek to drive the Christians away. This in turn gives us insight as to why some in the church are showing favoritism towards these people. They’ll do anything to try and appease these detractors who are making life so difficult for them. Let’s move on to verse 8.

Verse 8: What do you do when you need to convince someone of something? You appeal to a higher authority. When my son throws one of the dogs in the pond (“I was giving it swimming lessons, Dad”) or my daughter paints her wall with Magic Markers (“I thought it would brighten things up, Dad”) I have to sit down with my children and explain why those things are not good ideas, and usually I have to back up my reasoning with elaborate PowerPoint presentations, charts, and academic citations, because my word isn’t good enough to stand on its own.

As James begins to wind down his point that showing favoritism is bad on just about every front, he locks everything down and ties it up by doing what? By appealing to a Higher Authority. His citation is nothing less than the Royal Law of Scripture: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19). Any Jewish person reading those words would automatically think of the companion verse from Deuteronomy 6 as well: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Taken together, those two verses sum up the whole of the Law and the Prophets, and so it becomes evident very quickly that James is not tooting his own horn over this matter. God’s Word shows that that favoritism is sin. In the next verse, we see that truth applied directly to James’ readers.

Verse 9: A few technical notes help us to see the strength with which God’s people are being called to account:

But if you show favoritism: This is better translated as “since you show favoritism.” The Greek structure of the phrase shows that this practice was indeed happening among the people.

Furthermore, the verb tense for “show favoritism” indicates that the practice of favoritism in their midst was habitual rather than occasional. In other words, this was an entrenched problem that was harming the spiritual lives of God’s people and it was negatively affecting their witness for Christ. They had become transgressors under the Law.

Wrapping Up:

When we first addressed the issue of favoritism yesterday, we talked about the fact that it was hurtful to the body of Christ on many different levels. As we close off our study for today, ask yourself this question: “Is there an area of my life where I tend to show favoritism for one person over another?” Maybe it’s a family member. Perhaps it’s a person or group at church. If you have several ministers in your congregation, you may find that you are guilty of showing favoritism in that respect. How might that affect your life and ministry for Jesus Christ? How does it impact your relationship with Christ? Has it compromised the integrity of your witness? Take some dedicated time this week and go through your relationships one by one, asking God to help you love each person in your life as He so faithfully loves you. He will gently show you where correction is needed... but He will also give you the strength to grow through it.

James 2:10-13

Getting Started

Today we finish our study on favoritism among God’s people. Our focus: Not favoritism, but grace and mercy!

James 2:10-13

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," also said, "Do not murder." 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!

I was playing a video game with my son yesterday called Tiki Mini-Golf. It was quite realistic, (at least as far as miniature golf goes) and we were having fun going from hole to hole trying to make par. I was actually feeling pretty good about myself, because I had a couple of aces and several birdies, and I was on my way to a new course record. Since that never happens to me on a real golf course, it was the perfect fantasy. But all too soon, reality intruded. On the eighth hole, some masochistic programmer decided that there should be a four-level ascending switchback trail to the green, and to add insult to injury, it wasn’t even a par-5. It took me 23 strokes to sink it. Up until that point, I had been perfect, but my crash and burn on hole number eight negated everything that I had accomplished.

Verse 10: Today we come to the end of a section in God’s Word on the dangers of showing favoritism. Thus far we’ve learned that it’s something that can pop up in our lives and in our churches pretty easily; that it’s damaging and dishonoring to others and to the Lord; and that in the final analysis, to show favoritism is to sin and transgress the Law of God. James wraps up this segment by showing how breaking the Law of God in just one point makes us guilty of breaking all of it, demonstrating the seriousness of the issue at hand. Take a look at how he explains this in the following verses.

Verse 11: The quotes here are taken from the Ten Commandments as they're presented in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Are the Commandments ten separate laws independent of each other? No. They are part of a unified whole, authored by One Divine Lawgiver. So, when one portion of the Law is broken, the entire Law has been transgressed. When I choked on the ascending switchback in Tiki Mini Golf, the strokes I took didn't just make for a bad hole, they ruined my entire round. The sin of favoritism (and any sin, for that matter) has the same impact. If that's the case, then where does that leave James' audience, and where does that leave you and me?

Verses 12-13: These verses give the final counsel on the issue. Let's take several phrases and break them down:

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged...: Notice that there are two components here. We are to both speak and act as those who will be judged. Our lives are to have unity in what we say and do as God's people. I don't know about you, but to me that's a convicting statement! The integrity of my character and the condition of my heart can be found wanting at any given moment, and I am keenly aware of the disconnect between my beliefs and my actions at times. But by what standard will we be judged? Here is where hope resurfaces and begins a work of change in us:

...By the law that gives freedom.: If you'll remember our study from chapter one, we learned that when James talks about the law that brings freedom, he's talking about Scripture in a special way. He is reminding us that it is the message of the Word – Christ's perfect life, His complete sacrifice for our sins by His death at Calvary, and His victorious resurrection over sin, death, and the devil himself – that gives us the power to do things He has called us to do. And that's really key here: in our own strength, we are powerless in the face of sin. But in the strength of the Lord, we have supernatural power to act as He has called us to act. In this case, that applies to the issue of favoritism. Since we remember that God has poured out His grace and mercy on us regardless of our station in life, that Christ shed His blood equally for all and not just for some, and that God continues to bless us as His people with a complete absence of favoritism, our joyful calling is to offer that same spirit of grace, mercy, and impartiality to those around us.

Verse 13: Here is the summary: If we conduct our relationships with others in the absence of mercy and with an attitude of judgment, such will be the judgment we receive from our heavenly Father. But mercy triumphs over judgment – and by showing mercy to others, our lives give evidence that we ourselves have received God's mercy. Let's pray that that would be the case for each of us!

Wrapping Up:

I hope that as we close off this particular topic, you've been challenged to do some growing in this area of your life. One of the great things about studying God's Word is that it always shows us new opportunities to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. As we head into the weekend, I pray that you'll get to spend some quality time with the people you love, and I also would encourage you to make time for worship this weekend in a solid, Bible-teaching church. If you already have a church home where you can worship, serve, and celebrate, great! If not, then this is the perfect time to find one. God's people need each other, and God designed your Christian faith to be lived out in community with other believers. Lord willing, we'll meet again at the first of the week. Until then, take care!

James 2:14-17

Getting Started

Today we begin a series on the nature of true faith. Our focus: The issue of faith; the issue of works; the relationship between them.

James 2:14-17

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.

When I was in high school, I dated a girl from the next town over. She was every boy's dream: intelligent, beautiful, athletic, and a great personality. I carried pictures of her in my wallet, and I was always talking to everybody about how great she was. The problem was that since she lived in the next town, nobody ever actually saw her, let alone saw us together. And because I was on the shy, quiet side, the rumor mill started and it became a widespread assumption among my peers that I had simply made this girl up. The picture, they said, was of someone too pretty to be interested in me. The stories I told about her were the product of my imagination. My explanation that they never saw her because she lived 15 miles away and went to a different school was too convenient. I became the laughing stock of my school. But several months later at the Homecoming dance, I showed up with Emilie on my arm. And once the surprised gawks and stares had stopped, an amazing thing happened: the snickers and taunts and jokes made at my expense stopped too. Why? Because I finally had the chance to make good on my claim, and the evidence I produced as proof was incontrovertible.

Verse 14: Here in verse 14, James introduces an important concept: if a person claims to have faith, but has no verifiable evidence to back it up, is that faith genuine? Can it save him? Is faith without deeds really faith at all?

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith...: Notice that the text is very clear: it doesn't say that the man has faith, but that he claims to have faith.

But has no deeds: The verb tense here in the Greek refers to continuous action. In other words, "If a man claims to have faith but continually, habitually lacks any evidence of it..." Can such faith save him? This is a rhetorical question; the answer is decidedly "no." Now, having said that, let me take a brief step back and give us all a reminder about the nature of saving faith. God's Word is very clear that works cannot save us. Salvation comes solely by grace through faith, and even faith itself is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). James has asserted the very same thing earlier in this letter (cf. 1:17-18), and so we need to understand that the subject here is not works-righteousness. The point being made is that while we are not saved by works, works will be a natural manifestation of saving faith.

Verse 15: Here James gives a simple illustration, one which would ring true for his readers because they had many poor among them. A person without clothes or daily food would

certainly be noticed, and his or her need would be obvious. Let's see how things play out in the next verse.

Verse 16: Last week my daughter Taylor took a chunk out of her hand trying to cut an orange with a big kitchen knife. When I heard the screaming, I ran down to the house from my office and found her at the sink with a look of terror in her eyes. Suppose I had simply said to her, "My goodness honey, that's quite a cut. I certainly hope you feel better soon," and then left her to fend for herself. Not only would I deserve visit from Child Protective Services, I would also be a jerk of a father! The same can be said for the response given to James' illustration here in verse 16. It's a no-brainer, and it's meant to be that way so that no one can miss the gist of it: faith without works is like words of compassion without acts of compassion.

Verse 17: James is about to pick up the argument from a different perspective in verses 18 and following, but he pauses here to give a summary statement: Faith which is unaccompanied by action is dead. Just as my loving words to my daughter, absent of caring for her wound, would not be genuine, a person who professes to have faith but whose life doesn't give evidence of it through works is simply deceiving himself.

Wrapping Up:

I won't leave you today by wishing you well and hoping that you're warm and well-fed! However, I will leave you today with a couple of things to think about: First, rejoice in the fact that God has saved you by His grace! His bestowal of life and salvation to you through His Son is the greatest gift that you will ever receive, and the fact that you did nothing (nor could do anything) to earn His favor makes His love all the more amazing. Second, as you think about that precious gift, take a moment and assess how it flows through you and into others. Remember, though you aren't saved by works, works are a natural outflow of your genuine, saving faith. I pray you'll be blessed as you think of even more ways to live out that truth. See you next time!

James 2:18-26

Getting Started

Today we continue our look at the nature of true faith. Our focus: The issue of faith, the issue of works, and the relationship between them.

James 2:18-26

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," 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.

As we said last time, James has already given a summary statement on the issue of faith and works in the previous verses. True faith is naturally going to manifest itself through good works. It's possible, however, that some were in opposition to this teaching, and so in verses 18 through the end of the chapter James redoubles his efforts to show the relationship that works have to saving faith.

Verse 18: You have faith; I have deeds: A flawed argument that James exposes in the next sentence.

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do: This is an easy comparison. Which of the two will hold water? The point remains unchanged, being that the only evidence able to show the genuineness of faith is the works that it produces. But you might ask, "What about intellectual assent to the truth of the Gospel? Doesn't that count?" Look how James treats that concept in the following verse.

Verse 19: There's an old sermon illustration that talks about a man with a headache. He has a bottle of aspirin in his hand, and he's talking to himself in the mirror of his medicine cabinet. "I believe that this aspirin will relieve my headache," he says. "It says so right here on the bottle." He goes on, "I have no reason to doubt that what it says is true. I trust this product 100%." But instead of opening the bottle and popping the tablets into his mouth, the man inexplicably puts the bottle back into the medicine cabinet and walks away, his head still pounding. He didn't receive the benefit of the medicine because he didn't act on his belief.

So it is, James says, with people who say they believe in the tenets of the faith, but have never internalized or personalized them. It's one thing to say that Christ is the Savior. It's another thing entirely to say that Christ is *my* Savior. Anyone – even demons! – can be orthodox in their understanding of God and Scripture. But unless those truths are appropriated by faith, they are of no benefit.

Verse 20: Again, James is not talking about salvation by works as opposed to salvation by faith. Rather, he is comparing faith that is living and active to a so-called faith which is dead, and actually no faith at all. Let's move on and take the next several verses together as a way to sum up.

Verses 21-26: In this section James uses the well known Old Testament accounts of Abraham and Rahab as examples of faith in action, or faith marked by the accompaniment of deeds. You can read about Abraham in Genesis 12 and Genesis 22, and you can pick up the story of Rahab in Joshua 2. Consider it your homework for the day! James' readers, as Jews, would be familiar with both histories, so they're good way for him to state his case. And once more, to beat a dead horse, just what is the case being made? That true faith is always demonstrated, always marked, always proved, by the presence of good works. I love what Jerry Bridges writes in his wonderful book called *The Pursuit of Holiness*: "Faith and holiness are inextricably linked. Obeying the commands of God usually involves believing the promises of God" (p. 145).

Wrapping Up:

As we close up shop for the day, let me say something that applies not only to what we've just covered, but to our study time in general: there is much more that can be said about these topics, and much deeper study that can take place. Our format here at EDiBS is designed with several things in mind — namely, to get you consistently engaged with your Bible on a daily basis and to give you a greater sense of understanding about what you're reading. But another

great benefit of EDiBS is that as you grow in your facility to interact with Scripture, your appetite for deeper study will grow as well, prompting you to begin searching things out for yourself. It's all part of the process of discipleship, and I pray that it will be as profound a journey in your life as I'm finding it in my own. I hope you'll join in again tomorrow as we begin the next chapter in our study. Until then, take care!

James 3:1-5

Getting Started

Today we begin James chapter 3. Our focus: The tongue, so untamable!

James 3:1-5

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.

Growing up, did you ever have your mouth washed out with soap for something you said? For me it happened twice that I can remember, and though I don't recall the word or phrase I used to offend my mother's sensibilities, I can tell you to this day what Ivory tastes like. At 99.44/100% pure, it was evidently on better footing than my mouth was. As we begin to study what God's Word has to say about our speech and the power we possess in our tongues, you might want to hide the soap in your home for the next couple of days!

John MacArthur, in his excellent MacArthur Study Bible notes, gives an enlightening introduction to this section of verses. He writes, "In this passage, James uses the common Jewish literary device of attributing blame to a specific bodily member. He personifies the tongue as being representative of human depravity and wretchedness. In this way, he echoes the Scriptural truth that the mouth is a focal point and vivid indicator of man's fallenness and sinful heart condition" (*MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 1930). Let's see where things take us in these first five verses.

Verse 1: Not many of you should presume to be teachers: James begins this section by reiterating something he said back in chapter one. The reference here is to the official teaching or preaching offices in the church, and because judgment for those in these offices will be stricter than for the general population, great care must be taken in undertaking such an occupation. Is the call to teach automatically a sentence of condemnation? Of course not. But teachers must give special consideration to the use of their words, and as we'll see in the next verse, though different people tend to stumble in different ways, one of the more common areas of such stumbling has to do with our tongues.

Verse 2: We all know what it means to stumble, and we're all experts in our own particular areas! But as I've just mentioned, one place where many of us seem to excel in our stumbling is in the things that come out of our mouths. Scripture is full of references — in both the Old and

New Testaments — about the evil of the tongue. This is what prompts James to say the following:

If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man: In other words, since we all continually stumble in what we say, this is an impossibility! James uses the argument for precisely that purpose: to show that the propensity to sin with our tongues is always with us.

Able to keep his whole body in check: Control the tongue and you can control everything else. But again, this is wishful thinking. The only thing that can be effectively brought to bear against the power of the tongue is the power of God. How powerful, then, is the tongue? Let's read on to the next couple of verses.

Verse 3: If you've ever been on a horse or even stood next to one, then you know how powerful they are. Their muscles ripple with strength, their eyes are full of spirit, and their demeanor is one of confidence and independence. But put a tiny bit into the animal's mouth and you can control its whole body.

Verse 4: In the same way, a very small rudder can steer a large ship, even when it's buffeted by the wind and the waves.

Verse 5: Just as a bit can direct and control a horse, or a rudder steer a mighty ship, so the tongue — small but mighty — makes great boasts and wields incredible, even disproportionate power over our lives. When you think about the analogies given here in the Word of God, they definitely find their mark, don't they!

Wrapping Up:

As we'll see next time, James is spending time here pointing out the power of the tongue for a specific reason. To borrow from the *Spiderman* epic, "With great power comes great responsibility!" The problem is that when it comes to our tongues, we are notoriously irresponsible in the way that we use them. As we wrap up today and prepare for our time together tomorrow, spend some time assessing your own tongue. What words do you find it forming? What kind of tone does it sound? What attitudes does it help to portray toward — and about — the people in your life? If you're like me, you'll probably find this a timely study...and you'll probably find room for a good dose of repentance as well! The good news is that we have a great God who, through His Son, graciously and lovingly forgives us when we have sinned — even when we have sinned with our tongues. Approach Him now and ask to be made clean; He will do it! Until next time, may the joy of the Lord be your strength!

James 3:5-8

Getting Started

Today we continue to look at the power of the tongue. Our focus: The depth of its power shows the depth of its ability to destroy.

James 3:5-8

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.

Many of you will remember the recent wildfire in Southern California, set by an arsonist. It was an amazing display of destructive power. It killed four firefighters, destroyed 34 homes, and burned 60 square miles of forest and brushland. It took 2500 firefighters to put it out, and aside from the tragic loss of life, it did over \$8 million in damage, not counting the cost of fighting it. My parents sat on their patio and watched the fire from a distance. In their 50 years of living on the west coast, they've seen lots of forest fires, but none, they said, were as bad as this one. What is especially mind-numbing is that the blaze had no multiple starting points; all it took was one spark in one spot at the base of a slope. As you picture that scene in your mind's eye, you might just as easily find the image of your tongue coming into focus!

Verses 5-6: Just like one spark can start an enormous and damaging fire, so, says God's Word, the tongue is a fire as well, and though small, it has the capacity to do enormous and tragic damage when it burns. Look at how James describes it:

A world of evil among the parts of the body...: Recalling our last study, here the tongue is personified as being a source of wickedness and depravity. This common literary device in Jewish writings would have been a powerful illustration for James' readers, even more so than it is for us.

It corrupts the whole person...: Meaning that it pollutes or contaminates.

Sets the whole course of his life on fire...: This can also be translated "circle of life." In other words, the ungodly, sinful use of our tongues not only corrupts us, but serves to negatively influence everything and everyone in our sphere of influence as well.

And is itself set on fire by hell: Some commentators say that this is another word picture that would be familiar to Jews who had once lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem. "Hell" here is "Gehenna" in the Greek; a reference to the Valley of Hinnom southwest of Jerusalem where the city dump was located. Not only was it trashy and smelly, but it was constantly on fire. Jesus Himself pointed to Gehenna as being representative or symbolic of eternal punishment, and James follows suit. We might say it this way: the tongue at its most destructive is the epitome of what it means to be controlled by Satan himself.

Verse 7-8: There is irony in the fact that man can tame most everything in creation. Our ability to train beasts is, in one sense, amazing. Go to Sea World or the zoo and you'll marvel at what we've accomplished with every kind of animal on the face of the earth. Yet in the final analysis, we are nonetheless powerless to pacify the beast that is the tongue. What an unholy trinity James uses to describe it!

Restless: Always moving, always looking for the next victim, unable to be still; **Evil:** As explained in verse 6;

Full of deadly poison: Like a snake that can strike with deadly force, the venom that drips from our tongues (drawn up from the reservoirs of our hearts!) is lethal to others – and to us as well.

Wrapping Up:

If the tongue is so evil, then why do we have it? What good is it? Why not get rid of it? Besides being a necessary component to our health and well being in the physical sense, it also has — even with its great propensity for evil — a redeemed and sanctified (set apart) purpose in our spiritual lives as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Tomorrow we'll see how that works, and we'll also have the opportunity to ask God to bring that about in and through each one of us. Until next time, God bless you richly in both word and deed!

James 3:9-12

Getting Started

Today we finish our study of the tongue. Our focus: Final evidence of the evil of the tongue, and a call to account.

James 3:9-12

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 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.

One of the key ingredients of integrity is consistency. Many people describe integrity as acting the same way in private as you do in public. It's the absence of duplicity, the refusal to be two-faced. It's genuineness of character regardless of the circumstances. Our high school and college years are often a severe test of integrity, a learning time in more ways than one. Once we graduate, the business world becomes an even more rigorous testing ground. You might be thinking right now of a time when you were hard pressed to follow through on your convictions.

If we were to talk about the integrity of the tongue, we might describe it as consistency of another kind. It's the refusal to speak out of both sides of your mouth; the genuineness of your words regardless of the circumstances. And just like integrity in other areas of life, each us can probably think of times when we have been hard pressed to be consistent in what we say. In this final section of verses on the topic, James describes one more area where we come up short when it comes to the use of our tongues.

Verse 9: We praise...we curse: Jews had a cultural custom of verbally blessing the Lord ("Blessed be the name of the Lord" or "Blessed be He") whenever God was mentioned in a conversation. James is making the point that as readily as they let blessings roll off of their lips in a public show of piety, his readers just as readily curse their neighbors. The absurdity and shame of that truth is evident in the tone of James' writing. How is it possible — and furthermore, how could it possibly be logical — that we would in one moment give praise and adoration to God and in the next moment curse men and women who have been made in His image? The two practices are diametrically opposed to one another. In fact, to curse God's creation is to curse God Himself. It's philosophically untenable, theologically unacceptable, and actually, just plain old wishy-washy. We all know that, of course...but it happens all the time, doesn't it! This shows you how bent human nature is. We are experts at exercising the ridiculous in life, aficionados at choosing evil over good. And while I won't win any popularity points for pointing out to you that you are innately sinful and that this whole subject matter of the tongue is a

superb example of the fact, Scripture is crystal clear that left to our own devices, there is nothing for us but utter self-destruction.

Verse 10: Here James turn a bit of a corner and begins to lay out his final illustrations on the issue at hand.

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing: A further delineation of what the common practice was among the people.

My brothers, this should not be: In the words of Dr. John Maxwell, this is an I.Q. test! Of course it shouldn't be! But as James brings the situation to light and condemns it, he lovingly calls the church to account and in so doing, calls them to repentance at the same time.

Verses 11-12: With talk here of salt water (or in the Greek, bitter water) in the midst of fresh, and figs, olives, and grapevines reproducing each other, James uses three closing analogies to show that just as some things simply don't occur in nature, neither should the unbridled, uncontrolled use of the tongue occur in the household of faith. Not only should it not be, it must not be, for such activity puts the unity of the church and the relationships of individual brothers and sisters in Christ at risk. Furthermore, it could also hinder the witness of Christ's people among those who still need to hear the Gospel.

Wrapping Up

As a pastor one of the most common ailments I see in the church among people is this struggle over the tongue. The tongue causes church splits. The tongue causes bad blood between believers. The tongue brings pain and suffering both to those who field it and to those who wield it. Though I'm thankful not to have ever gone through a church split, I've had many families come to my churches as a result of one elsewhere. So many times it's a he said/she said/they said/we said situation. You know what? Nobody wins. Nobody except Satan. It's been said that the church would be perfect if it wasn't for the people! But since the church is full of us, it might be a good thing to remember that the whole reason we're here together is that we are in need of being saved from our sins - sometimes, especially the sins so evident on our tongues. As we close off for the week, let's do it by loving one another, praying for one another, and forgiving one another, just as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven us. The more we're involved in those kinds of words, the less opportunity there will be for the other stuff to rear its ugly head. God bless you and your church family as you worship Him this weekend! We'll see you back here on Monday.

James 3:13-16

Getting Started

Today we begin a new section on heavenly wisdom versus demonic wisdom. Our focus: Discerning one from the other.

James 3:13-16

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.

One of the great things about Scripture is that it frequently reinforces itself. Not only that, but it seems to have the knack of reinforcing a particular point of truth at just the time I need to have it refreshed in my heart! As we move into this important section on wisdom in James 3, what we find is that it is a reinforcement of an earlier teaching on the same topic. If you'll remember back to James 1, we learned some very practical points about wisdom:

If we lack it, we should ask for it. (1:5)

In response, God will liberally give it! (1:5)

When we ask for it, we are to do so in faith, not doubting. (1:6)

Verse 13: We also learned that wisdom is more than simple knowledge, but rather, wisdom is understanding combined with practical skill. It's principle put into practice. It's the divinely given help that we need when faced with trials in life. As we approach verse 13, the question of wisdom and understanding is once again brought to bear.

Who is wise and understanding among you?: The Greek word used for understanding in this verse is found only here in all of the New Testament. It applies to a professional tradesman or business person who knows how to apply his skills to practical situations. In this context it applies to someone who is skilled in how to live successfully.

Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom:

Look at the masterful way this is put before us: if someone is wise, let them show it. How are they to show it? By a life which demonstrates the fruit of wisdom. What is the fruit of wisdom? The fruit of wisdom is a life of genuine faith. How do we know that faith is genuine? It's going to be evidenced by the accompaniment of deeds done in humility. Deeds done in humility give witness to the power of God, who is the One who promised to give wisdom liberally in response to those who ask for it in the first place! This is a summary of all that James has taught thus far in this epistle! And notice that it all goes back not to us, but to God, who gives generously without finding fault! Isn't that marvelous? Now – why would James return to this issue at this point in his letter? Let's look at the next verse.

Verse 14: Have you ever held a grudge? Ever refused to let go of something and move on with your life? Ever been hurt and couldn't find, or didn't want to find it in your heart to forgive someone? Yep, me too. And apparently, so it was in the lives of James' readers as well.

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts: Remember, we've just come off of a section on the terrible, havoc-wreaking power of the tongue. James wasn't addressing an imaginary issue; it was all too real in the lives of some to whom he was writing. Bitter envy and selfish ambition is Man-centered wisdom at its best (or worst, as the case may be). It seeks revenge; it harbors bitterness; it looks out for Number One, even if it means stepping on other people in the process. Because of strife among some in the churches, this man-centered wisdom was in abundant evidence, and James was concerned. What was his prescription?

Do not boast about it or deny the truth: Rather than take pride in a bitter, hardened heart, rather than deny the reality of those feelings and pretend they're not there, own them. Be real

about them. Understand that continuing to harbor them is not only NOT God's will for you, but yet another exercise in the ridiculous, an act of choosing evil over good. Look at how James puts it in the next verse:

Verse 15: Such behavior is not "wisdom" from heaven; it is not wisdom at all! Instead, it is earthly (of the world), unspiritual (decidedly not of God), and demonic (in actuality, of the devil himself). Do you see the progression? When this kind of a mindset begins to envelop us, the results can only be disastrous. Verse 16 sums it up:

Verse 16: Bitter envy and selfish ambition hurts everybody and only produces negative things, including:

Disorder: A word which gives the impression of chaos and instability.

Every evil practice: Literally, "Every worthless work."

Wrapping Up

As we can see from these four verses, human wisdom can be a deathtrap for our service to the Lord, our relationships with others, and even our faith itself. God's Word today calls us not only to recognize the signs of human wisdom, but to flee it and run to Him instead. Do you need to admit to the reality of human wisdom in your life? Is it eating you up and hardening your heart? Now's the time to own it! Take some time to pray and ask God to take it away and replace it with His wisdom, the wisdom that is truly from above. Remember, He gives it liberally to all who ask, and He gives it without reproach! Tomorrow we'll talk about that wisdom in depth. See you then!

James 3:17-18

Getting Started

Today we continue our study on heavenly wisdom versus demonic wisdom. Our focus: The beauty and blessing of heavenly wisdom!

James 3:17-18

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.

Have you ever been wise in your own eyes? Usually, that's a lot like being a legend in your own mind! I remember a time in my life when I thought I had it all together. My life was like a well-oiled machine; a place for everything and everything in its place. I had the perfect job, the perfect colleagues, the perfect family, pretty much the perfect situation all the way around – in my own eyes, that is. But underneath the smooth exterior there were cracks. Nothing earth-shattering, but I knew I was asserting control in areas of my life that really needed to be in the hands of God, and I knew that to turn those things over to Him would take a huge step of faith.

Verse 17: If you've ever felt like that yourself, then take heart, because today's study in James 3 will greatly encourage you, and I also believe it will move you to begin yielding control to God in your own life. Yesterday we talked about the detrimental effects of human wisdom. Today, however, we have the joy and blessing of looking at wisdom from above! There are six

characteristics of heavenly wisdom. Let's take them one by one in what essentially will be a brief word study, starting in verse 17:

Pure: Heavenly wisdom is first of all marked by moral and spiritual integrity. It is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, affecting positive and ongoing change in our hearts. It is 180 degrees removed from human wisdom, which, as you'll remember from yesterday, is characterized by disorder, chaos, and instability.

Peace-loving: This can also be translated as "peace-promoting." Wisdom from on high brings with it the reality of a peace which the world cannot give; the peace that only Jesus Christ is able to give to us. This is in contrast to human wisdom, which is full of bitterness and strife.

Considerate: Commentators tell us that the closest English equivalent to the Greek term here is "sweet reasonableness." It means patience in times of trial; peace of mind in times of conflict; the ability to be kind in the face of mistreatment; and having a spirit of gentleness and assurance in the midst of uncertainty. You'll recall that human wisdom is none of those things.

Submissive: This word gets a bad rap in today's culture because there's all kinds of baggage attached to it. However, in the Greek this is actually a military term. Submission to authority for the sake of a greater good was considered an honorable trait to possess. Such a person would be teachable, loyal, and would adhere to established codes of conduct. Spiritually speaking, heavenly wisdom brings about a sense of holy submission in the life of the believer. Because we can trust that God always has our greatest good in mind, we gladly give Him our loyalty and sit under His teaching. We gladly view His Word as authoritative. We even willingly submit to discipline, because we know that whom God loves he also disciplines – always for our good. Another way to translate this term is "willing to yield."

Full of mercy and good fruit: Whenever I talk about mercy with children, I explain it to them along with the word grace. In simple terms, grace is getting the good thing that you don't deserve. Mercy, on the other hand, is not getting the bad thing that you do deserve. Wisdom that is imparted to us by God brings about a spirit of mercy in us, including the willingness to forgive and the ability to show compassion, even to those who don't, by their actions, deserve it.

Impartial and sincere: Another reference to something James has already covered in an in-depth manner, impartiality is that special trait seen in people who are consistent in their commitments, convictions, and actions. They don't show favoritism. The Greek term used here is very strong, again being one that is used only here in the entire New Testament. Sincerity refers to an absence of hypocrisy. One way to say it, then, is that Heavenly wisdom cultivates a heart that is equally loving and compassionate toward all.

Taken together, the blessings, benefits and sheer beauty of heavenly wisdom make for an amazing package of spiritual strength and sustenance. And the great news is that this wisdom is not for the spiritually elite, not reserved for the "super Christian" or the professional church worker. It's the very same wisdom that God gives liberally and without reproach to all who ask! That means that it is available to you! It means that the futile exercise of trying to be wise in your own eyes can finally be set aside for the far superior, all surpassing wisdom of God. And it means that your ceaseless striving and your sense of frustration over things not being right and your days of banging your head against the wall because of the agonizing decisions you have to make can all be traded in for the peace, and serenity, and gentleness of heart that comes from

laying those things before Jesus instead. It's a big step, that step of faith...but are you willing to take it today? Are you willing to believe that the Lord God Almighty can do more than all you could possibly ask or imagine in your life as you hand over the reigns to Him? Are you willing to trust that living by His wisdom is a better alternative than living by your wits? And are you willing to put your faith in His promise that as He gives you His wisdom, your life will be steadily transformed into what He has dreamed you to be instead of the cheap two-dimensional facsimile you've been settling for all this time?

Verse 18: That's what James is talking about when he speaks of peacemakers raising a harvest of righteousness. God has called you for a unique purpose in life. Today might just be the time for His wisdom to take hold of you and move you to a place of new trust and transformation in life. It will happen. But you have to ask. Why don't you do it now?

Wrapping Up

Yesterday you owned up to the presence of that dastardly, deceptive human wisdom in your life. Today is your chance to own up to your need for heavenly wisdom. It's your opportunity to ask God to do a new work in you; it's your time to place your trust in His promises in a way that you never have before. I'm set to make that trade-in right along side of you. Let's believe together that right here, right now, things are beginning anew. Lord God, pour out your wisdom on your people, and give it generously. We ask this for Jesus' sake, amen!

James 4:1-3

Getting Started

Today we see James address the issue of strife within the church. Our focus: Selfishness and pride don't make for smooth relations with others!

James 4:1-3

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.

I'm not what you'd call a violent person, but I've had my moments. Like the time I chased my older brother around the house with a kitchen knife. He was six years my senior and like any big brother, there were times when he got a little too rough and overbearing. One day, his teasing and pushing sent me over the edge and I snapped. Since Jim was so much bigger and stronger than I was, my nine-year-old sensibilities went for the most threatening object I could find, and the knife pretty much did the trick. I don't remember how close I got to actually cutting him, but I do remember that he left me alone for awhile after that!

Verse 1: It may sound unnerving, and maybe even scandalous, but when James writes in this section of verses about fights and quarrels, he's talking about more than personal tiffs and individual conflicts between people. The fighting being described here is between different factions in the church: real life, knock-down drag-out battles that had the capacity to destroy. And though we don't know the precise nature of the disputes, we do know what caused them:

Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? Internal desires prompted external conflict. And what of those desires? The Greek word used here is one that has only negative connotations. It's used to define the pursuit of worldly pleasure, and in fact it's where we get the English word "hedonism." So in the constant battle that God's people wage between the flesh and the Spirit, in this instance the flesh was working overtime and having its way in the congregation. Rather than fighting the flesh, James' readers embraced the flesh and fought each other instead. What we see here is a picture of sin gaining the upper hand in the midst of a group of believers.

Verse 2: Verse 2 gives us further insight into the activities surrounding these conflicts. The lust for things of the world was strong, because it was perceived that the things of the world would bring happiness. When they were not attainable by legitimate means, people resorted to illegitimate means – even going so far as to murder. Yet still they did not have what they wanted. Take a look at what James says at this point, because it is pivotal:

You do not have, because you do not ask God: Whatever it was that these folks were chasing after and fighting over, they had left out the most important part of the equation – including God in the mix as the One who could deliver what was most needed. Notice that I said needed, not wanted. This is another issue that begs the question. Since true happiness, joy and fulfillment can only be provided in life by God Himself, and since these people would have known that and been accountable for that knowledge, chances are they didn't ask God for the things that they wanted because they knew that those things would not be pleasing to their Heavenly Father. The evidence stacks up pretty convincingly that this was a group that had gone astray and lost its way; a group that had traded heavenly wisdom for the seductive and destructive way of worldly wisdom. The next verse confirms it.

Verse 3: When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives: Literally, to ask in an evil manner. To ask with wrong motives means to ask, not in keeping with the greater good or with a mind to build up the body of Christ, but to ask with selfish, self-serving intentions. Some in this group were so spiritually out of touch that they weren't even able to approach the Living God with proper humility.

Wrapping Up

In every age of the church, there are those among the body who are actually of the body, having been made new creations in Christ... and also those who are not genuine believers, but are simply along for the ride. They misguidedly view church membership as a form of spiritual insurance, or as a way to help their business, or as an activity that shows them to be upstanding members of their community. It's possible that some of the battle lines which had been drawn by James' readers could have been the pitting of devoted followers of Christ against those who were denigrating the faith by worldly living. Personally, though, I think it was more that God's people were simply living in accordance with the flesh instead of the Spirit. And while they didn't need to be chased around with a big holy kitchen knife to get them back on track, a good spiritual kick upside the head wouldn't be out of order. When we get together next time, be ready, because James is about to put his boots on! Take care; I'll see you tomorrow!

James 4:4-6

Getting Started

Today we see James continue to address the issue of strife within the church. Our focus: The danger of friendship with the world.

James 4:4-6

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? 6But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

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

Yesterday in James 4:1-3, we saw James take his readers to task for the fighting and quarreling that was going on among them. Conflict was dividing them and ruining their church, not to mention the fact that it couldn't have been doing any good in terms of their evangelistic outreach! Today, James gets to the root of the problem. Ultimately, he says, it all stems from the issue of divided loyalties: the people have chosen friendship with the world over friendship with God. Here we see that choice condemned in the strongest of terms:

Verse 4: You adulterous people: This is a common Old Testament picture of spiritual unfaithfulness. James' readers, as Jews, would be immediately familiar with it, and there would be no way for them to miss the meaning of what was being said. Just as God's covenant people of old prostituted themselves over and over again by following after other gods, so James' audience was doing the same through friendship with the world and its evil system.

Friendship with the world: This particular Greek word for friendship is used only here in the New Testament, and it refers to a strong emotional attachment to something. Such an attachment to the world would necessarily relegate a personal relationship with Christ to the back burner.

Verse 5: Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?: Though a brief glance might render this verse somewhat confusing, a careful look clears things up. The word *spirit* here is not to be taken as a reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather our own human spirit, which indeed envies intensely...after what is evil! Our human nature is stained with sin, and given the choice, it will always veer toward the way of the world rather than the way of the Lord. This is one reason why friendship with the world is so dangerous; we need very little encouragement to cultivate it. If this is the case, then where does that leave us? Let's look at the next verse.

Verse 6: Just when things look hopeless for this situation, James speaks the word of the Gospel. (Whenever I read through James three and four, when I get to this verse I always breathe out, "Finally!") To this point he has made quite clear that because of their strife, because of their infighting and because of their bent toward the things of the world over and above the things of God, God's people are under judgment. Yet now James says:

But He gives us more grace: More grace! That's great! Just what does that mean? It means that though our sinful nature is strong, and though the allure of the world is powerful, the grace

of God to forgive and restore when we are caught in the midst of those things is stronger. What is the key to knowing that grace?

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble: The key is a humble heart, one that recognizes that there is a God, and that you are not in the running for the title!

Wrapping Up

I think we all know about friendship with the world, because frankly, the allure of the world today is stronger now than it ever has been. We know what it means to desire what is unholy, and we know the rush that comes from following after something that gives momentary pleasure, even if deep down we are attuned to its damaging long-term impact on our lives. Do you find yourself in a spot today where God seems far off because of your wandering? Are you at a place where you need to repent and turn back to the One who is a True Friend? Remember, though your sin may be great, God's grace in Jesus Christ is stronger, and He is ready to welcome you back, no matter where you've been! Humble yourself before Him right now, confess your guilt, and God will wash your sins away. Let's meet again next time to see if James prescribes similar action to his readers. God be with you!

James 4:7-10

Getting Started

Today we'll look more at how to extricate ourselves from the danger of friendship with the world. Our focus: Humility and repentance.

James 4:7-10

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.

When I was a child, there were times when I needed discipline and I knew I needed discipline! But there were also times when I was flippant or cocky as a kid, and in those moments I wasn't necessarily clued in to the inappropriateness of my attitude or behavior. In that kind of a situation, my dad had a ready-made phrase to pierce my insolence and bring me back to the real world: "You'd better get off of your high horse, mister!" His words by themselves were enough, but the tone of his words was what really got me!

Verse 7: As we study the verses before us today, those words from my childhood come floating back to me. Why? Because James, a spiritual father to the early church, is calling for nothing less than a high-horse dismount in the lives of the people to whom he is writing, and his tone could wither even the cockiest of his spiritual children! To the fighting, sinning, worldly church in the throes of disorder, chaos, and instability, he gives 10 commands designed to bring them back to the real world. Let's take a look at them.

Submit to God: Here is that military term again, which means "to line up under." God's people are to line up under His authority and give their allegiance to Him and no one else.

Resist the devil: Literally, “Take your stand against the devil.” If we are going to submit to God and give our allegiance to Him, then it is equally crucial that we stand against the enemy.

Verse 8: Come near to God: The sense here is one of pursuing intimacy with God, finding communion with Him and taking delight in our fellowship with Him. The promise is that as we do that, He will also come near to us. Of course, His love and mercy has already come near, because it is God in His love and mercy who has called us to repentance in the first place!

Wash your hands, you sinners: Jews were familiar with ceremonial washing of many kinds. Priests ceremonially washed their hands before approaching God in the temple. The picture here is of cleansing oneself from evil behavior. James pulls no punches when he calls the people sinners; it’s a term for those who are unregenerate and dead in their faith.

Purify your hearts, you double-minded: Washing of the hands refers to the external behavior; purifying the heart pertains to inner thoughts, motives and desires. Going back to his teaching in chapter one, James mentions once more the concept of double-mindedness, which refers to a soul divided between God and the world. What we are witnessing here is the call for an all-out purging of sin.

Verse 9: Grieve: This is a call to be truly broken over sin; a command to recognize and embrace the misery that comes from disobedience and separation from the Lord.

Mourn: Mourning is the inner response of the heart to separation from God.

Wail: A call to cry out over the guilt of sin. Again, we have the juxtaposition between the internal and the external taking place.

Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom: Here James uses yet another word found nowhere else in the New Testament. The laughter he talks about here is the glib, careless variety of those who seek only after pleasure and live for the moment. It describes people who give no thought to the things of God and have no concern for their spiritual state. The joy of sinners is fleeting and inauthentic; they are to leave it and consider instead the seriousness of their condition.

Verse 10: Humble yourselves: As we come to the last verse in this section, James sums up by calling for humility. It means to make oneself low. It speaks of a proper position before an Almighty God, and it is a fitting position for all who have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. To humble ourselves before God means to do all of what James has called for in the preceding verses. The promise? As we humble ourselves and return to God in repentance, He will lift us up. That’s good news!

Wrapping Up

As I read through this chapter of James, I’m struck by the seriousness with which James treats sin and separation from God. I’m moved by the depth of his call to repentance, and I am somewhat ill at ease when I see the length to which I am to go as I humble myself before my Heavenly Father. Maybe I’ve forgotten the true nature of my depravity – and maybe I’ve forgotten the true nature of God’s holiness as well. How long has it been since you’ve thought of those things? I pray that you’ll be meditating on them just as I will be, and I pray that God will

graciously bring each of us to a place of true humility, that He may lift us up. I'll see you on Monday.

James 4:11-12

Getting Started

Today we consider the issue of slander, judgment, and the law of God.

James 4:11-12

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?

When I think of the word slander, I usually think of it in the context of a lawsuit. That's probably how we hear it used most in our culture today. We live in a litigious society, and court cases dealing with slanderous behavior are heard every day. To slander someone means to speak evil of them, to defame them (there's another great lawsuit word!). But slander and defamation of character is not a modern evil; it goes back to the beginning of time.

Verse 11: James, having just come off of a scathing assessment of the behavior of his readers and a stirring call – actually, command – that they repent, now takes a more conciliatory, instructive tone as he talks about the importance of speaking the truth in our relationships.

Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it: Anyone who speaks evil against his brother becomes a judge. Not good! If I set myself up to be a judge, I've placed myself over the law, and am effectually judging it as well. There's a caveat here: if I am confronting known sin in a person's life, and I am doing it scripturally with the goal of bringing him or her to repentance and reconciliation, I am within my bounds as a member of Christ's body. The moment I talk to others about that situation and make a statement regarding that person's behavior, I've crossed the line. This happens all the time in the church, doesn't it! "Please don't tell anyone else...I'm just sharing this with you so that you can pray for Guinevere. She really needs the Lord to help her with her pickle addiction." What James is addressing here is the tendency for God's people to make critical, derogatory, or embellished remarks about other people in the body of Christ. To do so is a slandering and defamation not just of the victims of our talk, but a slandering and defamation of God's Law, which expressly forbids that kind of condemnation.

Verse 12: In my own weaker moments when I have said something I shouldn't have, what usually brings my sin to the front part of my brain is when I find myself doing precisely the thing I was criticizing in someone else. I'll be putting the milk back in the fridge after drinking straight from the jug, and suddenly it will dawn on me that I was just talking to someone about how gross so-and-so was because they were double dipping their veggies at last week's party. It's a minor example, but you can fill in the more serious breaches of this principle on your own. When we refuse to submit to the Law in this respect, we place ourselves above it.

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge: God Himself! He alone has the authority to assess the life of another. He alone can save; He alone can destroy. The good news, of course, is that

this One who has the power to destroy, did destroy – through the death of His own Son. Jesus has paid the penalty of your sin and declared you righteous through the cleansing power of His blood. The One who rightly judges us has judged us Not Guilty because He Himself took our punishment. What mercy that is – and thus, what mercy we should have when it comes to dealing with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and indeed, all people.

But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? A self explanatory conclusion to James' words of counsel and instruction.

Wrapping Up

A short session today, but one with a lot of practical wisdom! In a world of talk radio, tabloid journalism, and TV exposes, slander and judgment are par for the course. With such a desensitizing environment, it's easy for you and me to deteriorate into the same kind of mindless, defamatory chatter that takes advantage and speaks ill of others. But God's call to us as His people is to shun such talk and to withhold judgment. Will you make a conscious effort to show restraint this week and speak well of others instead of evil? Will you remember the grace by which you yourself have been saved and the mercy which you have been shown? That in itself will go a long way toward transforming your mind in this area. God bless you as you do it!

James 4:13-17

Getting Started

Our Focus Today: Depending on self versus depending on God!

James 4:13-17

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.

We all know the axiom that says, "Failing to plan is the same as planning to fail." Most of us have experienced the truth of that statement in our lives at one time or another! But as God's people, brought under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of His Word, we might enhance that phrase just a bit and say it this way: "Failing to include God in the plan is the same as planning to fail." Let's look at this important teaching point today as James leads us through it.

Verse 13: Today or tomorrow we will go...and make money: As we start off here in verse 13, we want to understand that James is talking to those people in the church so consumed by their businesses that the bottom line has become the most important thing for them in life – perhaps even replacing the supremacy of their relationship with Christ. Is James condemning good business practice? Of course not. Turning a profit and expanding your territory is a good thing if you're doing it ethically and if your business is in proper balance with the overall picture of your faith and family. But when your business planning leaves no room for God to speak – when your objectives are driven by unholy or spiritually uninformed principles that do not have His blessing because you have not sought His will and counsel – you've missed the boat. Success for success' sake is an empty cup. God's purpose for your life is all about significance...and when

you get right down to it, that's the true measuring stick for success anyway. Let's look at how James treats this idea in the next verse.

Verse 14: You do not even know what will happen tomorrow: Do you know what tomorrow holds? Neither do I. But the bumper sticker cliché is true, no matter how trite and overused it has become: I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future! God is the only One who knows, and yes, holds, the future in His hands. The idea here is that it is presumptuous for us to plan our lives out without the Lord's leadership and guidance.

What is your life? You are a mist...: I went for a walk around the property this morning before I came into the studio, and you know what? Here in Missouri, it gets cold in the wintertime! Every time I exhaled walking through the meadow or around the pond, my breath came out in little cloudy puffs before it disappeared. When James says that our lives are like a mist, that's the image he has in mind. There for just a moment – and then gone. I don't know about you, but that makes me stop and think about how I'm using my time...and also how much of it I've placed in submission to Christ and His purpose for my life. The next verse brings needed correction on this issue.

Verse 15: If it is the Lord's will...: Here we have the antidote to the problem, the prescription for what is honoring to the Lord (and also best for us): the practice of making our decisions subject to the will of God. This is not meant to be a mindless euphemism used at the beginning or end of a sentence, but rather an intentional, reverent mindset that truly endeavors to place God first in the decision-making process. And how do we subject our planning to God's will? The way to know the will of God is to become more and more knowledgeable about the Word of God.

Verse 16: But now you boast...: Summarizing, James refers back to the problem one more time, just as he addressed it in verse 13: that of a self-centered, godless form of boasting about personal plans, power and prosperity.

Verse 17: And as we come to the last verse in this section, we have a final word given to us on the issue. As Christians, we are accountable for the knowledge we have, including Christ's call that we make Him the center of every area of our lives. To live otherwise, whether in our private lives or in our business affairs, is a sin. And that's the bottom line.

Wrapping Up

One of the reasons that the Word of God is such a blessing is that it is faithful to rebuke and correct us! Yet at the same time, it restores us as well, bringing us back to a place of reliance upon our Lord Jesus instead of ourselves. How does this passage speak to you today? Do you find it easy to leave God out of the details of your life, compartmentalizing Him into a Sunday-only environment and running on without Him for the rest of the week and in the rest of your activities? How would life be different for you if, in every area of your life, you submitted your ways to Him? As we close off for today, take a moment to pray about that – and then watch God to bring you to a new place in your relationship with Him! You'll be blessed as you surrender yourself to His will. I guarantee it!

James 5:1-3

Getting Started

Our focus today: The deception of wealth and the tragedy of its misuse.

James 5:1-3

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.

I still remember it to this day: I was driving the crowded freeways of southern California on my way to the contractor's office. Something had gone wrong with our kitchen remodel, and I was stressed and angry because the mistake was a costly one and I didn't want it to come out of my pocket. I had borrowed heavily on my home to do this project, and I was ready for a battle. In the midst of grinding my teeth and rehearsing my argument, who should come on the radio but Chuck Swindoll, that wonderful Bible teacher who has blessed so many millions of listeners over the years. What was Chuck Swindoll's topic for the day? "Godliness with contentment is great gain!" We are happiest, Chuck said, most satisfied, and most at peace in life not through great wealth or material possessions — but when our needs are met. Not our wants...though God is faithful to provide so many of them as well...but our needs.

So I did a quick check. Roof over my head? Yes. Food to eat? Yes. Clothing to wear? Yes, and a bit snug at that. Children healthy, family functional? Yes, and mostly yes! Then why was I so incensed over a \$2500 widget that 1) wasn't even a functional component of my kitchen, but a cosmetic one, and 2) could easily be omitted from the design with no visible results? Then I started to think about how that \$2500 could feed, clothe, house, and provide Christian education for a family of six for a whole year in a developing nation, and suddenly I wasn't so proud of my attitude, let alone my new cabinets, countertops, and appliances.

As we begin the fifth chapter of James, don't get me wrong: God's Word doesn't say it's wrong to remodel your kitchen, or even that it's wrong to have a few costly widgets to make it extra nice. But it's all a matter of balance, of perspective and attitude. In the three verses that we're about to tackle, the Scriptures do get very specific about the misuse and hoarding of wealth, of obsessing over wealth, and of building wealth through ill-gotten means, especially when it's at the expense of others. And yes, the Bible is also clear about what happens when wealth becomes a god to us. As we get started, let's remember what Paul said to Timothy about money: not that it is the root of all evil, but that the *love* of it is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

Verse 1: Now listen, you rich people: James defines the rich in a commonly accepted way for that day and age: it is simply those who have more than they need to live. By today's standards, that definition would include a lot of us, wouldn't it! Again, let's be clear: being rich is not the problem. The problem is the misuse of resources.

Weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you: A reference to the judgment and sorrow that will be the lot of those who have misused their wealth. The reprimand is especially strong here. Let's look at verses 2 & 3:

Verses 2-3: Your wealth has rotted: This is another way of saying that their riches are corrupt. The picture is that earthly displays of ostentatious living – garments, gold, and silver – are moth-eaten and corroded, and on the day of judgment such corrosion will stand as a witness against those who have hoarded such things.

You have hoarded wealth in the last days: Not only has wealth been hoarded, but it has happened in the Last Days, that is, the period between the first and second coming of Christ. These people had given no thought to the Great Commission or to the imminent return of Jesus, and in failing to use their resources to advance that cause of Christ in their midst, their sin was especially tragic.

Wrapping Up

We'll have more to say on this passage tomorrow as we look at verses 4-6, but as we wrap up for now, ask yourself some tough questions. How do you fare when it comes to the issue of wealth? Is your attitude governed by the understanding that God is the owner of everything and that you are a steward of what He has entrusted to you, or does money tend to govern you? Are you a person who never seems to have enough? Are you a person who can never seem to get enough? Is your consumer debt (minus your mortgage) four, five, six digits or more? And here's a really tough one: do you give God first place in your giving, recognizing that what He has given you is ultimately a tool to be used for His kingdom — or have you never really looked at it that way before? Next time we get together, I'll give you some resources that can help you assess those areas in your Christian life and give you some help if you find that you need it. We'll see you then!

James 5:4-6

Getting Started

Our focus today: The deception of wealth and the tragedy of its misuse.

James 5:4-6

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

Yesterday we had to leave off in the middle of this important section because of our limited time together, so let's pick up and continue on through the remaining verses. You'll remember that James is condemning a certain wealthy element in the church for their ungodly actions, attitudes, and acquisition of money and possessions. They have not acted in accordance with the tenets of the Christian faith, but rather, have been carried away by a worldly desire for ill-gotten gain. The judgment, James says, will be severe. As we pick up the study today, we learn of still more unsavory behavior associated with this group.

Verse 4: Here in verse four, we see not just the corruptive power of misused wealth, but how it also creates the desire for even more, regardless of how it is obtained.

The wages you failed to pay...are crying out: Jews would be intimately familiar with the Old Testament injunctions against defrauding those who worked as day laborers in the fields. This

method of increasing personal wealth was considered especially despicable, and yet evidently was being practiced by some in James' audience.

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty: The literal translation here is that the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. This is another uniquely Hebrew term that would have special meaning to Christians of Jewish heritage. Lord of Sabaoth means "Lord of Hosts," or "Lord of the Armies of Angels." God, who has heard the cries of the defrauded, is the God who commands the armies of heaven! These armies of angels, the Bible tells us, will be involved in the judgment of apostates and unbelievers. The implied meaning here is quite sobering.

Verse 5: As we move on to verse five what we see is James reiterating the negative activities of those whose lives are driven by wealth. If we look at the terms in their original sense, we are struck by the total departure from the Christian life. Take a look at a few text notes I've made:

You have lived on earth in luxury...: The term for luxury in this context is most likely a reference to wanton pleasure.

...And self-indulgence: Again, a negative connotation akin to vice or the unbridled pursuit of pleasure.

You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter: The picture here is of cattle fattened to their limit and ready for butchering. A life of vice and wanton pleasure due to the love, hoarding, and misuse of wealth will lead to divine judgment.

Verse 6: Verse six brings us to the end of this section of judgment, and though it can be somewhat difficult to pin down exactly what James is talking about here, text and context give us some definite clues. It could very well be that this life of overindulgence and greed had actually resulted in the murder of innocent people. At the same time, James could be using hyperbolic language to show the seriousness of the charges he is making. The wording seems to indicate legal action. John MacArthur says that rich people had sued the innocent and oppressed, using the courts to bury the poor in judgment so that they could take what was not rightfully theirs. Although we don't know for sure, this rendering would certainly be supported by James' earlier reference to this practice in chapter two.

Wrapping Up

So tell me: how did you fare with the tough questions from yesterday? Has your time in the Word today brought you any more clarity on this issue as it applies to your life? You know, you may be a person today whose situation fits this text like a glove. Maybe God is convicting you of your hedonistic, devil-may-care approach to life and maybe you've been shaken by the charges leveled at you and the promise of judgment. If that's the case, then I praise God for the incredible work He's about to do in you. You're going to have a change of heart like you never thought possible, and things for you will change for the better. But for most of us today, this passage is more subtle in its life application.

For so many of us, it's not so much the possession of wealth, but the pursuit of wealth that gets us off track. The average individual credit card debt in the United States today is over \$8,000. Many families with multiple cards have \$20,000, \$30,000 and even \$40,000 in high-interest credit card debt, and that's before you add the auto loans and the furniture bought two years

same-as-cash and the home equity lines that have been maxed out. More personal bankruptcies were filed last year than ever before in the history of our nation, and mortgage bankers tell us that with a huge rash of adjustable rate mortgages coming to the end of their three- or five-year fixed rates, thousands of people who couldn't really afford to buy those homes are going to be in between a rock and a hard place as their payments jump several hundred dollars a month. Could it be that we have made money a god – and could it be that we are finding it to be a hard master? And finally, could it be that the true God who has promised to provide for us as we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness is still waiting for those two things to happen?

For help with your finances, go to www.crown.org. They'll get you started on a Money Map that puts God first in your finances, and they'll give you sound advice on how to get out, and stay out, of debt. I'm also a Dave Ramsey fan. He's a Christian guy with a lot of savvy and he's been through the school of hard knocks. Read Total Money Makeover to bring some realistic hope back into your financial situation. God is with you – and He can deliver your heart from this burden. Trust Him and begin today!

James 5:7-9

Getting Started

Our focus today: Patience and suffering in persecution.

James 5:7-9

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!

I'm a person who loves gardening. I'm not very good at it and the flowers and produce I grow wouldn't win any ribbons at the county fair, but it's a deeply satisfying hobby that gets me outdoors and enables me to get my hands dirty. When I lived in California, I could grow pretty much anything I wanted at any time of the year. But since moving to Missouri, I've had to learn about something called "the growing season." I've also had to learn to rely on rain to irrigate my crops, because our well out in the country is old and shallow, and we try to conserve what we pump for household use. So with my garden, the name of the game is patience. Sometimes I just have to wait for beneficial things to happen.

Verse 7: That's a similar illustration to what James gives us here in this short passage on being patient. You'll remember that he has just finished condemning the rich who were pursuing wealth with wrong motives and ungodly principles. Now, on the flip side of the coin, he addresses the faithful who were being victimized by that practice.

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming: Patient in this sense refers not to trials or circumstances so much as it does to actual people. In other words, the counsel here is something like this: "Endure the people who are oppressing you and be patient with them, knowing that the return of Christ is imminent. Whatever it is you're putting up with now isn't worth comparing to the glory that awaits you, so hang in there!"

See how the farmer waits...: The man in the field knows that the earth will produce for him. He also knows that he needs the early rain to soften the ground for planting and the late rain to give his crops a boost just before harvest. In between is the waiting period. What does he do during the waiting time? Sit around and watch Oprah? Nope...he does farming stuff. Sharpens his tools. Cleans out his barn. Balances his books. As God's people, we wait for His return just like the farmer waits for the rain – not passively, but actively and with anticipation for the coming of the harvest.

Verse 8: In verse eight we have the restating of the point: *take heart. Be patient, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.* I want you to notice something here. In the space of two verses, either through illustration or direct teaching, James entreats us three times to be patient and also affirms three times the fact that the coming of the Lord is imminent. The same is to be true of God's people today. Our thoughts are to be fixed on the imminent, promised return of the Lord Jesus Christ instead of mired in earthly ambition and worldly conflict, and we are to be encouraged and heartened by that reality!

Verse 9: Have you ever said something in anger to someone when you were stressed out? Whether they deserved them or not, your remarks were probably motivated as much by your frame of mind as they were by anything that person said or did. It happens to all of us. Remember for a moment the circumstances of the people to whom James is writing: they've fled their homelands because of persecution over their newfound faith; they've settled in new places where they may or may not be necessarily welcomed by the locals; they're still under Roman rule; and now they're being subjected to unfair treatment from within their own ranks. It's enough to make anyone cranky! James' instruction here in verse nine about not grumbling against one another is written to temper a people on the edge and to help focus them on a more noble way of dealing with their situation. The judge standing at the door – a reference to Christ – once again speaks to the expectation of His return, and also gives a picture of a judge about to open the doors of his chambers to convene a trial. Grumbling among those in the household of faith is a punishable offense! Good words for all of us to heed as we think of our own relationships within the body of Christ.

Wrapping Up

Well, as we wrap up today I'm thinking about the time we'll be apart over the weekend. As always, my prayer is that you'll make time for worship and fellowship in your local Bible-teaching church, and that you'll really connect with the Lord in a special way as you follow through with that commitment. Not involved in a church yet, or just out there on the fringes of your current church home? Let me encourage you to jump in with both feet and get involved! The Lord has given you gifts for the building up of His people, and your pastor can help you find a place of service where you'll truly be a blessing (and be blessed!). Remember: you need other believers, and they need you too! God designed your Christian faith to be lived out in community with others. I look forward to joining you back here on Monday. Until then, the joy of the Lord be your strength!

James 5:10-12

Getting Started

Our focus today: An example of patience in the face of difficulty!

James 5:10-12

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.

How long has it been since you took a windshield tour through the Old Testament? Remember the prophets? Those folks who spoke the Word of the Lord? Not on the super popular list with the people around them! They had an alarming propensity to be killed for their oracles of judgment and their insistence that there was only one true God, whose name is *I Am*. When they weren't speaking judgments or being killed, it seems they felt like dying because of the difficulty of their jobs. But most of them hung in there and got the job done anyway.

Verse 10: Because of that, in verse 10 James presents them to this beloved, Jewish Christian audience as examples of patience in the midst of suffering. So often when I'm hurting, it helps to know that there's someone out there who understands what I'm going through...someone who's been through my particular plight and can lead me through to the other side of it. For the Jews, the examples of prophets who persevered would have fit that ticket very well. Here in verse 10, James continues to bolster his readers who are suffering from persecution at the hands of others. In fact, he will do this through the next two verses. Let's see how he does it.

Verse 11: I've been a pastor for a little over 11 1/2 years now, and I am going to say something that might put you off a little bit: I don't understand the book of Job. I can theologize about it and tell you what the commentaries say. I can give you the themes and walk you through an outline so that you can follow the flow. If you've got an hour to kill I can even pull out my Hebrew Bible and impress you a little bit with some badly pronounced words and translate for you going from right to left across the page. But the part I don't understand is how a man so utterly beaten down and afflicted could maintain his integrity. At news of such terrible loss after loss after loss in his life, the Scriptures say that Job sat down in the ashes and worshipped the Lord. He knew his Redeemer was alive...and he had such confidence in the goodness and mercy of God he declared, "Though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him!" Do I believe it? Yes. Do I embrace it? Are you kidding? I cling to it with every fiber of my being. But do I understand it? No. Maybe it's because I haven't been in that position.

Job, of course, is the ultimate example of patience in the face of suffering. Along with the prophets mentioned in verse 10, this great man who was God's friend endured far beyond what most of us can comprehend. Yet the point of the Scripture here is not the act of suffering; it's the act of restoration. "You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about." There's the focus! It's the end result! And in bringing this up to his readers, James is reminding them once more of God's faithfulness, once more of the end of the story, once more that, just as someone like Job suffered but was greatly blessed on the other side of his tribulation, so it would be for them.

One of my mentors in life is Dr. John Maxwell. At a particularly difficult time early in my life as a pastor, John sent me a note that I have to this day. It says, "Paul, I prayed for you and your situation today. Every leader goes through what you're experiencing right now, but remember: the victory is always on the other side of the struggle. Your friend, John." Then his assistant Linda put my wife and me on a plane to Atlanta, and John ministered to us and encouraged us

and told us not to give up, and when he was done he gave us a pat on the back and a kick in the butt and told us to get back at it, and so we did. I'm still in ministry today because of it. And you know what? He was right – the victory was there on the other side. And yes, the Scripture is true: sometimes it's in our darkest times that the compassion and mercy of God shines the brightest.

Verse 12: And now we move on to verse 12. It's kind of a dangler...it fits into the overall context of the letter, especially in regard to James' remarks about the tongue in chapter three and the need for self control and a refrain from grumbling earlier in chapter five. But what's the deal about not swearing? Well, we know it was a contemporary Jewish practice of the day and we know that such an oath was usually insincere and full of deception. We could force it to fit into the framework of patience and perseverance, but I think that would be pushing it, so let's take this as a stand-alone thought. The end of the letter is approaching, and James is going to be tying up some loose ends before he signs off. This is likely one of them.

Wrapping Up

It strikes me today that, as we've gone through this section of verses, you might be a person who is suffering persecution. Maybe it's on account of your faith; maybe it's just a lousy situation that you don't deserve but you're stuck in it for the moment; maybe it's because you're caught in a web of untruths or unfortunate circumstances that are surrounding your life right now. If there is sin to be confessed, let me encourage you to do that before anything else. If it is not of your own doing, cry out to the Lord and ask that His compassion and mercy would burn brightly in the midst of your trial. Remember the godly men and women of Scripture who persevered under trial, and remember especially your Savior Jesus, who not only endured persecution for you, but emerged victorious over it on the other side of the grave! As you look to Christ, be encouraged: He is faithful, and His victory is your victory. We'll see you tomorrow!

James 5:13-18

Getting Started

As James begins to wrap up his letter, he draws his readers into a very special place – the purpose and power of prayer. Our focus today is on the wonderful gift that prayer is to God's people!

James 5:13-18

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.

Think about your prayer life for a minute. How would you characterize it? Strong? Weak? Middle of the road? What is it that prompts you to pray? Crisis? Hard times? Meal times? Finally, when you pray what do you pray about?

Verse 13: In this great section of Scripture, James wants to open our eyes to the gift and purpose of prayer, and he encourages us here in verse 13 to pray or praise in every situation, whether it be a time of trouble or a season of happiness. James reminds us that our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for every need and worthy of every praise, and he also reminds us in this and

the verses following that prayer is a beautiful gift God has given His people, one they can use to confidently call on Him in every circumstance. This is illustrated further in the next verse.

Verse 14: As we look at verse 14, we see how prayer is to be used in a specific kind of situation: that of sickness. Did you know that a sick person in the body of Christ has the privilege to avail him or herself of great comfort and encouragement in times of bodily affliction? It comes through the elders, or pastors, of the church. They are to be called, they are to pray, and they are to anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord.

Anoint: When we look at the word *anoint*, it poses some interesting questions. Some scholars believe that anointing here refers to a ceremonial act to be done by the elders in faith and obedience to the Scriptures. Others believe that it refers to a medical treatment, since oil was a common medicinal salve in the first century. Still others say that this anointing is not an actual anointing at all, but a symbol of the care and support that was “poured out” by the ministers upon the sick person. I don’t put much stock in version #3, because there’s nothing in the text to suggest anything symbolic or metaphorical. The language is quite plain. Version #2 is certainly plausible, however, and so is version #1. But the important point to note in the text with either of these two views is the spiritual component: it is to be done for the person in the name of the Lord. The power here is in the Word and promise of God!

Verse 15: Moving on to verse 15, we see the result of the prayer offered in faith – the sick person is made well. This can mean physical healing, or a refreshed, encouraged heart in the midst of infirmity, or both. The promise here is not one of miraculous healing, though that can certainly happen if God wills it, but of the restorative power and presence of the Lord as the situation is brought to Him in faith.

If he has sinned: When people are weakened by illness, they often think of their own mortality – and when they do they are quick to recognize the reality of sin in their lives, as well as their need to deal with that sin. In my own life as a shepherd, I always take the opportunity to pray for and anoint the sick when I visit them, and almost without exception that prayer time includes going before the Lord and asking for His forgiveness. The reference here in the text is very likely pointing to the same thing: that time with the elders of the church would include confession of sin and restoration of spiritual health as well as prayers for physical healing.

Wrapping Up

You know, whenever I ask people if they feel that their prayer lives could improve, I always get an affirmative answer. That’s good, because it’s true for all of us! There is always the potential for growth in our walk with Christ, and that includes our prayer lives. As we are drawn into deeper fellowship with God through the study of His Word, and as we become more knowledgeable about the nature and character of God through our learning of the Scriptures, guess what happens? Our prayer time becomes deeper and more intimate as well! The verses we’ve just looked at barely scratch the surface of all that there is to discover about God’s gift of prayer to His people. Tomorrow we’ll look a bit further into that gift, and after that, who knows? You might just decide to do a full-blown topical study on the subject yourself! But as we close for today, remember this: because of the finished work of Jesus on your behalf at the cross, you have access to the throne room of God. And when you come to the Almighty, you come not as a nameless subject, but as a beloved child. Present your need to Him today, won’t you? He is listening!

James 5:16-18

Getting Started

As James continues to wrap up his letter, he continues to talk about the purpose and power of prayer. Our focus today is on the joy and blessing of praying for one another!

James 5:16-18

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.

As you'll recall from yesterday's study, James was instructing his readers about the gift of prayer and how prayer was to be utilized in the life of the individual Christian. Whether troubled, joyful, sick or in other kinds of need, God's people are both to pray themselves and in some instances, call on others to pray for them — particularly the elders of the church. Today as we look to the conclusion of this section on prayer, we see a marvelous blessing unfolding for all who are followers of Christ.

Verse 16: Having given the example of the elders praying for the sick, along with showing the blessing of the confession and forgiveness of sin, in verse 16 James now, in essence, extends the benefit of this practice to everyone in the congregation. In other words, God's people are to confess their sins to one another — to be accountable and to be operatives of mercy for each other — and they are also to pray for one another in order that healing may come in the midst of those times. What's the promise connected to that? That the prayers of the righteous — that is, people living in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, relying on His grace, believing in His power to accomplish all things — are powerful and effective! I love the way the New King James Version translates this verse: "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Isn't that great? That description doesn't fit any one of us in our own strength or in accordance with our own merits. But in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose mighty power is at work in each of us, our prayers absolutely avail much! What a blessing and a privilege it is — and really, when you think about it, a Scriptural imperative as well — to be able to pray for one another as God's people! Great things happen when we do it.

Verses 17-18: James ends this discourse on prayer by providing an example of high-powered prayer from the Scriptures. Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet, had been called to confront idolatry during the reign of Ahab and to proclaim that The Lord was the only true God. In fact, that's what Elijah's name means: "The Lord is God." Due to the effective, fervent prayer of Elijah, a drought came upon the land for three and half years, and did not end until he prayed again. James' point was that even though Elijah was a "man just like us," God heard and answered his prayer in a mighty way. So it is that God answers the prayers of His people today as well. What encouragement that must have been to the people reading this letter! Battered and bruised by persecution, suffering from those within the body as well as those on the outside, they could take heart that even in their most abject moments of distress, God would hear and answer their prayers. Does God do the same for us today? Absolutely!

(By the way, you can read more about Elijah, his ministry, and his reliance upon God starting in 1st Kings 17 and going through 2nd Kings 2. Amazing stuff, and a great way to get your feet wet in some Old Testament Bible reading.)

Wrapping Up

As we wrap up for the day, let me ask you a question: How do you find yourself responding to what God's Word says in this portion of James? How does it intersect with the reality of your own life, and specifically, your prayer life as a follower of Jesus Christ? When I review it for myself, several things come to mind. Let me share just a couple of them:

The need for a Prayer Partner: While we certainly acknowledge our sins to one another in the context of public worship, having someone with whom we can share deep spiritual things – including our brokenness and our sin – is a great blessing. I have several men in my life with whom I can share anything, and we pray with and for one another on a regular basis. I encourage you to enter into a similar spiritual relationship in your own life. And please, unless that prayer partner is your spouse, keep it men with men and women with women.

The faithlessness of my prayers: Even in this brief Scriptural treatment of prayer, I am amazed by the purposeful place it is given and the incredible power it carries in the life of the believer. When I compare this straightforward teaching to the way I treat prayer in my own life, I realize that God has given me a banquet of blessings, but that too often I settle for a sack lunch in the corner. I want to start praying with boldness and confidence in life! How about you? I'd love to know how God is working in your life through His Word! Whether encouraged, convicted, built up or deepened down, let me know how you're doing.

Tomorrow we finish the book of James! Be sure to join us as we look at some very special closing verses. See you then!

James 5:19-20

Getting Started

In the final two verses of this book, James talks about those in the church who have gone astray and their need for restoration. Our focus: bringing home the lost, and the power of the Gospel!

James 5:19-20

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.

When you were little, did you ever get lost in the store? It happened to me a lot...and it always seemed to be in the women's fashion department at Macy's. All those racks of clothes swallowed me up. I'd slip in between the dresses or follow one of the narrow aisles designed to be an endless maze for the consumer, and suddenly I wouldn't know where I was. Mom was gone. Strange ladies wearing strong perfume had replaced her. Panic would slowly overtake me, and I would begin to surge through the merchandise, convinced that I had been left behind. About the time the tears were ready to fall, there would usually be an announcement on the intercom. Mom had tracked me down again! And despite the embarrassment I felt or the

scolding I received, it was always comforting to be reunited with her, to be safe again...to know that I was back where I needed to be.

Verse 19: If you've been following the flow of this letter over the past five chapters, you will realize that we've essentially seen two kinds of people along the way: those who are alive and those who are dead. Those who are genuine in their faith and those who are not. Those whose affiliation with the local Christian church is motivated by love for Jesus Christ and a desire to serve Him, and those who are in it to see what they can get out of it. But there is another kind of person in the church as well: the person who at one time embraced the truth of the Gospel, but who, for some reason, has found cause to wander away from it. Any number of things might have precipitated that event, but the point is, he or she is lost and may not even know it. How is the church – or more pointedly, how are the people within the church – to act? James' instruction is clear: the body of Christ is to do all it can to bring that person back to the truth.

Here's what I know: even as I'm speaking to you right now, there is a high degree of probability that you are thinking of someone, probably more than one person, in fact, who fits this category. It's a brother, a sister, a parent, a best friend from a long time ago, or even a best friend right now. They've wandered...lost touch. They may have joined a cult or married an unbeliever and they've been blinded to spiritual reality. Perhaps they suffered a traumatic event and they're angry as hell at God and want nothing to do with Him whatsoever. But the truth is God wants them back. God hasn't stopped loving them. God's desire is not that they perish, but that they return to Him, allow Him to minister to them and heal them and put their feet back on solid ground. And it may very well be that you, as a member of the body of Christ who just happens to be thinking of that person right now, may be God's chosen instrument to bring it to pass.

Verse 20: What does verse 20 say? "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins." Let me help to clarify this verse for you. The death being spoken of here is not physical death; it is eternal death – as in an eternity apart from God. Make no mistake: the person who has wandered away from the truth is in a place of great spiritual jeopardy. The stakes are high. And the one thing that can bring them back is the lovingly, winsomely, relevantly presented message of the good news of Jesus Christ, spoken in a way that goes right to the center of their circumstance.

God says that when you turn such a person from his or her error, not only have you saved a soul from death, but by imparting the Gospel into the life of that person you will also have covered a multitude of sins. That's important, do you know why? Because a lot of people who have wandered have wandered so far or for so long that they don't think they're salvageable. Their guilt is overwhelming. Their faith is miniscule. Their ability to receive mercy is marred. They need someone – someone like you – to penetrate the darkness of their soul and remind them that the love of God in Christ is greater than any sin, more far-reaching than any amount of distance they might have traveled from Him, and more ready to forgive than the human mind can begin to comprehend.

Will you be God's instrument? I pray that you will!

Wrapping Up

What a great way to end a letter – calling God's people to be agents of restoration and grace to those who need those things the most. It strikes me, though, that rather than being instruments

in that process, some of you today may actually be the ones in need. Would you do me a favor? Consider me to be God's instrument in your life today. No matter how far you've wandered, no matter how great your sin, no matter how deep your anger, God is reaching out to you right now, and do you know what He says? He says, "I love you," and "I forgive you," and "Please come back," and "Let's start all over again." He says those words specifically to you, for you, about you. Hear Him today...and begin life again. It's time.

God bless you richly until next time, dear ones...take care, and the joy of the Lord be your strength!