

An Introductory Note

This study in James was developed specifically for the small group ministry of Signal Mountain Bible Church.

James is a rich book, and pulling out all that the Holy Spirit put in it is a work of years, not months. The point of this study is not to exhaustively study the book, but to work through it in such a way as to provide practical application of its truths and encouragement in the trials of life.

The purpose of this book is to provide a framework for discussion. It is intended to allow a small group leader to guide a discussion that hits the main points as they relate to their individual group, rather than covering every point of the study. There is more material here than any groups will be able to uncover in detail in a single meeting. That is intentional.

It is my desire and prayer that every individual using this study guide would commit the time required for personal study in order to learn what James has to say to a group of Gentile Christians living on the edge of the 21st century, more than 1,900 years after its writing. Each of us should approach the study with an attitude of commitment, prepared to take part in an informed and meaningful dialogue on the text and its application.

James: Faith that Works

In this first session of our year-long study in James we will focus on introductory matters: Who was the James who wrote the book? To whom did he write? Are there clues as to when the book was written? The answers to these questions are important, because they will help us interpret and apply the book's teaching.

To begin, the very first verse gives us an undetailed answer to the first two of our three questions:

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

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ

But who was this James? The answer is not a simple one, because there are no less than three "James" to consider.

The Apostle James, son of Alphaeus

This James is not likely the author, because he did not play a prominent role in either the New Testament record nor in the history of the early church. None of the church fathers attributed the book to this James.

The Apostle James, son of Zebedee, brother of the Apostle John.

This James was one of Jesus' intimates (along with Peter, John and Andrew) whom Jesus chose to witness certain very critical moments (such as the Transfiguration (Mark 9:1-2) and the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-37)). However, this James was also the first of the Apostles to die, probably in the year 44 (Acts 12:1-2, a date we know from the year that Herod Agrippa died, Acts 12:19-23), and since the book was likely written after that time, it is unlikely that he is our author.

James, the Lord's Brother

This James is our best candidate. Brother of Jesus and later head of the Jerusalem church, this James had the standing and authority in the early church to write such a book. How much of him can we discover from the New Testament? We know that he was one of Jesus' four brothers (Matthew 13:55-56) and that there was some relationship between the disciples and Jesus' family (John 2:12). Use the following verses and questions to consider more about James:

John 7:1-9

What does this passage tell you about the brother's level of knowledge about Jesus?

Mark 3:21, 31-35

What do you suppose it was like being Jesus' little brother?

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

What effect do you think this "appearance" had on James?

Acts 1:14; 12:17

These episodes are separated by several years. Do you see a difference in James' prominence in these two situations?

Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12

What was James' standing in the church at Jerusalem?

Acts 15:13-29; 21:17-19

What do these passages say about James' leadership in the early church?

1 Corinthians 9:5

What does this verse tell you about James and his place in the church relative to the Apostles?

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations

This book was addressed to a specific group of people, the "twelve tribes" who are "scattered among the nations". What does the book itself say about its original audience?

James 1:1, 2:21

The "twelve tribes" was a common way of referring to Israel (see Matthew 19:28 and Acts 26:7 for examples) and so it is safe to guess that the book was intended for Jewish readers.

James 1:16, 19

What does James call the people to whom he writes?

James 2:1

Are these people Christians?

James 2:2

Where do they meet (Note: the word translated "meeting" or "assembly" is the Greek *sunagoge* translated everywhere else as "synagogue")? In some cases, the early church met in the synagogues (Acts 22:19, 26:11).

James 1:2

What are they experiencing?

Acts 8:1-4, 11:19

James, as the head of the church at Jerusalem, wrote to people that he knew, Jewish Christians who had been scattered among the nations. When was the church at Jerusalem scattered?

When Did James Write?

Most scholars feel that this book must be dated between 44, the year that James took over the leadership of the Jerusalem church from Peter, and 62, the year that he was martyred. The early date is argued for several reasons: the lack of mention of any Gentile believers; the lack of any evidence of a split between Jews and Jewish Christians; the fact that the believers addressed still meet at the synagogue, and the simple description of church authority (*elders* in 5:14, not overseers as in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1).

Still more reasons to consider an early date is in what it *doesn't* say. The epistle barely mentions Jesus, and never His death and resurrection. This is understandable for a first or second generation church which may have seen the Lord firsthand and learned the Gospel from His apostles.

Why is this important? That is, does it matter when the book was written? It does because some choose to interpret James, and especially the teaching on "dead faith" in 2:14-26, as though the book was written to either contradict Paul's teaching on faith in Romans or to counter perversions of Paul's teaching which had sprung up after his arrest. An early date makes such an interpretation impossible. Second, it is very

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valuable to understand the context from which James writes, since he is addressing a couple of very basic issues that the entire Church must face: **how do we live out our faith in the face of trials and of everyday life?**

What Some Have Said About the Book

James has had a rough history. Because it was considered a “general” or “catholic” epistle, and since James was not himself an Apostle, the church at large didn’t put as much stock in the book as they did in Paul or Peter’s letters. As a result, James didn’t always make the lists when the church fathers decided on which books were authoritative or not. In fact Martin Luther looked at James as somewhat inferior:

In fine, Saint John's Gospel and his first Epistle, Saint Paul's Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Saint Peter's first Epistle, these are the books which show thee Christ, and teach thee everything that is needful and blessed for thee to know even though thou never see or hear any either book or doctrine. Therefore is Saint James's Epistle a right strawy Epistle in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it. (Martin Luther, 1522)

However, not all have agreed with Luther:

Though this epistle was rejected in old time and not considered by many to be the Epistle of a true apostle, and though also it does not lay the foundation of the faith of Christ, but speaks of a general faith in God, neither preaching His death and resurrection, nor the mercy that is laid up in store for us in Him, nor the everlasting covenant made for us by His blood . . . yet, because it sets up no human doctrine, but calls upon men to keep the law of God, and makes love which is without partiality the fulfilling of the law, as Christ and all the apostles did, and has in reference to this many good and Godly sentences in it; and has also nothing that is not agreeable to the rest of the Scripture, if it be considered impartially, I think it ought rightly to be regarded as Holy Scripture. (William Tyndale, 1525)

Though James seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an apostle to be, it is not surely required of all to handle the same arguments . . . It is enough to make men receive this Epistle, that it contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ. It is indeed full of instruction on various subjects, the benefit of which extends to every part of the Christian life; for there are here remarkable passages on patience, prayer to God, the excellency and fruit of heavenly truth, humility, holy duties, the restraining of the tongue, the cultivation of peace, the repression of lusts, the contempt of the world, and the like. (John Calvin, 1551)

Speaking sometimes with the fire and intransigence of an Amos; sometimes in the more reflective and aphoristic style of the Wisdom literature; sometimes in figurative speech such as may well reveal the lasting impression made upon him and, as we may also surmise from the Epistle that bears his name, upon his brother Jude, by the teaching of Jesus

Himself; and always with vividness, energy, and dramatic power, he proclaims to the Christians of the second generation a message specially applicable to them but relevant to the Church in every age. For what he has to say is this. Religion divorced from morality, words without deeds, creeds that satisfy the head but never warm the heart, are vain. The wisdom that they exhibit is of the earth; the fire that kindles them is the fire of human pride. (R. V. G. Tasker, 1976)

As we move into the text of the book itself, we will be challenged in many areas. James is unvarnished practical Christianity, and his words will confront us with the need to be doers of the word, quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, practicing a living and effective “faith that works.”

Perseverance in the Face of Trials (1:2-4)

James opens his book very bluntly, addressing a subject that was very practical for his audience: trials of “many kinds”. From what you know of early Church history, what kind of treatment might these first generation Jewish believers have been experiencing from their Roman masters? What would they be experiencing from their non-Christian Jewish brothers?

² *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

Consider it pure joy (1:2-3)

James encourages his readers to be joyful when they encounter “trials of many kinds.” What do these verses add to your understanding of the Christian and trials?

Luke 6:22-23

Romans 8:17-18

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

1 Peter 4:12-16

James says that these various trials test the faith of the individual. How have trials that you have personally experienced challenged your faith in Jesus?

According to 1 Peter 5:7, what can we do with our trials?

Perseverance

James gives one reason why we should be joyful in the face of trials - knowing that such trials will produce *endurance* or *perseverance*. The word translated “perseverance” means steadfastness and endurance. It is the characteristic of one who “remains under” their difficult circumstances, not swerved from their purpose and loyalty even under the greatest trials and sufferings.

Romans 15:5

Where does perseverance come from?

Hebrews 12:1-3

How does Hebrews tell us to practice perseverance?

Perseverance must finish its work (1:4)

It is the fruit of perseverance that gives us cause to be joyful in the face of many trials. According to verse 4, what is the natural result of perseverance?

James 3:2

“Mature” in the NIV is the word usually translated “perfect” in the NAS. Is James teaching that we will reach perfection in this world?

Phillipians 3:12-15, Ephesians 4:11-15

Is Paul teaching that we will reach perfection in this world?

Questions to Consider:

Do you think of trials differently in the second person (your trials) or third person (their trials) than you do in the first (my trials)?

What does it mean to “consider it pure joy”?

When you are in the midst of suffering, how do you tend to respond when someone tells you that good can come from your trials?

How has your relationship with God changed as you have gone through trials and problems?

Prayer in the Face of Trials (1:5-8)

In the light of their trials, James encourages his readers to ask for wisdom from God with the sure expectation that He will provide. However, while God is faithful, man is often not, and so James must urge that prayer be uttered in confident belief.

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But 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. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

If Any of You Lacks Wisdom (1:5)

James continues to address the subject of trials, linking the previous paragraph to this by stressing the “lack” of those going through them. As we have seen, those who have seen their trials through to the end are perfect and complete, lacking nothing. For those with whom God is not quite finished, wisdom is indispensable.

Is James calling his readers stupid? What is wisdom? Use the following verses to get a sense of what biblical wisdom is:

Proverbs 1:1-7

Proverbs 2:1-6

Proverbs 9:10-12

Based on Proverbs, how would you define wisdom in James’ context?

Does God always give us what we ask for in prayer?

According to James, what is God's response when we ask for wisdom?

Understanding that wisdom is the gift we ask for, James makes it clear that such a prayer will be answered. Like Jesus’ assertion in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7-11), James says that if we ask, we will receive, because God is by nature a generous giver.

Believe and Not Doubt (1:6-8)

God’s generosity does not relieve man of responsibility. What is our responsibility in prayer?

How does doubt affect you as you face various trials? How does it affect your relationship with God?

James strongly criticizes those who pray without faith, picturing them as an ocean wave - up one minute, down the next. Such a one is literally “of two minds”, saying with one mind “I believe!” and with the other “No way!” Prayer that is offered in this way is no prayer at all, and God does not answer it. **How effective is such a man or woman?**

The author of Hebrews had a thing or two to say about this as well:

Hebrews 11:6

Why does the prayer without faith not get answered?

Hebrews 10:23, 13:5-6

Why can we trust in God's response?

Proverbs 15:8, 21:27

What is God's attitude toward the sacrifice offered without faith?

Now consider Asaph. Read through the true-to-life description that Psalm 73 gives of the believer who is experiencing trials:

Psalm 73 A psalm of Asaph.

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" This is what the wicked are like -- always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

Questions to Consider:

What do you expect of God when you pray?

When do you struggle with prayer?

What effect does doubt have on your prayer life?

Perseverance in Circumstances (1:9-11)

Trials come upon believers of all means, rich and poor. James urges his readers to reflect on the spiritual perspective of trials in their life. *Before diving into this study, consider to which group you belong: those in rich circumstances or humble?*

⁹ The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For 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.

The Brother in Humble Circumstances (1:9)

One of the ways we tend to evaluate God's blessing in our and other's lives is in the area of money. "God has really blessed" often (not always) is meant in terms of the financial. In other words, the lack of money is sometimes thought of as a trial in and of itself. James, however, has a different point of view.

James urges the brother of humble circumstances to "take pride" in his high position before God. The word James used can also be translated "glory". The brother who is poor should *glory* in his high position:

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

What were you when you were called to Christ?

Romans 8:17-18, Colossians 3:1-3, 1 Peter 1:3-9

What are you now?

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

How long do trials last?

In other words, James says that the Christian who is poor needs to have a perspective that ignores his financial condition and focuses on his spiritual inheritance.

How easy is that? What makes it hard?

The One Who is Rich (1:10-11)

While the poor glory in their high position, the rich need to take a different tack. James urges "the one who is rich" to glory in his humiliation. Some commentators feel that James is addressing rich non-Christians here, since he doesn't call them "brother" as in 1:9, and because of his warnings to the rich later in the book (2:5-6, 4:13-14, 5:1-3). However, if he is addressing the need for perseverance in the face of trials to a group of Jewish Christians, there is no reason to assume that "the one who is rich" is not also a believer.

Isaiah 57:15, 66:2, Matthew 5:3

What kind of spirit or attitude does God desire?

The following verses give some reasons why this kind of attitude makes a great deal of sense:

Psalms 102:11-12

1 John 2:15-17

1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17

In verse 11, James uses a common Old Testament analogy of the brief life and frail nature of man, who is like the flowering grass burned by the desert sun and scorching wind. In the same way, the rich will pass away in the midst of his business pursuits. What is to be envied about that?

Poor and rich alike should have a proper perspective on their lives. The poor can focus on their future exaltation with Jesus. The rich can focus on their humility before Jesus.

Both will be exalted together, and both humbled together. But James says that *both need to have a perspective that ignores his financial condition and focuses on his spiritual inheritance*. What would such a perspective provide in times of trial?

The humiliation of the rich brother is as inward as the exaltation of the poor brother. The Christian's eternal status is unaffected by wealth or its lack. Neither being rich or being poor is anything. The attitude of both is the result of the spiritual wisdom which each has attained. And where do we get spiritual wisdom from (James 1:5)?

Psalm 62:9: Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD.

Questions to Consider:

In the end, what will happen to man's wealth?

Have you ever pursued a particular material possession, only to be disappointed once you got it?

Do you find it easier to give to the poor than to be with them?

Perseverance in Temptation (1:12-18)

How do you explain to little kids why people do evil things?

James concludes this opening section of the letter as he began it, by declaring the need to persevere under trial. James understands that not all will stand the test, and so he warns them not to blame God when they are tempted by evil, but to understand that temptation's origins are much closer to home.

¹² Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Blessed is the Man (1:12)

James proclaims that the one who perseveres under trial is blessed, sounding something like his older brother:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
Matthew 5:10-12*

James has already said that the one who endures testing is blessed because such perseverance brings maturity (as we saw in 1:2-4). Now he gives another reason.

The Crown of Life

This second reason the one who perseveres is blessed is called the "crown of life." **What does a crown represent? What images come to mind?**

How is the symbol of the crown used in these verses?

1 Corinthians 9:25, 2 Timothy 2:5, 4:7-8

The crown James is talking about is not a king's symbol of royalty, or an individual's sense of pride and blessing, or even a victor's wreath. He calls it the crown "of life." Some commentators believe James is referring to eternal life only, but there are reasons to think he means something else. Look at these verses to answer this question: **When is a believer granted eternal life?**

John 5:24, John 10:27-28, Romans 8:1

The crown of life that James is talking about is not eternal life only, because it is given to those who meet two requirements: they stand the test and they love the Lord. In other words, as believers they have already received eternal life.

The crown of life that James is addressing here refers back to the blessing of maturity and completeness experienced by the one who endures trials to the end. It is those who love Him and show that love by

persevering through their trials who receive the crown of life, the joy of their salvation and the maturity to realize it.

The crown of life is the emblem, not of royalty, but of highest joy and gladness, of glory and immortality. (R. C. Trench)

The love of the Christian for his Lord does not win for him eternal life as a reward to which he has a right, any more than does his faith. It is however, an axiom of the Bible that God has abundant blessings in store for those who love him, keep His commandments, and serve Him faithfully whatever the cost may be. (R. V. G. Tasker)

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Corinthians 2:9)

No One Should Say, “God is tempting me.” (1:13-15)

Those who stand the test are blessed, but we don't always endure our trials, do we? In fact, often our trials are a source of temptation to us. We whine, complain, mope about, and generally act as though God has singled us out for His displeasure. Further, we are often tempted to sin even when not experiencing a specific trial. James urges those who are being tempted to recognize where it originates.

No one should blame God for their sin for two reasons:

- ◆ *Reason One: God is holy*

Psalm 11:7, 18:30, 33:4-5

Because he is holy, he is not tempted by evil.

Leviticus 11:44, 19:2

Because he is holy, he calls men to holiness and does not tempt them to evil.

- ◆ *Reason Two: We aren't*

Psalm 14:1-3, 51:5, 130:3

Any questions?

Genesis 6:5, Mark 7:20-23, Romans 7:11-13

Because we are not holy, we are tempted by our own evil desires.

Using an analogy to childbirth, James traces the progression of temptation in verses 14 and 15:
What is the cause of temptation?

Where does it come from?

What does desire (lust is a better translation) produce?

What is the end result?

Don't Be Deceived (1:16-18)

How often do we hear (or think) that a loving and powerful God would not permit evil to occur? Those that react against trials in this way are, in a word, deceived. James gives us a reason and an example to tell us why we are not to be deceived.

Rather than sending temptation, what does the Father send?

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“Father of lights” (the NIV has added “heavenly”, but the word is not in the manuscripts and is probably an unnecessary addition) is a great description of God. The sun, moon, and stars are all God’s creation, and as they consistently and predictably provide light and heat, he consistently and predictably provides every good and perfect gift. Unlike the shadows they cast, he does not change or shift.

Verse 18 provides an example of his goodness. What is it? Is it a compelling argument?

Questions to Consider:

Who normally gets the blame for tempting people to sin?

What can you do to stop an evil desire from becoming an evil act?

What temptations do you need God's help to resist?

Doers of the Word (1:19-27)

Having been encouraged to persevere through trials and reminded of God's goodness in saving us through his word, James exhorts us to action relative to that word: do what it says. In this exhortation, James lays the framework for the rest of his letter by addressing 3 areas of difficulty in being a "doer of the word."

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

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But 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.

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion 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.

Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak, Slow to Anger (1:19-21)

James commands action. We are to be better listeners than we are speakers, and to resist anger. This is more wisdom along the lines of Solomon:

Ecclesiastes 5:1-3

Why is it wise to be restrained in speech?

Proverbs 10:19

What do many words lead to?

Proverbs 13:3

Where does someone who is quick to speak wind up?

Proverbs 17:27-28

What does restraint in speech demonstrate?

Consider someone who lives the opposite of James' instruction: slow to listen, quick to speak, quick to become angry. What would the Proverbs call that person? How would they likely handle trials? How open would they be to accept what the word has to say to them?

In verse 21, James draws a conclusion. Since we are to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, we are to purify our lives and to *accept the word*. There is much to consider here:

What does it mean to accept the word?

How does James describe the word?

Where is it? What does it do?

James pictures the word as a seed that has been planted in us. What do seeds do?

Do What it Says (1:22-25)

We are to be good listeners, and James makes clear that he is thinking primarily of listening to the word. However, if listening is all we do, James says we are deceiving ourselves. If we are really listening, we will do what it says.

Previously, James pictured the word as a seed. Now, he pictures it as a mirror. Why do you usually use a mirror? What does it show you?

What good is a mirror to you if you take no action based on what you see?

Like a mirror, the word shows us who we are. Unlike a mirror, the word also shows us who we are to be. For that reason, we are to look into the mirror of the word, “the perfect law that gives freedom”.

What things should characterize our look into the word in verse 25?

Pure and Faultless Religion (1:26-27)

James will have a lot more to say about the tongue in chapter 3. For now, he is content to summarize what he has said (the one who is religious is not characterized by words but by deeds) and to give examples of the religion that God expects his people to practice.

The word “religious” doesn’t show up much in the New Testament. It is a neutral word, not a negative, and is meant to define religious worship or discipline. It can refer to religious ceremony as well as to personal religious faith.

James says that “pure and faultless” religion is shown by caring for widows and orphans, and by keeping from being polluted by the world.

Look up these passages from the Psalms:

Psalm 10:17-18, 68:5, 146:9

Why does God want us to take care of widows and orphans?

*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.
(Proverbs 15:2)*

"As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice. "When all this comes true -- and it surely will -- then they will know that a prophet has been among them." (Ezekiel 33:30-33)

Questions to Consider:

What does it take to be a good listener?

Which do you find easier: listening or talking?

Do you know any widows and orphans? If so, what can you do to help them? If not, who can you help?

Avoiding Favoritism (2:1-7)

The short version of the book of James is simply this: *be doers of the word*. James says we are to be doers of the word in being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. From 2:1 through 2:26, James focuses on hearing and accepting what the word has to say regarding the believer's relationship to other believers by addressing what was evidently a problem area for the early church, showing favoritism.

¹ *My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.* ² *Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.* ³ *If 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,"* ⁴ *have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

⁵ *Listen, 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?* ⁶ *But 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?* ⁷ *Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?*

Don't Show Favoritism (2:1)

James' appeal to avoid favoritism is based on our identity as believers in our "glorious Lord", or "Lord of glory". "Glory" refers to God's splendor and reputation, and describes his intrinsic worth and majesty. Look at the following verses and consider what it means to be a believer in the Lord of glory:

John 1:14, Hebrews 1:3

How different is Jesus' glory from the Father's?

Ephesians 1:17-18, 3:16-19, Phillipians 4:19, Colossians 1:27

What are some of the practical ways his glory touches us?

Given our relationship with one another as brothers and with our glorious Lord as believers, does it make any sense to show favoritism to mere men? Can even the wealthiest of men compare in splendor to our glorious Lord? And yet . . .

Suppose A Man (2:2-4)

Moses knew that man tends to play favorites, and so he wrote against showing preference to rich *or* to poor (Leviticus 19:15). James is addressing a slightly different problem - preferring the rich over the poor.

James proposes a hypothetical situation to illustrate his point. The rich man is pictured wearing fine clothes and jewelry, the poor is shabbily dressed. The one comes in to a royal welcome, the other is barely tolerated. How hypothetical is this?

What would the general reaction be if a truly poor and shabby person showed up at the church for Sunday worship?

Why would anyone in a church show partiality to a rich man over a poor man?

If we practice such discrimination, what does that make us?

Has not God chosen those who are poor? (2:5-7)

Having given an example of favoritism, James gives three reasons why favoritism is to be avoided: 1) favoritism is at heart opposed to the work of Christ. 2) favoritism denies honor to the poor (whom God honored), 3) favoritism gives honor to those who dishonor the Lord.

Job 5:15:16, Psalm 9:18-19

What is God's attitude toward the poor of this world?

But James doesn't appear to be talking about spiritual poverty here (as in Matthew 5:3), does he? He is talking about financial poverty, those "who are poor in the eyes of the world." If your financial assets were an open book, would our society consider you rich? Would the rest of the world? Do you think you would be considered rich in James' eyes?

If we are among the wealthy of this world, we have some pitfalls to avoid:

Proverbs 11:28

What happens to the one who trusts in his riches?

Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

The writer of Ecclesiastes pictures his life in pursuit of wealth. What does he conclude about trusting in riches?

Ecclesiastes 5:10-11

What is the basic problem with money?

Matthew 5:3

What kind of poverty does God require and honor?

Note that James doesn't say that God has chosen "all the poor" or "only the poor", just "the poor". Add that to James' exhortation to rich Christians in 1:9 and it is clear that he is not saying that the rich cannot be Christians. His point is that it tends to be the rich who mistreat the poor.

God honors and protects the poor. Jesus was poor himself. For this reason it is wrong to insult the poor by showing preference to the rich. At the same time, it is the rich who would drag the poor Christian Jews of the early church to court and slander Christ's name. Showing preference to such people merely because of their wealth insults God.

Now let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the LORD our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery." (2 Chronicles 19:7)

He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)

Questions to Consider:

Why do we often treat rich people differently than poor people?

Besides the wealthy, what kind of people does our culture show favoritism toward?

How can you change the way you look at people so that you view them as God does?

Loving Your Neighbor (2:8-13)

In the last lesson, we saw that showing favoritism was wrong because it works against Christ, dishonoring the poor whom God honors and honoring those who dishonor God. Now James continues the focus on hearing what the word has to say with regard to our relationships, going to the fundamental issue: love. Showing favoritism is contrary to the bedrock principle that governs our relationship with one another.

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For 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.

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

The Royal Law (2:8-11)

James refers to "the royal law." Look at the following passages and consider why James calls this commandment "royal?"

Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31

Romans 13:8-10

Galatians 5:14

Is it possible to show favoritism and love your neighbor as yourself at the same time? Why or why not?

Consider where James has taken us in this discussion. Our tendency might be to regard something like favoritism as a relatively small matter. After all, it only makes sense to be nice to those who are in a position to help you out, right? But James says that sin is sin, and breaking the law at one point is the same as breaking it at another. This point is made in a few other places in the Bible:

Matthew 5:18-19, Galatians 3:10

How does it feel to know you are charged with upholding the whole of God's moral standards? Can you do it?

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment! (2:12-13)

Rather than speaking and acting as those who show favoritism, we are to speak and act like those who know they will be judged. That sounds ominous, but notice what law James says we will be judged by - the "law that gives freedom", or "law of liberty". That phrase should sound familiar, since that is what James called the Word back in 1:25.

Look at the following verses. Where is liberty to be found?

Psalms 19:7-14

Psalms 119:32, 45, 105

Philippians 4:8-9

Finally, not only is one who shows favoritism guilty of not loving his neighbor and so breaking God's royal law, but he is also guilty of being unmerciful. In the following passages, why is it important for believers to be merciful?

Micah 17:18

Matthew 18:23-35

Questions to Consider:

Why is non-racial prejudice often overlooked as a sin?

Are there some practical ways you can show love to people who are just very different from you?

Living Faith I (2:14-17)

James brings the focus on being doers of the word by avoiding favoritism to a close by addressing the relationship between our faith and the needs of those around us. We are to avoid favoritism because such an attitude shows a faith that is as good as dead.

Before launching into this study, consider this question: How is being a Christian supposed to change the way we live?

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If 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? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

What good is it (2:14)

Can a faith that is not accompanied by deeds save? Is James advocating a gospel of salvation by works? Is James, who writes “faith without deeds is dead” at odds with Paul’s theology of salvation by grace through faith, “not by works”? These questions have evoked volumes of commentary over the last 2,000 years. We’ll spend more time on those questions next week.

Tonight, the focus is on the practical aspects of the question in 2:14 “Can such faith save him?” The question is pretty straightforward. What answer does James expect?

James says that a faith that has no works cannot save anyone. But what kind of “saving” is James talking about? What do these verses tell you about the spiritual state of those that James is writing to?

James 2:1, James 5:7

James is writing to those who are already brothers, believers in the Lord and waiting for His return; their salvation is not in question. James is addressing a hypothetical situation. He doesn’t write “What good is it, my brothers, if a man *has faith* but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” Instead, he asks “if a man *claims to have faith*” It is the claim of faith that is at issue here. A professed faith, lacking in results, does not have power to save.

Matthew 13:18-23

How does this familiar parable help illustrate what James is describing?

Matthew 7:21-23; 25:41-45

How would you compare these two warnings to James’ admonition?

It is important to be aware of the context in which this question occurs. It is raised in the specific context of avoiding favoritism, loving your neighbor as yourself. James has not been talking about matters of salvation, but of relationship and action for those who are already Christians.

James is ***not*** talking about deeds performed before God to earn merit. He is talking about an intrinsic ***quality*** of faith. It is living and active. James is making a practical application of his thesis from 1:22: *be doers of the word*.

Suppose a brother or sister (2:15-16)

In 2:15-16, James demonstrates the uselessness of faith which is not expressed in good works. How is this very practical application related to the problem James addressed in 2:1-4?

Picture yourself on a downtown street in the winter. A young mother and her child are shivering on the corner, without proper clothes, obviously hungry and in need of help. What *should* you do?

What practical effect would it have on them if you walked up and told them, “Dress warm. Eat right.”?

In the same way (2:17)

Donald Burdick writes, “Action is the proper fruit of living faith.”

In other words, living faith *will* show action. One who claims to have a living faith had better have deeds to back it up, otherwise his claim is false. His faith is as good as dead, and is no faith at all.

Ephesians 2:8-10

What does Paul say that faith will result in?

In Paul, therefore, as well as in James, good deeds are the product of genuine faith. In both writers faith that produces no good deeds is incapable of saving a person. (Donald Burdick)

Questions to Consider:

Is it harder for you to talk about your faith or to demonstrate it?

How can you tell if a person is a believer?

Living Faith II (2:18-26)

Last week we began this critical section of James. Remember the context: being doers of the word by avoiding favoritism, acting on the relationship between our faith and the needs of those around us. Ignoring the needs of those around us gives evidence of a faith that is as good as dead.

As we move from the practical aspects of this passage, let's pause this week to consider the theological implications. Are we saved by faith or by works? Is there a conflict between Paul and James? How is this passage to be interpreted so that we are consistent with the rest of Scripture and honest with the plain words of the text?

¹⁸ *But 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.* ¹⁹ *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder.*

²⁰ *You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?* ²¹ *Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* ²² *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* ²³ *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.* ²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.*

²⁵ *In 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?* ²⁶ *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*

But someone will say (2:18-19)

One key issue which affects interpretation is the objection James introduces from a hypothetical questioner in 2:18. This objection is directly related to 2:17 - faith unaccompanied by action is dead. Rather than get tangled up in the identity of "you" and "I" in 2:18, it is best to use the J. H. Ropes translation of "one" and "another", as in "One has faith, another has deeds." In effect, the objector is saying to James' exhortation to show living faith in 2:14-17 by saying "So what? One has faith, while another has works. They are two completely different things, and both are good!"

Is there a separation between works and faith? How are the two related?

How can one prove the reality of a living faith without works?

To whom would an individual need to prove the reality of his faith?

In 2:19, those who take the point that faith can be proven without works must rely on their theological orthodoxy. James counters that even the demons are orthodox - and they at least have *some* action to show for their belief!

You foolish man (2:20-25)

James responds to his straw man that there *is* good evidence for the connection between faith and good works, and it is demonstrated clearly in two Old Testament saints, Abraham and Rahab.

It is at this point that some see a contradiction between James and Paul. Some careful reading will make clear that there is no contradiction.

Romans 4:1-5

In this passage, Paul defines the gracious and free nature of salvation as illustrated by Abraham's justification.

Genesis 15:1-6

When was Abraham declared righteous?

What did he do that God declared him righteous?

Does James use the same illustration of Abraham's righteousness as Paul?

Does James' illustration occur before or after Abraham was declared righteous?

In other words, James is not describing the event in which Abraham was declared righteous - literally became a saved man. He is describing the event in which Abraham gave proof positive of his faith in his willingness to obey God even to the point of sacrificing his own son.

That willing action was the fulfillment of God's own declaration of righteousness to Abraham. In this, faith and works were cooperating together, faith motivating the work, the work proving and completing the faith. But note which came first - Abraham was first declared righteous, then proved it.

It is this cooperation of faith and works that James refers to in 2:24.

The inevitable conclusion is that, while it is faith that justifies, for James never denies this fundamental truth, faith is never static. Faith is a practical response to the divine initiative. It is an answer to a heavenly call, and the call is always a call to obedience. Therefore obedience, expressing itself in action, is the inevitable and immediate issue of faith. In other words, the life of sanctification dates from the moment a man is justified by faith, when he surrenders himself to Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour, through whose saving death apart from any merit of his own he is counted righteous in the sight of God; but the life of sanctification is not a life of faith only; it is a life of what might be called faith-obedience. R. V. G. Tasker

Although he could easily have ended his point with Abraham, James uses a second illustration to drive the point home. And what a contrast in people! Consider two or three things that differentiated Rahab from Abraham.

Hebrews 11:31

What motivated Rahab?

Like Abraham, Rahab acted out of her already existing faith and so proved that faith.

As the body without the spirit is dead (2:26)

It's only appropriate that having characterized a faith with no works as useless and dead, that James finish with a pungent analogy. The connection between faith and works is illustrated in a dead body. Just as a spirit makes one's body living, works make one's faith living as well.

James and Paul don't disagree. As we saw last week in Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul's faith will also result in good works. The difference between James and Paul is in their perspective. Paul is writing against justification by works, while James is writing against cheap grace. They are battling different enemies, and so emphasize different points. In addition, each man is addressing a "different" justification. Paul

address the justification that declares righteous, while James addresses the justification that vindicates or proves righteousness.

Questions to Consider:

How were Abraham and Rahab like us, and how were they different?

The Power of the Tongue (3:1-5)

“Talk is cheap” is a pretty commonly held belief. James disagrees, and strongly. Not only is talk not cheap (that is to say, it is costly), but it can be dangerous as well! In chapter three, James addresses the second of his three point outline from 1:19, being slow to speak. In this study and the next, covering 3:1-12, James will make his case for controlling the tongue.

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

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or 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. ⁵ Likewise 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.

Not many of you should presume to be teachers (v1-2)

James has addressed “tongue control” before. In 1:19, he gives a nice summary of his entire letter: “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”. A few verses later, in 1:26, he is still more direct: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”

Here James returns to the issue of speech, beginning with those who speak a lot, teachers. **What is the principal reason James gives for his admonition against too many teachers in verse 1?**

The teacher is held accountable. And while his accountability is before both man and God, God’s standards are what James has in view. The teacher, whether he knows it or not, incurs a heavy responsibility - a stricter judgment. How many would sign up for any teaching job today with the promise that they will be held to closer account than others?

Contrast what James says here to the following verses. How do you explain the contrast between these references and James?

Matthew 28:19-20

Hebrews 5:12

Being a teacher is not a bad thing, but it *is* something to be careful about. The following verses should help explain some of the issues James may have had in mind.

Matthew 12:33-37

What did Jesus claim a person's words reveal? What will each of us do on the Day of Judgment?

1 Timothy 1:6-7

What does Paul condemn?

“We all stumble in many ways.” The law of averages being what it is, the teacher is more likely to stumble in the use of the tongue, and that is a very critical area. Consider what James has to say about speech in verse 2. **What does he call someone who is faultless in speech?**

Can we achieve perfection in controlling the tongue? Not likely, but remember that “perfection” is best defined in James 1:4: “mature and complete, not lacking anything.” **If a person were never at fault in what he or she said, what would that show about them?**

It is interesting to note that according to 1 Corinthians 14:26-34, anyone could contribute to the teaching time of the church service. This could lead to bedlam, and so Paul gave guidelines to preserve order in the service. On one level, James’ warning strikes a similar note. However, teaching is not the only or even the most important application here. Like the Corinthian church, James’ audience had a real problem with bickering and quarreling among one another (4:1). This warning is not necessarily aimed at teachers only, as though heresy and instruction without depth were James’ only concern. His focus is more on reckless speech among all because of the great power of the little organ in your mouth.

The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts (v3-5)

James gives three analogies in 3:3-5 to illustrate the power of the tongue. What things does he compare to the tongue in each of them?

What do all of these things have in common with each other? Given the power of the tongue, why do you suppose sins of speech are often treated as less serious than other sins?

We saw in Matthew 12:33-37 that our words are a good reflection of our character, our true selves. For this reason, problems with the tongue are a good indicator of deeper problems in the heart. Do you struggle in this area? Welcome to the club!

Precisely because of the tongue’s power, and its ability to reflect our innermost being, we need to be careful of what we say. Read these verses for some prescriptive observations from the Psalmist.

Psalm 141:3

Where can we turn for help in this area?

Psalm 39:1-4

If the tongue is a loaded weapon, does it make sense to take a vow of silence?

Psalm 71:8

What is something you can fill your mouth with (other than food) to ensure you do not stumble in speech?

Questions to Consider:

What sins of the tongue are you currently struggling with that indicate a deeper problem in your heart?

What are some specific steps you can take to avoid sinning in your speech?

The Evil of the Tongue (3:6-12)

Last week, in an application that should strike a sense of sober responsibility in every individual who teaches, we saw the power of the tongue. This week the focus shifts to the critical element of control of the tongue in light of its incredible destructive power.

⁶ The 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. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

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

The tongue also is a fire (v6-8)

In the analogies in verses 3-5, James showed how small objects like a bit, a rudder, and a spark influence and control things far larger than themselves. Extending the last of those images, he writes about the evil of an uncontrolled tongue. In this one verse, he describes the uncontrolled tongue in two ways, gives two results of an uncontrolled tongue, and reveals the motivating power behind an uncontrolled tongue.

How does James describe the tongue and its work in verse 6?

Picture what happens when a fire lights off in a tinder-dry forest. In James' analogy, you are the forest and your tongue is the fire!

Not only is the tongue a destructive fire in a vulnerable spot, but it is the very "world of evil", a microcosm of evil, concentrated in a small but hugely powerful package. No other member of our body has comparable power and influence for evil.

What sins *don't* involve the tongue in some way?

As the bit controls the whole horse, so the tongue corrupts the "whole person." Not just his physical person, but his spirit as well. James personifies the tongue and its vile nature here, but he is fully aware of the person behind it.

Stop for a minute to consider the words "the whole course of his life" in the light of your own dreams and aspirations. Now. Set your pencil down, close your eyes, and picture what you most ardently desire for yourself and your family over your remaining years. I'll wait.

Now that you have the picture in your mind, continue to watch as it goes up in flames because of the destructive power of your tongue. It's not a pretty sight, is it? Even more serious is the realization of the **motivating power behind the uncontrolled tongue. What (or who) is it?**

Seeing the power and destructive force of the tongue, James presents an ironic contrast in verses 7-8. Man, who was given dominion over the earth at creation, who is made only a little lower than the angels, who can subdue and rule over every wild beast and animal can't control his own mouth.

Why? What is so difficult about taming the tongue? It is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” James’ choice of words is significant. “Restless” is used only here and in 1:8 (translated “unstable”) in all the New Testament. The word means unsettled, without order. **How did James picture the unstable man in 1:6-8?**

It can be tough to control such a wildly moving target. But the tongue isn’t *merely* restless. James says it is a restless *evil*. It cannot be trusted. It goes this way and that, inflicting evil everywhere it happens to land. The tongue’s restless unpredictability only makes its evil stronger because of what the tongue is filled with: deadly poison.

Look at the following two Psalms. With what class of men does James seem to be lumping his audience?
Psalm 64:1-4

Psalm 140:1-3

Can James be talking to *me*? Surely having the Holy Spirit indwelling me prevents the tongue’s power from affecting me, right?

Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing (v9-12)

Wrong. As a powerful example of the tongue’s restless evil, James points out that Christians may praise God one moment and curse man the next. Have you ever found yourself cruising down the highway, praising God along with Christian radio, and then erupting in anger over a rude driver? We each could probably supply a baker’s dozen examples from our own experience.

James gives a couple of reasons why it is so wrong to curse man. The first is theological - all men are made in God’s image. When we insult or curse his creation we indirectly insult the God whose likeness man still carries. Not only that, but our hate will corrupt our love.

1 John 4:20-21

Can we curse men and truly praise God in the same breath?

The second reason is natural. Such inconsistency (praise one minute, cursing the next) is simply against nature. To have one mouth giving forth both hate and love would be like a spring that alternated between good water and bad, or like a fig tree that bore olives, or a grapevine figs. It doesn’t happen.

A spring of water is either sweet or bitter, not both (and you wouldn’t trust a spring that was sweet one day and bitter the next). A fig tree doesn’t give olives, nor a grapevine figs. Both produce fruit according to their nature.

In the light of the tongue’s great evil and destructive force, James’ simple rebuke, “this should not be”, may seem overly gentle. Perhaps no more powerful rebuke is needed. If God’s creation does not go against itself, we as the crown point of God’s creation ought not. Man’s inconsistency is so condemned by nature that nothing more need be said.

The LORD said to Job: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” Then Job answered the LORD: “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer— twice, but I will say no more.” Job 40:1-5

Perhaps, like Job, we should simply put our hands over our mouths and think a moment before we speak.

Questions to Consider:

If your daily conversations were to be taped unbeknownst to you, would you be comfortable having them played back in front of the church?

What can you do to get control of your tongue?

Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)

James has been focused on the tongue since the beginning of chapter 3. Following the discussion of its power and destructiveness, James rounds out the topic by writing of the motivation behind the evil use of the tongue.

Before beginning the study, consider the word “envy”. **What is a good definition of envy?**

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But 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. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

Who is wise and understanding among you? (v13)

Having specifically addressed the teachers in his audience, James calls on *all* those who consider themselves “wise and understanding” (whether they teach or not) to demonstrate their wisdom. Before we get too far down that road, consider this question: **What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?** It may be helpful to incorporate your thoughts from the study on 1:5-8 from pages 12-15 of the first study guide.

Given a biblical understanding of wisdom, it is clear that sheer brainpower and eloquent words aren’t legitimate proofs of wisdom. Rather, James calls on all to show their wisdom and understanding by living a good life. **How does he define what he means by a “good life” in verse 13?**

James has already given a good example of such a life in 1:27, one that is spent helping the helpless. James is not the only, or the first, New Testament writer to call his audience to humility, starting with words from his big brother. In three different parables, Jesus uses the same paradox to teach about humility:

Matthew 23:8-11

Luke 14:7-11

Luke 18:9-14

Meekness or humility is the hallmark of wisdom. Does that ring true of our society? Even worse to contemplate, does that ring true of us?

Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven (v14-16)

Contrasting the one who is wise and understanding with one who harbors bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, James urges the latter to not boast or be arrogant. **What does any believer who is bitter and selfish do to the truth every time they speak about Christ?**

Consider the damage an obviously bitter, jealous, and selfish believer does to the message. Do they also damage themselves?

The mere possession of truth is no security for true utterance of it: all utterance is so colored by the moral and spiritual state of the speaker that truth issues as falsehood from

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his lips in proportion as he himself is not in a right state: the correct language which he utters may carry a message of falsehood and evil in virtue of the bitterness and self-seeking which accompanies his speaking. (Hort)

The “wisdom” that exalts the “wise” in jealousy and ambition is obviously not from God (as if in answer to the prayer for wisdom James encourages in 1:5). He gives three attributes that make clear where such wisdom originates. They each are the opposite of “heavenly wisdom”

- *earthly*
- *unspiritual*
- *demonic*

What is the inevitable accompaniment to jealousy and ambition?

Considering that God is a God of peace and order (1 Corinthians 14:33), is it a surprise that demonic wisdom should result in the exact opposite of God’s desire?

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure (v17-18)

Verses 17 and 18 mark a major contrast to such demonic “wisdom”. Unlike the “wisdom” from the world, wisdom from above is characterized by purity, resulting in righteousness. James lists 7 characteristics of heavenly wisdom to distinguish it from earthly:

- Pure
- Peace-loving
- Considerate
- Submissive
- Full of mercy and good fruit
- Impartial
- Sincere

Compare James’ list to a couple of other famous lists. How is it different? How is it similar?

Matthew 5:3-11

Galatians 5:22-23

Notice that heavenly wisdom is multifaceted, and is made up of both internal and external attributes. The first four and last two attributes in James’ list are internal characteristics or attitudes, directed at our relationship to others. The fifth, mercy and good fruit, is external, but still directed towards others. Wisdom’s foundation is *purity*. In contrast to the strife of verse 16, wisdom doesn’t have ulterior motives. In addition, “pure” is a synonym for “holy”. Wisdom’s foundation is in holiness. **Consider each of the remaining six attributes. What does each mean and how can you practically apply them?**

Verse 18 proclaims that peace and righteousness is the result of heavenly wisdom. He pictures wisdom as a “seed of righteousness” (NASB translation) which is sown in peace, by peacemakers. Righteousness is the result of peace, and peace is the result of heavenly wisdom that shows itself in a good life of good deeds and humility.

The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. (Isaiah 32:17)

Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. (Psalm 85:10)

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (Romans 12:18)

Questions to Consider:

Who is the wisest person you know? How does their wisdom manifest itself?

Who is the most humble person you know (and I'm not talking about those who deserve to be humble)?
How does their humility manifest itself?

Friendship With The World (4:1-6)

When we turn the page from 3:17-18 to 4:1, it is pretty obvious that James has shifted gears. The sudden transition from the beautiful picture of heavenly wisdom resulting in peace and righteousness to the sharp questions and stinging accusations of these verses is intentionally startling. This begins the development of his third major point from 1:19, being slow to anger.

¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You 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. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You 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.

⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

What causes fights and quarrels among you? (v1-3)

Every church body since Pentecost has been afflicted with fights and quarrels among believers, often over the most petty and trivial of issues. The great tragedy is that Jesus made it clear that it was to be different among his followers:

John 13:34-35; 15:12-14, 17;

What did Jesus command, and what would be the result if he was obeyed?

James opens this section with two sharp rhetorical questions. The first, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?", is answered by the second, "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" which is so written as to demand a positive response.

The source of quarrels and conflicts among us is our *desires*. The word translated *desires* in the NIV is taken from the same root for the word "hedonist". **Look up "hedonist" in the dictionary and summarize the definition.**

As far as our desires go, James has covered this ground before. What do our desires get us according to 1:13-15?

Here, James says that these desires are anything but passive, literally waging war within us against ourselves and against other believers whose pursuit of their desires may thwart the fulfillment of our own. Paul talks about the same inner struggle:

Galatians 5:13-17

What is the continual conflict within the believer?

If we indulge our flesh rather than the Spirit, what is the result within the church?

This is the very problem James is addressing. The translation of 4:2 varies widely between translations because there is no punctuation in the Greek. Preferable to the NIV is the NAS translation: "You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel." The word that NAS translates as "lust" means just that: a hot or burning desire strong enough that a Christian will commit murder to satisfy it. Does James mean that literal murder was commonplace in the first century church? What do these verses tell you about Christians and murder?

Matthew 5:21-22

1 John 3:15

The disorder and evil practice that result from envy and selfish ambition in 3:16 are here. When believers try to resolve their inner struggle through external means, they quarrel and war against one another. Rather, believers need to resolve their inner struggle through spiritual means, and this, James says, his readers do not do.

They do not have what they want because they do not ask God for what they need. Or, if they do ask, they ask with the wrong motive - that they may spend what they receive from God on their pleasures. This is a far cry from the prayer of faith in 1:5. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (1:17) and yet we sometimes ask God for evil things. James doesn't pull any punches in describing such behavior.

You adulterous people (v4-6)

Using the strongest possible imagery, James bluntly calls his readers "adulteresses" (the NIV's "adulterous people" seeks to make the term more inclusive, but James clearly intended the feminine form to include men and women alike).

As his readers have made friendship with the world in seeking after their desires they have committed spiritual adultery. Obviously, James' analogy presumes a marriage relationship. Have you given much thought to your position (man or woman) as part of the Bride of Christ? Read through Paul's tender words in Ephesians and consider the effect of adultery on such a relationship.

Ephesians 5:22-32

What does friendship with the world do to our relationship with God?

While Christians should answer James' rhetorical question in 4:5 with a resounding "No!", we sometimes live a resounding "Yes!", as though God were not a jealous God who desired our undivided love.

"The Holy Spirit, imparted to us by God at conversion, yearns enviously for our total loyalty and devotion to Him. The incoming Holy Spirit, who sealed our redemption, justly claims our undivided love. He can brook no rival for our affection." (D. Edmond Hiebert)

God stands against the proud. What Christian in their right mind would willingly put themselves in opposition to him? God gives more grace to the humble. What Christian in their right mind would not seek such grace? Having delivered this solemn warning, James can only call on his readers to repent.

Questions to Consider:

Is there a difference between self-satisfaction and a feeling of achievement?

How does pride show itself in your life?

Submission to God (4:7-10)

We saw last week that as James' readers have sought after their desires by making friendship with the world, they have committed spiritual adultery against God. Now James announces that the resolution to their struggle is in submission and repentance to God, turning away from the denial of their real need.

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Submit yourselves, then, to God (v7-10)

Because God gives grace to the humble (v6) we are to *submit* to him. James calls for an active response here, outlining 5 clear actions that Christians are to take:

Submit yourselves

Submission is a familiar concept to us (at least in theory). The word came from a Greek military term that meant to arrange troop divisions under the command of a leader. In non-military use, it means a voluntary attitude of placing oneself under another. We are to willingly place ourselves under God.

Besides being right, submitting to God has a couple of very real advantages. Job 22:21 says that submission is the foundation for prosperity. Conversely, Psalm 81:11-12 uses the example of the Israelites to say that lack of submission is the foundation of disaster. **With that in mind, why is submission sometimes difficult?**

How is submission to God different from submission to some earthly authority (parents, employer, government, etc.)?

Resist the devil

Active submission to God is coupled with active resistance to Satan. The context for James' exhortation here is pride (4:6), a special area of interest for Satan (1 Timothy 3:6). How do we resist the devil?

Ephesians 6:10-18

1 Peter 5:5-9

James makes clear that if we resist him, the devil will flee from us. He has no special right or power to torment those who turn away from him. He is not an all-powerful creature who can have his way with us. If we resist, he will run. Pretty neat, huh?

Come near to God

In contrast to our resistance to the devil and his reaction to it, we are *to draw near* to God, who will also draw near to us. James is picturing the approach of the High Priest to the Holy of Holies:

Hebrews 10:19-22

As the priests were to cleanse themselves externally as an outward sign of their purity before God, so believers, in drawing near to God, must come to him with clean hands and pure hearts. "Pure" here refers less to moral purity than it does to singleness of heart and mind, as in James 1:8.

Titus 2:11-12

Who washes our hands?

1 John 3:1-3

How can we keep our heart and mind focused?

Grieve, mourn, and wail

The first question which should enter your minds upon reading v9 is “Whatever happened to ‘count it all joy’? What about Paul’s ‘Rejoice in the Lord always.’”?

Christian joy is appropriate, but there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4), and when a Christian finds himself mired in sin, it is time to mourn. This is not manufactured sorrow, calling upon false tears to show God how sorry we are, but the real thing caused by a deep sense of the seriousness of sin and its consequences in our lives today.

“So long . . . as sin is active in the believer’s own life and is working its havoc in the lives of others, the mourning of penitence and the sorrow of sympathy must be among the Christian’s most deeply felt emotions.”
R. V. G. Tasker

What do these verses tell you about godly sorrow?

Matthew 5:4

Romans 7:24

2 Corinthians 7:9-10

Humble yourselves

Just as he opened this exhortation by calling for submission, so James closes it by calling for humility. The humility James is talking about is best pictured in one of Jesus’ parables:

Luke 18:9-14

The paradox is that humility will bring exaltation, and exaltation will bring humility. This truth runs throughout the entire Bible. Use this sampling of verses to summarize how God rewards sincere humility:

Psalms 149:4

Proverbs 3:34

Ezekiel 21:26

1 Peter 5:6

Questions to Consider:

What do the people you work with think God wants from them?

How can you bring humility into your life?

Living In Submission to God (4:11-17)

Having called his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, practicing sincere submission and humility before God, James gives a couple of very practical examples of how that humility should work itself out by showing us what *not* to do.

¹¹ *Brothers, 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.* ¹² *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you -- who are you to judge your neighbor?*

¹³ *Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."* ¹⁴ *Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes* ¹⁵ *Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."* ¹⁶ *As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.* ¹⁷ *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*

Brothers, do not slander one another (v11-12)

Humility before God must have an effect on our relationships with one another. The first example of something that Christians must avoid in submitting themselves to God is an all too common problem:

Slander (n). 1. The utterance of defamatory statements injurious to the reputation or well-being of a person. 2. A malicious statement or report. (The American Heritage Dictionary) The dictionary definition of "slander" is greatly simplified by James. What is his definition of slander?

Slander was, and is, a serious concern for the church. It is specifically condemned by Moses, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jesus, Paul, Peter, Jude, John, and of course, James. How do we use slander to fulfill our own desires?

Notice the company that slander keeps. What are some of the traits slander is equated with in these verses?

Ephesians 4:31

Colossians 3:8

1 Peter 2:1

James says that one of the reasons slander is such an ugly thing is that it is pure arrogance. The one who slanders is so lacking in humility before God that he is comfortable acting as judge, not only against his brother, but against "the law" itself, God's law. James has previously called the it "the royal law" and summarized it in 2:8: "Love your neighbor as yourself". Obviously, the one who slanders is not keeping that law, but is breaking it.

Here are some *really* good reasons not to do this:

Matthew 7:1-2, 12:36-37

Romans 14:10-12, 2 Corinthians 5:10

When man does not do the law but talks against it in word or action, he has placed himself above it as judge, a position for which he is not equipped, and which is already occupied:

Deuteronomy 32:39

God has power over life and death, and we don't:

Luke 12:4-5

Now listen, you who say . . . (v13-17)

The second example of something that Christians must avoid in submitting themselves to God is in the area of *dependence*. To be humble before God means that we must recognize and act upon our dependence on him.

The example James uses is very familiar to us. James is not picking on the traveling salesman or entrepreneur. He doesn't have a problem with business, but with the businessman who does his work and plans his life with no thought towards God or prayer for direction.

How are the people pictured in these verses like the people James is talking about?

Luke 12:16-21, Luke 17:26-29

What's wrong with planning out our lives?

The Christian who adopts such an attitude, whether he knows it or not, is boasting, being arrogant and blind, oblivious to what is actually going on around him. James says that we must be aware that our life here has no more staying power than the river mist that burns off when the sun rises. With the knowledge of our frailty in the forefront of our minds, we can make our plans based on a dependence of the Lord's will, not our own.

But isn't just prefacing our plans with the statement "If it is the Lord's will . . ." a cliché we use to give us cover for our arrogant self-planning? How does James intend us to take this instruction?

James closes this section with characteristic bluntness. When man makes his plans, carries them out, and then boasts about his accomplishments he is neglecting his duty to honor God. What man owes God is dependence and praise, and to withhold them is sin. There are *lots* of applications of the principle of sin by omission. Some good verses to consider are 1 Samuel 12:23, Matthew 25:40-46, Luke 10:30-35, and Luke 16:19-31.

Questions to Consider:

How far does our responsibility to plan our lives extend?

How can you make plans for your life which please God?

When you look back on your life, what would you like to have accomplished?

These words summarize generations of man's arrogance, and are often quoted for inspiration at high school graduations:

Invictus - William Ernest Henley
Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

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

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

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

What is not known by most who take solace in Henley's poem is that when his daughter died at the age of 10, sometime after he had written "Invictus", he was destroyed. Man can make his plans, but sometimes God asserts himself in reality.

Borrowing the attractive cadence and rhythm of "Invictus," Dorothea Day wrote a Christian reply to Henley:

My Captain - Dorothea Day
*Out of the light that dazzles me,
Bright as the sun from pole to pole,
I thank the God I know to be
For Christ the conqueror of my soul.*

*Since His the sway of circumstance,
I would not wince nor cry aloud.
Under that rule which men call chance
My head with joy is humbly bowed.*

*Beyond this place of sin and tears
That life with Him! And His the aid,
Despite the menace of the years,
Keeps, and shall keep me, unafraid.*

*I have no fear, though strait the gate,
He cleared from punishment the scroll.
Christ is the Master of my fate,
Christ is the Captain of my soul.*

Warning to the Rich (5:1-6)

Having warned the proud to be humble, James now warns those who are rich and who misuse their wealth. James brings the full brunt of his rhetorical power as a prophet against those whose wealth gives them a false sense of security, and a love of power.

¹ Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ² Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴ Look! 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. ⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

Now listen, you rich people (v1-6)

James has addressed the rich before. In 1:9-11, he called on rich believers to dwell on their humility before Christ. In 2:6, he called on his readers to quit favoring the rich since they are the ones who oppress the church. Here, James makes clear just what some of the “rich” have been up to.

While some hold that James is addressing a group within the church, it is more likely that he is writing for the benefit of the church against the oppressive rich who are not Christians, much like the prophets wrote against the sinning nations and peoples who would never read or hear their words. In so doing, James gives testimony against evil before God and great comfort and encouragement to the oppressed believers.

James isn't talking about any and all rich. Verses 2-6 makes clear that the rich he has in mind are those who misuse their wealth.

Wealth is a blessing from God (Genesis 24:35, 26:12-13, 1 Samuel 2:7, Proverbs 10:22). Its misuse is a curse that affects not only the rich, but those around them as well (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Weep and Wail

Like the proud (4:9), James calls on the rich to “weep and wail”. This is not a call to repentance, but to anguish: “Repentance has indeed its weeping, but being mixed with consolation, it does not proceed to howling.” (Calvin)

Instead, they are to fear what they have brought upon themselves, a judgment of misery. They will be held accountable for the evil they have done to others in obtaining their wealth. Their money won't lessen these miseries, and they can't buy them off. Their misuse of money is spelled out in 4 specific ways:

Your wealth has rotted (v2-3)

James tells the rich to weep and wail because their wealth is rotten, moth-eaten, and rust-covered. A rich man's food may rot (because he has more than he can eat), his garments may be eaten by moths (since he has more than he can wear), and his gold and silver rust away (because he has more than he needs). James is not being necessarily being literal here. Rather, he is pointing out both the temporal nature of wealth, its decay, and the idiocy of hoarding it.

Matthew 6:19-20

Where would the rich be better off investing?

Luke 12:16-21

What comes from this use of wealth?

Hoarded and decaying wealth gives testimony against the rich, damning them, “For the moth will eat them up like a garment” (Isaiah 51:8).

You failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields (v4)

Not only does their hoarded wealth testify against them, but so does their evil to others. What would you call someone who does not pay those who mow their fields and harvest their grain?

Jeremiah 22:13

Malachi 3:5

The NIV refers to the “Lord Almighty”, which is an interpretation of the literal “Lord of Sabaoth”, a transliteration of a Hebrew word that points to God’s sovereign omnipotence over all creation and position as Lord of the heavenly hosts. He is the defender of the poor, the hope of the hopeless. What man would be so foolish as to challenge him?

You have lived on earth in luxury (v5)

In hoarding wealth and withholding their worker’s wages, they have given themselves a luxurious and self-indulgent lifestyle, living extravagantly at the expense of others. This attitude is seen clearly in Isaiah 22:12-14:

The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth. But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!" The LORD Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," says the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

How can money affect our relationship with God?

Amos 6:1-6

Revelation 18:6-8

Where will luxury end?

Whether they are aware of approaching judgment or not, those that pursue such luxury are only fattening themselves like sheep for a slaughter.

You have condemned and murdered innocent men (v6)

Topping this sordid list off, those who misuse their wealth kill innocent men. Obviously, not all the rich are literal murderers, but whether they have physically murdered innocent men, literally condemned innocent men to death, or done so figuratively is all the same to James.

It is clear that James is talking about those who abuse and kill the members of Christ’s body, and this takes our readers right back to the beginning, “Consider it pure joy . . .”. While those who abuse, condemn, and kill the innocent believers fatten themselves like sheep for a slaughter, Christians should expect such treatment.

What do the following verses say about those who persecute the innocent?

2 Timothy 3:12-13

1 Peter 4:12-18

Could there be Christians to whom God has entrusted great wealth who might abuse it? How do we apply James' words in our own lives?

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

Questions to Consider:

If you had a spare million, what would you do with it?

Do you own something you'd find hard to give up for someone else's benefit?

Do you possess anything that money can't buy?

Patience (5:7-12)

James has declared the stern judgment coming upon the rich who misuse their wealth. Now he turns again to encouragement, exhorting his readers not to lose patience as they wait for the end to their trials.

⁷ Be 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. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As 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.

¹² Above 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.

Be patient (v7-9)

What are the things that try your patience? We can all list dozens of pet peeves, but how about alienation from family and friends, loss of your job, home, and belongings, unjust prosecution, and denunciation from the state, just for starters? Think that would make you a bit testy?

That is where James' readers found themselves as they lived out their commitment to Christ, and so his letter opens with a call to consider their trials "pure joy", and gets ready to close it with a call to "be patient".

If you look up "patient" in a dictionary (and aside from "invalid"), you'll find some aspects of patience that James underscores here:

*patient (adj.) 1. Capable of bearing delay; not hasty. 2. Tolerant; understanding.
3. Persevering; constant. 4. Capable of bearing affliction with calmness.*

1. Capable of bearing delay

James calls his readers to the kind of patience that is capable of bearing delay, knowing that there is an end to their afflictions at "the Lord's coming."

On the edge of the 21st century, we are perhaps used to waiting for the Second Coming. These 1st century believers, however, were expecting a nearly immediate return, and when it did not occur, began to lose heart. How does James' example of a farmer relate to our wait for the Lord?

Why has Jesus not returned already?

2 Peter 3:3-10

Is patience merely a personality trait?

Galatians 5:22

Hebrews 12::1-2

"Capable of bearing delay" also means the ability to stand firm. What does it mean to stand firm as a Christian? How do we do it?

2. Tolerant; understanding

The temptation for the persecuted to call down judgment on the persecutors must be great, but what about the temptation to grumble against fellow Christians - especially those who aren't experiencing the same level of persecution as you? The church body undergoing persecution faces terrific understanding, not grumbling against one another. In verse 9, what is the primary motivation to avoid such grumbling?

Whose job is it to judge? For help on this really, really tough question, look at Deuteronomy 32:35 and 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6.

Has God asked for our assistance on this one? Does he need a hand in judgment?

When we grumble against one another, we are judging one another. James has touched on this already (4:11-12), but the topic deserves repetition. Rather than judge, we must keep the "royal law", loving our neighbor as ourselves (2:8), knowing that the Judge is near. Our attitude towards one another should be governed by the fact that Jesus is about to walk through the door. What do we want him to find us doing?

As an example of patience (v10-11)

3. Persevering; constant

Perseverance is another topic James has already addressed (1:12). The kind of patience that perseveres is seen in a couple of very familiar examples.

The prophets

What happened to the prophets "who spoke in the name of the Lord"?

Hebrews 11:32-38

What can we expect?

Matthew 5:11-12

Job

Job is a byword even in our culture. Even a child could fill in this blank: "She has the _____ of Job". Job's patience may be more accurately considered to be his perseverance. More than any other Old Testament character, Job is the one who displays the determination to endure:

Job 1:21; 2:10; 13:15; 19:25-27

Can you say along with Job, "*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised*"? Such perseverance is what James is looking for and God commands.

God is not harsh in expecting his children to persevere. The end of Job's story (Job 42:10-12) is an illustration of God's compassion and mercy, which is in fact how God chooses to describe himself:

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." Exodus 34:6

Above all, my brothers, do not swear (v12)

4. Capable of bearing affliction with calmness.

The conclusion to this exhortation is a call to bear affliction with calmness. Considering the persecution the readers are going through and the resulting stress and temptation, there was probably a significant temptation to swear.

There are two kinds of “swearing”. One is the careless or malicious use of God’s name. The other is using oaths to give ourselves credibility. Why do we swear at all?

Exodus 20:7

Why should we not use God’s name “in vain”?

Matthew 5:33-37

Why does it not make sense for a Christian to swear oaths?

What can a Christian do to be trusted with his word?

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident. Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me. I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD. Psalm 27:3, 10, 13-14

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. Psalm 130:5-8

Questions to Consider:

For you personally, what is the hardest thing about waiting on God's timing?

What actions do you need to take to grow in patience?

Prayer (5:13-16)

James has told us to be patient in the midst of our troubles, avoiding grumbling against one another or at all costs swearing oaths out of frustration or anger. What then is a Christian to do with his anxiety? What outlet is appropriate for the believer who is going through the trials of life?

¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore 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.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (v13-16)

James opens this final section of his letter with a series of rhetorical questions that cover a wide range of experience in this world. Each of these questions has the same answer, prayer.

Is any one of you in trouble?

The first question, not surprisingly for James, deals with “trouble.” This is the verb form of the same word that James used in 5:10 to describe the prophets “suffering”. As we saw last week in looking at Hebrews 11:32-38, that was a *lot* of trouble. **What action does James counsel believers to take in the face of such trouble?**

Does such action seem sufficient to you?

What is the effect of prayer during such times of trouble? Consider this quote from R. V. G. Tasker’s commentary on James: “*Prayer may not remove the affliction but it most certainly can transform it.*”

Is anyone happy?

Of course, trouble is not the only thing believers experience. In fact, when we are in our trials we are to consider them pure joy. On that note, when we are happy, we should “sing songs of praise.”

James may be thinking specifically of happiness in the face of trials. In fact, this particular word for “happy” is only used in two other places in the New Testament, both of them occasions of adversity (Acts 24:10, 27:25).

Take some time to meditate on some of these “Songs of Praise” and consider these 2 questions: How often do you sing to the Lord? How often should you?

Psalm 33:1-3

Psalm 92:1-3

Psalm 98:4-9

Psalm 150

Is any one of you sick?

The third question James raises is for those who are suffering illness of one kind or another. Rather than merely instruct his readers to pray for healing when they are sick, he commands that they take their concerns to their elders. There are several elements to note here: anointing with oil, the elder's "prayer of faith", and the connection between sins and sickness.

Anoint him with oil

It is important to know that in James' day, olive oil was considered to be a medicinal, commonly used for all sorts of illnesses and discomforts. It was used by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34) and the Twelve (Mark 6:40) in a practical and physical way. James is not looking at oil as a supernatural thing here.

The prayer offered in faith

What *is* supernatural is the "prayer of faith" offered by the elders. James is clear. The sick person will be made well. This verse has raised questions throughout the centuries. If prayer is offered and the sick don't recover, does that mean that the prayer wasn't offered "in faith"? Is James saying that God will heal all sickness if this "prescription" is followed? Look at the following verses for some help:

Philippians 2:25-28

2 Timothy 4:20

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

If he has sinned

Some have taken James to say that all sickness is caused by sin, but note his qualification of this connection, "If he has sinned . . .", not "because he has sinned".

Sometimes sickness does result from our sins, a fact of which we need to be aware (see John 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 11:30-32 for examples). For this reason, James says that we should be confessing our sins to one another.

What keeps us from confessing sins and praying for each other?

If we confess our sins to God, why should anyone else know about it?

Galatians 6:1-5

The physical presence of the elders praying "over" the individual and the anointing of oil make it clear that James is not talking about merely sharing a prayer request with the church. How does James' command differ from our practice?

When we are involved in helping one another with sin in their lives through prayer, we can be used by God to bring about healing. That is where the "powerful and effective" prayer of a righteous man is most clearly seen.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us -- whatever we ask -- we know that we have what we asked of him. 1 John 5:14-15

Questions to Consider:

What are some life situations that most people would pray over?

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Have you ever experienced truly life-changing prayer?

What keeps you from praying with confidence?

Restoration Through Prayer (5:17-20)

In the last study we saw that the prayer is powerful and effective, looking at its impact on those in trouble, happy, or ill. James brings his exhortation to pray, and his letter, to a close with an illustration of a man of powerful prayer, Elijah, and an application of prayer in the church body that is as needful today as it was 2,000 years ago.

¹⁷ Elijah 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. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹ My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Elijah was a man just like us (v17-18)

Elijah is considered to be the preeminent prophet. Although he is not represented in the written prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah, his importance is clearly seen in the anticipation surrounding the Messiah. It would be Elijah who would precede the Messiah and prepare his way.

Elijah's story is found in 1 Kings 17-19 and 2 Kings 1-2. What made Elijah such a key figure?

Luke 1:17

Elijah is seen in prayer on several occasions. Look at the following two verses and see what specifically he is praying for.

1 Kings 17:19-23

1 Kings 18:18-40

When Elijah prayed, things happened. He prayed for drought (1 Kings 17:1) and there was drought. He prayed for rain (1 Kings 18:41-45), and there was rain. His prayer was certainly effective, and accomplished much!

Why does James tell his readers "Elijah was a man just like us"?

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth (v19-20)

And now, the conclusion. Most of the letter-writers of the New Testament finish their work in a chatty, neighborly sort of way, sending greetings and instructions in closing. None of that for James. Practical and somewhat solemn from the start to the finish, James finishes his exhortation with a call to intimate involvement with one another.

What James has in mind here is the falling away of a brother or sister, "wandering from the truth" either of their own accord or through the deceit of others. When such a thing happens, we should "bring him back".

James was not the first author to address this issue.

Ezekiel 3:17-19

Galatians 6:1-5

Hebrews 3:12-13; 10:24-25

The answer to Cain's arrogant question in Genesis 4:9 is "Yes, you are your brother's keeper!" How should we go about bringing someone back? What tools do we have to enable us?

What causes Christians to stumble and fall away from their faith? Sin. When a Christian has fallen away, it is sometimes hard to be certain of their salvation. We must pursue them the same as if we knew them to be die-hard pagans. James says that in pursuing such a brother or sister, it is the same as turning a sinner (a non-believer) away from eternal death.

Here's a tough question: **Who forgives sin?** If you need help with this one, check out Psalm 103:8-12.

Of course, we ourselves don't forgive sin, or turn sinners back to eternal life, God does. We can, however, be his instruments if we obey James' command. The power of prayer extends beyond our personal troubles, happiness, or illness. It can bring God's forgiveness, and covering of sins. When we pursue others in this way, we are fulfilling the royal law of James 2:8, and showing the love that covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Psalm 32:1.

The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 1 Peter 4:7-8

In summary

So ends James. As a quick summary of the book as a whole, consider the following:

When in trial . . . (1:2)

we are to:

As individuals . . . (1:19)

we are to:

As believers . . . (2:8)

we are to:

As brothers and sisters . . . (4:11, 5:7, 5:13)

we are to:

Questions to Consider:

How have you been helped when you were struggling in your faith?

How could you help someone who is struggling?

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