

James:

A Manual for Christian Maturity

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Dedication:

To the Redeemer small group that comes together at our home.

To DeMyron, Haynes, a man with a pastor's heart and an abundance of wisdom.

To Bekah Brown who is walking through the Book of James with us.

To Darby and Trent as you pursue the path of maturity and completeness in your marriage.

To George Adams and N'Jeri Laird who shepherded me with words from James.

To all who seek the wisdom of God to face the trials and testing in life.

Resources:

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All Scriptures quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

Hello, My Name is James

Text: James 1:1

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Nametags are ubiquitous at conferences. They serve as security and legitimacy checks at the entrances. Most provide a first name. Beyond that, these tags often tell people our positions. The greeting at the beginning of this letter includes several significant markers concerning our author.

Hello, My Name is James

Of course, everyone who received this letter would recognize the name James. But then again, they might need more information for there were several men named James in the early church. There was James, the son of Alphaeus, an apostle about whom we know hardly anything. Then there was James, the son of Zebedee. That James was part of Jesus’ inner circle. Within 10 years of the emergence of the church, however, James the son of Zebedee was killed. That leaves one other James to consider.

James the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This James was skeptical of Jesus during the three years of Jesus’ public ministry. (see John 7:2-6) But when Jesus rose from the dead and “appeared to James” (I Cor. 15:7), James joined with the believers in the great prayer meeting that led to Pentecost. Peter emerged as the pastor of the gathered church in Jerusalem. Within a short time, the Lord blessed that church with exponential growth.

James, the head of the scattered church

When the church was scattered due to the persecution inaugurated by Herod and others, Peter went underground, and James, the brother of our Lord became the head of that scattered church. James describes that church as “the twelve tribes in the dispersion.” This letter is written to the scattered church. Later James became the convener of the Jerusalem Council. His wisdom and grace are described in three ways in Acts 15. He listens intently; he weighs all he hears according to Scripture; and then he presents a plan for maintaining the unity of the church in the world. Once that plan was accepted, James made sure that the Council sent a letter to the church in Antioch which would in turn circulate it to all the churches scattered throughout the Mediterranean world.

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

James took the position of a servant (literally, a bondsman). He is no longer his own, he is not free, but subject to God. He has acknowledged Jesus as the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, he has been fully converted from an autonomous, free thinker into a person who lived for the glory of God alone.

James, a spiritual director for dearly loved brethren.

This epistle, which begins with the briefest of greetings continues with the exhortation: “Count it all joy, my brothers ...” It is the first of more than 50 directives designed to help the believers to grow from spiritual birth to maturity. Interspersed between the commands, James writes words of wisdom drawn from Proverbs and from the words of Jesus. He is direct and his illustrations are vivid. He is zealous for their maturity as well as for their purity in relation to each other as they live in a hostile world.

“Dear Diary”

Text James 1:2-4

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

Spiritual disciplines are tools to help us grow in our faith. James might be pointing us toward the spiritual discipline of Journaling with his first directive, for the word **Count** means “to consider, add it all up, be precise, definitive, decisive, reckon, come to a settled conviction.

“Count it all joy...” It is doubtful that James has in mind the style of journaling practiced by the fifth grader who comes home, unlocks her diary with her secret key and begins: “Dear Diary, my teacher hates me.” Rather than such a reactive approach, James calls for a reflective approach to life.

Alec Motyer suggests that “in setting out this teaching, James has attempted to breach the stronghold of our minds and capture the way we think.” (Motyer:34) James urges us to include every trial we are going through in our thoughtful evaluation of life’s experiences, and when we count, he says: count it all joy.

Ah, but what does James know about my circumstances? Actually, James knew a great deal about the various trials that the first century church was going through. He had witnessed the persecutions, imprisonments, martyrdoms of some of her members. He had bid a hasty farewell to many who had scattered to the far corners of the Mediterranean world as refugees, aliens and strangers. He received feedback concerning the poverty many experienced not to mention the partiality shown against brothers and sisters in the faith along with the lack of genuine faith demonstrated by some in their midst.

James directed the scattered church to accept trials as the norm of life and to see that God was using these trials to produce steadfastness. This steadfastness, sometimes called perseverance or endurance, is the means to a most desirable end. James uses three words to describe the results of enduring trials.

When we let steadfastness have its full effect, we become “perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

The first word reminds us of Jesus, who perfectly bore the image of his Father in Heaven. He is the one who called his followers to be *perfect* – that is, to be like our Father in heaven, whose character is flawless and whose generosity abounds to all. (Mt 5:43-48) Jesus called believers who were living in the presence of enemies: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” If believers will face that trial steadfastly, their lives will begin to resemble the Father’s perfect life.

The next word, *complete*, means “possessing every part which goes into making up the complete whole.” (Motyer:33) When we make it our desire to bear the image of our Creator in his character, attitude and action, he gives us all grace, so that we may live as complete, whole people. The Apostle Paul’s faith was tested physically. He prayed intently for the removal of the thorn in his flesh. There is no sign that the thorn was removed, but in the testing the Lord assured Paul that he would lack nothing. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” In response, Paul concluded, “Therefore, I will boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

God uses trials to transform our lives to the end that we may be perfect, complete, lacking in nothing. In particular, when our faith is put to the test and we endure steadfastly, its genuineness is revealed, its durability is strengthened, and its full maturity is developed. If your goal is Christian maturity, then accept the pathway of trials and testing, count every trial as an opportunity to trust God, and lean into those trials with steadfast, unrelenting, joy-filled hope in God.

What do you still lack, dearly beloved?

Text James 1:5

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

James paints a positive picture of God’s purpose in taking us through trials. What could be sweeter than to arrive intact, whole, complete, lacking in nothing at the end of a time of trial and testing. But then we open our journal and do a searching inventory of our present condition. I have not arrived. I am not there yet. I am not whole, complete, and lacking in nothing. These trials are still difficult to face.

James next words address our frustration. It is almost as if he was reading our journal at this point and decided he’d better give us some help. What do you still lack, dearly beloved? “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

Wisdom is a common word in the Bible. It appears 211 times in Hebrew and Greek. Three books in the Old Testament are devoted to this topic and are referred to as Wisdom Literature. (Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). A wide range of meanings is included in the two words we translate wisdom. “Wisdom is skill in living, practical knowledge that helps one know how to act and speak in different circumstances. Wisdom is knowing how to navigate life well.” (Kantzer, Longman, Motyer)

In Proverbs 9:10 we read that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” It is the conclusion to nine chapters of instruction, warning and description of the two ways. Evil, foolish and adulterous seducers would turn us toward the path of destruction, but “a reverent awe and worshipful response of faith toward the God who reveals himself as Creator, Savior and Judge” will sustain us and provide all the direction we need. (note on Pr. 1:7 in RSB)

James points us to God, the source of wisdom and exhorts those who experience a lack of wholeness to ask God for wisdom. He offers three reasons for doing so. (Alec Motyer’s, *The Message of James* spells these out so clearly, that I want to acknowledge his contributions to the thoughts that follow)

God is a giving God. It is in God’s nature to give. It is ceaselessly true of God that he gives. He is always giving. Within the first chapter of James, we are reminded: “Every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights...” (James 1:17)

God is a generous God. He is not stingy; his bounty is unrestricted. The word generous includes the notion of single-mindedness, as if to say he has an exclusive preoccupation, that his mind is set on this one task, as if he had nothing else to do.

I was shocked when I first heard the song, *Above All* sung in a Seminary setting. After extolling Christ as the one above all powers, kings, thrones and wonders of the world, the chorus declares, “You took the fall and thought of me above all.” What? How can I sing of God as if he thought of me above all? Yet, this is included in the meaning of the word generous! He is generous to all.

Finally, **God is a gracious God.** He gives generously *without reproach*. A simple definition of reproach is “to address (someone) in such a way as to express disapproval or disappointment.” (Oxford Dictionary). That’s not how God addresses us. His welcome never fails. He refuses to keep score. He doesn’t come to the bottom line and say, “That’s it, I am not going to give any more to you!”

Grace is undeserved favor from God. The old hymn reminds us that God’s grace is “marvelous, infinite, matchless. It is freely bestowed on all who believe.” Do you lack wisdom? Come to the giving God. His generous and gracious attitude is the assurance that you may obtain help in your time of need.

Single-minded or Double-minded?

Text James 1:6-8

“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the winds. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

Are you hoping to receive wisdom from God who is a generous and gracious giver. “Ask and you will receive” is an open invitation coming from the Lord of the Universe. However, not everyone gets wisdom.

Donald Burdick shows us the irony. “Although there is nothing in God that prevents him from giving wisdom to his people, a barrier may exist in them.” (Burdick:169) Similar quotations are repeated in most commentaries that address this issue. A good explanation for this lack of wisdom obtained in face of the abundant supply offered by God is found in Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please him (God), for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask in faith!

Doubt and doublemindedness are two ways of describing the barrier to blessing which exists within us. The topic of doubt may be discussed from different angles. Surely, the person who has not yet come to know the gospel may be described as being in doubt. This person needs to receive knowledge from the Scripture, new birth and subsequent guidance from the Spirit and encouragement from believers in Christ in order to move from doubt to faith. But this is not the person James is addressing. James is referring to the person who has heard it all, but still has a divided heart.

This is the person who knows about God, but who doesn’t fully commit to him. He or she may appear to be a follower of Christ, but in reality, is living “in two minds” (literally “two souls.”). If that person became real with him/herself for a moment, the journal entry might read:

“I know God is good, generous and gracious. I know that God has fulfilled his promises within history; I see a cloud of present-day witnesses whose lives are being changed by Him; and I understand that God would share his wisdom with me if I asked for it. I’m just not sure I want that right now. I am still committed to doing my own thing in order to be culturally cool and socially acceptable. I am committed to my carefree lifestyle and choices.

Two closely related forms of double-mindedness could also be considered. “I am frightened of adulting; I’m with Peter Pan at this point, in that I do not really want to grow up. Sure, my life might seem like a small boat in a vast and stormy sea, but actually, living on the edge gives me a rush. Surviving the peaks and troughs authenticates my existence like nothing else.”

Finally, double mindedness may show up in the form described in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. In that classic story we read of Christian arriving in the town of Fair Speech where he meets a man named “By Ends.” He is a double-minded man as indicated by his working philosophy. *“I had always the luck to jump in my judgment with the present way of the times, whatever it was, and my chance was to get thereby.”* Sadly, he was not alone in his ambivalence about obtaining godly wisdom. His friends are Lord Fair Speech, Lord Turnabout, Lord Time Server and Mr. Facing Both Ways. The whole town was caught up in keeping with the wisdom of the age. (See Pilgrim’s Progress:91-92)

James cuts through this way of thinking with a blunt appraisal. “That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.” Duplicious prayers will not be answered. Beyond that, instability is the sure result of indefinite delay in fully committing to God.

Exempli Gratia – e.g.

James 1:9-11

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also, will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.”

On our way to maturity, we encounter trials and testing. These are the means by which God develops us as his servants. When we face them head on, and steadfastly persist in facing them, God completes the work he intends for us: He makes us whole, complete, lacking nothing. With that certainty in mind, we ask ourselves what trials and testing are given to us to meet?

In James 1:9-11 we read the **Exempli Gratia** – the example that most of those in the scattered church in the First Century would have understood.

James starts with the lowly brother urging him to boast in his exaltation. But no sooner does James cite the trial which the lowly brother faces, and which he says is an exaltation over which he may boast, than he switches the focus to the rich, whom he calls to boast in his humiliation.

James will have much more to say to encourage the poor in Chapter 2, and much more warning for the rich in chapter 5, but for now, he simply mentions the two in their contrasting positions and asks them both to boast (count it all joy; rejoice, glory) in their given positions.

How does this make any sense? How can the lowly consider their position one of exaltation? How can the rich even pretend that they are experiencing humiliation? How can they both equally boast in their positions?

Many voices coming from the lowly in the inner cities of America and the world at the end of 2023 are angry, filled with rage at the injustices they have endured. They feel entitled to better treatment whether in the form of reparations or guaranteed equity and inclusion in the distribution of resources and benefits. And how can anyone with means and a conscience blame them for decrying their lowliness or demanding their rights?

Certainly, the wealthy have had a better hand dealt to them. To describe as authentic any wealthy person’s claim to humiliation just seems out of touch. James’ explanation concerning the rich comes by way of picture and perspective. The rich man is like a flower of the grass that will pass away as soon as the sun rises with its scorching heat. Neither he nor his wealth is permanent. In the midst of his pursuits, his whole portfolio, yes, even the life of the rich fades away and perishes. If the trials leading to the loss of externals teaches anything, it teaches the rich that God is his only lasting treasure. See Ph. 3:7-11

The poor may feel the injustice and pain of his financial poverty. But if he puts his present circumstance into the perspective of eternity, his/her attitude changes. Every trial makes the poor person stronger. Every test approached with an abundance of faith becomes a stepping stone toward completeness. The poor becomes whole, though his pocketbook looks empty, the poor learns how to use God-honoring tools such as prayer and partnership with believers that the rich never take into account.

In the end, the poor and rich gather in worship and boast in the one thing they have in common.

“In the morning when I rise ... and when I am alone ... and when I come to die give me Jesus!
Give me Jesus, give me Jesus; You can have all this world, but give me Jesus.”

What a gracious example this is to a world wrapped up in mere material pursuits.

The Blessing of God

Text James 1:12

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”

This verse is a conclusion to James’ introduction of the theme of growth to maturity through steadfast endurance in face of trials. (1:2-11). It pronounces a blessing on the person who has stood the test.

This blessing of God is more than the wholeness promised in verse 4. It is also more than mere happiness. Burdick leads us into a better understanding. “It is not sufficient to translate the word *makarios* as “happy” Its meaning runs deeper. “It is the transcendent happiness of life beyond care, labor and death.” In biblical usage it speaks of “the distinctive religious joy” which is one of the benefits of salvation” (TDNT 4:362, 367 quoted in EBC 12:171). It includes the idea of approval and points to a reward appropriate for the one who has passed the test.

The reward that awaits is the crown of life. This is not a kingly crown, but the “stephanos crown” given to the victorious athlete. This laurel wreath presented publicly to the highly trained athlete who has proven himself in the battle, the race, the struggle. He will experience *life* in a new way now that he has gone through the test and endured to the end. Is this a reference to eternal life, perhaps? But more likely, it is a reference to the quality of the present life of one who stayed the course and won the crown.

When one asks the question, what made this athlete victorious in the battle over another? a few options come to mind: A better coach, a better training facility, better training conditions, better talent. The verse suggests another answer: A better relationship to his God. The crown of life is promised to the one who loves God.

The Apostle Paul was radically changed by the love of God in Christ. That’s what caused him to run with perseverance the race set out for him. That’s what kept him going when he faced tribulation, distress, persecution and famine. He said to the Corinthians, “the love of Christ controls us”. He wrote to the great outline of the gospel to the Romans. As he completed the central section of his letter, he declared the heart of it all: “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us; “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39). Paul lived as love’s response to love.

James quietly celebrated the love factor in this single verse. *“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”*

Alec Motyer’s final observations on this verse challenge me once again. “Our progress to the crown is expedited not by our powers of endurance but by the depth and reality and pervasiveness of our love for him. We live by what we love; the shape of our lives is determined by the joys of our hearts.” (49)

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own free will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

Our response to trials and testing counts. In fact, it is a matter of life and death.

Some who are confronted by trials refuse to lean in to them and steadfastly work through them. Instead, they blame God for their trials, accusing him of being the tempter. To say this is to deny the goodness of God and his holy will in relation to humanity. The truth lies elsewhere.

“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” (Ja 1:14) In other words, “the source of temptation lies within man himself.” (Burdick: 172) What is that desire within? James doesn’t spend any time excavating this source in this chapter. He will have lots to say about sinful desires in the following chapters. If one needs a template, he/she may turn to 1 John 2:15-17, Ephesians 2:1-3.

James’ purpose in this section is to reveal the consequences of being lured and enticed by our desires. Desire conceives and gives birth to sin. Sin grows up. When it is fully grown it brings forth death. This is not God’s intention. “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.”

To remove any form of self-deception, James tells us more about God’s goodness and will. God is the originator of every good and perfect gift. He’s the Father of lights. He is both the Creator and Sovereign One in the universe. There is no shadow that could possibly change him. He had a purpose in mind for us from before the dawn of creation. “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” (v. 18)

He intended, and still intends for us to bear his image in the world. God breathed life into Adam and Eve and brought them forth by his creative word. When they fell, he covered their sins. When their offspring reflected the sin nature they inherited from Adam, he made a covenant with Abraham through whom all the families on earth would be blessed. In Christ, the descendant of Adam and Abraham, God took on the covenant curses, that those regenerated by the Gospel would receive the covenant blessings.

Through the death and resurrection, ascension and intercession of the Son, God has called us to display his glory as the first fruits of his creatures. Someday He will restore all things. Today, it is our privilege to bear God’s image, to demonstrate God’s handiwork and to declare His praises before his creatures.

“Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven; To his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven; Evermore his praises sing.

Father-like he tends and spares us, Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hands He gently bears us, Rescues us from all our foes;

Angels, help us to adore Him, Ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon bow down before him; Dwellers all in time and space
Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him, praise Him! Praise with us the God of grace.

Man in the Mirror

Text James 1:19-25

“Know this, my beloved brothers; let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.”

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”

In this lesson James gives us something to know, something to hear and receive, something to avoid, and something to do. He is showing us the way forward. Look into this mirror and make adjustments.

Something to know – A battle rages between the desires of our sinful nature and the desires of our new nature which has been given to us by our holy, good and gracious Father. We have been called from the death spiral of evil desires to a new life of maturity, leading to the righteous life that God requires and the salvation of our souls. James’ exhortation is a review of truth clearly spelled out earlier in the letter.

Something to hear and receive – An eagerness to hear and receive the implanted word is crucial to winning the battle within. James mentioned the **word** in verse 18. He mentions the word again and again in this section. (1:20, 21, 22, 23, 25) Be quick to hear it. Receive the implanted word with meekness. Be a doer of the word. “It is the person who listens intently to the Word of truth (and puts it into practice) who progresses in godliness.” (See Note on James 1:19 in the Reformed Study Bible).

Psalm 19: 7-11 is a treasure given to God’s people to encourage them to hear and receive God’s Word. “The law of the Lord is perfect, the testimony is sure, the precepts are right, the commandment of the Lord is pure enlightening the eyes. In keeping them (all the expressions of God’s word), there is great reward.”

Something to avoid – “Be slow to speak and slow to anger. The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save you.” Just in case we might miss it, James will hammer this home in verse 26. “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” There are enough angry prophets out there. Bridle your tongue! Put all angry, filthy, wicked, pride-filled speech away!

Something to do – “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” That is, look intently into the perfect law, the law of liberty. Persevere in receiving, understanding and acting upon the word of God. The disciplined application of the word to our lives marks the difference between receiving it as information and letting the word become the agent of spiritual transformation. If we merely look at the mirror without adjusting our lives to what it reveals, we remain just as disheveled as the man who sees himself in the mirror but who walks away and forgets his need for correction. Don’t be deceived.

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

In so-called conservative circles in the Christian family, a saying has been offered in an attempt to distinguish this tribe from the rest of Christendom. “Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship with Jesus Christ.” I suppose it is used to disavow complicated liturgies in which people “go through the motions” in hopes of fulfilling all the requirements given to them by well-meaning priests who follow Books of Worship. Perhaps the disavowal of religion is intended to avoid religious pluralism.

James takes another look at religion and the religious life. He distinguishes between worthless religion and that kind which is pure and undefiled. Religion can be a matter of self-deception. For example, the man who thinks he is religious but who does not maintain control over his tongue deceives his heart. In addition, James identifies: “visiting orphans and widows in their affliction, to keep oneself unstained from the world” as necessary examples of pure and undefiled religion.

These three religious practices (speech, caring and holy living) will form the outline for the central section of his letter. (2:1-5:6) As James leads us deeper into obedience to the Word, the reader should consider that the key to true religion is its inward, upward and outward authenticity.

Inward: Is my heart aligned with the heart of God? This is a call to look inward, to examine my attitude in relationship to the heart of God. “Self-examination is part of spiritual formation. It is not the same as introspection, but is a discipline of measuring ourselves against God’s perfect standard. (Joe Carter in TGC Blog dated December 3, 2016). Do not allow yourself to be deceived in your heart!

Upward: Is my gaze upon God the Father from whom every good and perfect blessing flows? (1:15-18) That is the upward call of this passage. R.C Sproul popularized this idea by taking the words of the Reformers “Coram Deo” and adding his own understanding of it. “To live Coram Deo is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.” (Ligonier Ministry Blog, Nov. 13, 2017)

Outward: Is my concern as wide as God’s clearly marked concern for the afflicted? Widows and orphans are two groups of people specifically identified by James. One of the best examples of orphan care that emerged in the 20th Century is World Vision. Bob Pierce saw the plight of orphans at the end of the Korean War. His prayer became the rallying cry for this caring ministry: “Let my heart be broken for the things that break the heart of God.” Its vision statement is clear: “We look forward to a world where every child experiences Jesus’ promise of life in all its fullness.” (www.wvi.org > Our vision)

Holy living is James’ last word in his outline of true religion. He admonishes us bluntly: “Keep oneself (yourself) unstained from the world.” This admonition is of crucial importance in every generation, but seems of special importance in this present darkness where the attack of the evil one is so clear. Holy living must be practiced if we are going to overcome the downward pull of our sinful nature and the seduction of the world.

We may be aware of our sinful nature and may have come to Christ for rescue and sought the power of the Spirit to overcome the evil within. But have we faced the challenge of the world? That world represents “the total system of evil that pervades every sphere of human existence and is set in opposition to God and to righteousness.” (Burdick:176) Don’t be stained by the world!

My brothers,¹ show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ²For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

The word religion appeared three times in the preceding verses. Strangely, it is not mentioned again in the epistle. James hasn't forgotten the subject matter. Instead, he launches into a deeper discussion of the topic of true religion by writing, **"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory."**

Partiality is a form of favoritism or discrimination based only upon externals. It is a denial of the way our Lord Jesus Christ behaved. He who had all the glory of the Father humbled himself to be born of a virgin in a stable and to spend his first year of life on earth as a refugee in a foreign land. When it was safe enough to return to Israel, the family settled in Nazareth, a backwater town in Galilee. When he began his ministry, he chose to stand in line with sinners to be baptized by John and from thence to affiliate with the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the outcast. Ultimately, he gave himself into the hands of his oppressors and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. It was only in his resurrection and ascension, that the Lord Jesus was recognized for his true self – the Lord of glory.

True religion is "to hold the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." It consists of the specific ways in which a heart relationship with the Lord is expressed in our lives. So how were the believers in the dispersion doing? Actually, not well at all. They were enamored by the "eye candy" of externals. A gold ring and fine clothing was enough for them to offer deferential treatment to the wealthy at the expense of the poor man in shabby clothes.

It is not just a matter of paying attention to the rich at the expense of the poor, but also of using words to respect the rich and to disrespect the poor. "You sit here in a good place" but you stand over there or sit down at my feet."

Such distinctions based on externals reveals what is inside of us. We are judges with evil thoughts. How strange this must sound to the Lord of glory. How contradictory to his practice! Motyer puts it bluntly, "This is not living 'like Father, like son'"

But there's more to the problem. Disrespecting the poor is to ignore the honor God has bestowed on the poor, making them rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. He made a promise to give his kingdom to those who love him. If you dishonor the poor, you are disavowing the very people who will inhabit the kingdom of heaven.

Oh, by the way, do not forget your experience in this world. The rich are the ones who oppress you and drag you into court. They are the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called.

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

The word "law" is mentioned in five of the six verses in this paragraph. By repetition of the word James is challenging us to come to grips with the law. First of all, James commends those who fulfill the royal law. Next, he convicts those who transgress the law. Finally, he introduces the certainty of mercy triumphing over judgment by way of the law of liberty. What do these terms mean and how do they relate to the issue of partiality?

Commendations: The royal law is the king's law (*basilikon*) which applies to the heirs of the kingdom (*basilea*). "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?" (James 2:5) The royal law comes to us with all the weight of scriptural authority, for it is "according to Scripture." Lest we forget the scriptural basis of the royal law, James quotes from Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." All three synoptic Gospels quote this royal law. In Luke's gospel, the neighbor is identified as the person in need, one who was stripped, beaten and left half dead by robbers. The Samaritan loved his neighbor by seeing him, having compassion, binding his wounds, bringing him to an inn, caring for him, and then paying for further treatment with the promise of repaying any additional expenses upon his return. (Lk 10:29-37)

Conviction: Not everyone does that well when it comes to caring for people. James reintroduces the problem of partiality (2:1, 2:9) and identifies it as a transgression of the law. "If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as a transgressor." (2:9) Motyer concludes: "The opposite of the royal law is partiality. Instead of doing well (2:8) the one who shows partiality is committing sin." James' argument leads us back to an examination of the law. To use a simple analogy, the law is like a diamond with many facets. Anyone who picks and chooses among the facets of the law that he/she will obey is rejecting the law as one indivisible thing which comes from God as a reflection of his character.

Certainty: The law of liberty is the third expression of the law in this paragraph. The Lord brought the Israelites to Mount Sinai after he redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. At Mt. Sinai, he revealed the way of freedom. The law was given as the way of liberty for redeemed people. By obeying the law, his people become progressively restored to the image of God. Keeping the law of liberty makes us free.

But how can we obey? The history of Israel shows how poorly his chosen people fulfilled the call to obey the commandments. Fortunately, God provided a way for disobedient ones to escape the judgment.

God's mercy triumphs over judgment. (2:13) Those who come to him for mercy receive it. Those who pray, "God have mercy on me a sinner" (Lk 18:13) are forgiven. Sadly, not everyone seeks mercy. Some remain in a harsh judgmental attitude, showing no mercy, even though their deserving is negligible. Those who do not recognize their need of mercy do not receive mercy, but judgment. If we doubt this, we are forgetting the Beatitude of Jesus, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." (Mt 5:7)

Dead and Demonic Faith

Text: James 2:14-20

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

James introduces various topics in his letter at one point and then circles back to expand on them at later points. This is clearly the case with the topic of faith. He calls us to “count it all joy when we meet trials of many kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” When we find in ourselves a lack of wisdom, we should “ask for it in faith, with no doubting.”

He appeals to the scattered church to show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.” Holding the faith is incompatible with partiality.

To emphasize this point, James asks two rhetorical questions in 2:14. ***“What good is it brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”*** (Literally, the second question reads, “This faith cannot save him, can it? The answer every reader must understand is **no!** A claim of faith that doesn’t result in deeds is not saving faith. “Faith proves itself in the deeds it produces. Genuine faith affects the believer’s behavior.” (Burdick:182) Consider two examples.

Dead Faith

James illustrates this proposition with an extreme example. “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed, (literally the word means “naked”) and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” This kind of faith is formal at best. Motyer identifies this as “Spurious faith. [it] is ineffectual manward: the hungry are sent away unfed.” (Motyer:108)

Notice that the words spoken sound like words of blessing “Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” But no one is blessed by words alone. People are blessed when people of faith feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, welcome the strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner. (See Matthew 25:35-40) “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead.” (Ja. 2:17)

Demonic Faith

James pushes the issue to another extreme by addressing a Jewish “believer.” We can surmise this identity for he/she recites a portion of the foundational confession of faith in Judaism. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Deut. 6:4) James says about such belief, “You believe God is one; you do well.” But wait! “Even the demons believe – and shudder!” It is a demonic faith that merely believes that there is one God. It is useless unless it results in a life of love toward God and a lifestyle of caring for others. The demons refuse allegiance, much less express love for God and humans. They shudder for they know that their lack of positive response to this One God will lead to their demise. Likewise, humans are foolish, empty and endangering themselves when they do not comprehend and respond with an active faith expressing itself in deeds of love.

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."

Abraham and Rahab provide illustrations of genuine faith. On the surface, their lives could not have been more different. Abraham was the patriarch called by God out of Ur of the Chaldees to carry the blessing of God to a newly formed nation and through them to the world. "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (See Gen. 12:1-3) Rahab, on the other hand, was a pagan prostitute living inside the walls of Jericho, the first city in the promised land which God intended to subdue. What could they possibly have in common? They both demonstrate an active faith.

Abraham was promised a son through whom this nation would expand until its membership would be as numerous as the stars in heaven if you can count them. "So shall your offspring be!" Rather than quibbling with God's answer to Abraham and Sarah's present barrenness, "Abraham believed the Lord, and he (God) counted Abraham to be righteous," that is, meeting God's covenant demand (See note in RSB: Gen. 15:6) Theologians from the Apostle Paul to Martin Luther and onward describe the encounter in Genesis 15 as a prime example of justification by faith. (See Romans 4:1-5).

But Abraham's faith was not a one-time profession of belief. Instead, "this justifying faith had a certain quality, a vitality that makes it a producer of good deeds." (Burdick:184) ***His faith was completed by the obedience he rendered toward God. (Ja.2:22)*** This is seen in Genesis 22:1-14 in Abraham's willingness to offer the promised son as a sacrifice to God when God tested Abraham's faith. Genuine faith produces obedient actions.

Rahab's genuine faith is only briefly mentioned in verse 25. It is not even called faith, and yet, her name is included in Hebrews 11 in that chapter sometimes called the Hall of Fame of Faith. So, what were the marks of faith working itself out in practice? The writer of Hebrews says, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies." (Heb. 11:31) James elaborates slightly: "Was not also Rahab justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" The answer is yes, she was justified, by a faith that moved toward the Israelites' God. She came to believe what she had heard about the Lord, and crossed over from her pagan life. ***Rahab declared her allegiance to "the Lord your God. He is God in the heavens and on the earth beneath."*** (Josh 2:11) Her faith showed itself in her receiving, hiding and sending the spies out so that they could bring the report back to Joshua. Anticipating their return, she insisted that they remember her active faith and grant her and her family a place in the family of God.

James had earlier insisted that "hearing must be accompanied by doing" (see Ja. 1:22). Now he insists that faith must be accompanied by action." (Burdick:182) If there were any question about this, James makes it perfectly clear in his final statement: "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." To quote a colloquial expression: "It is as dead as a doornail."

In light of James ongoing concern for the poor, the orphan and the widow, we must conclude: "Genuine faith reaches out in costly compassion to people at risk." (Motyer:108)

“Let Me See Your Tongue”

Text: James 3:1-12

3 “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life,^[a] and set on fire by hell.^[b] 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

In the introduction to his commentary on the Book of James, Alec Motyer identifies James’ three characteristics of true Christian growth: Caring for the Needy, Controlling the Tongue and Personal Purity of life. (Motyer:13) By the time we reach chapter 3, James has provided many challenges about caring for the needy. Now he dives into his second topic: Controlling the Tongue.

Motyer sets the stage for this topic with these words: “Like a doctor who comes to a patient and says, “Let me see your tongue,” James examines our tongues, not only as an index of spiritual health, but...as a key to spiritual well-being.” (Motyer:17)

James has already broached this topic in the first chapter: “Know this, my beloved brothers, let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...” and, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religious is worthless.” (See James 1:19, 26) But for some reason, he’s convinced that this was not enough.

Perhaps he has picked up news from the churches in the dispersion and has discovered that there were issues with teachers – self-appointed teachers, false teachers, untrained or ungifted teachers- that convinced him to double down. He picks up the topic in James 3:1-12. We will notice that his exhortations extend into the fourth chapter as well. Sorting out the issue will take some time.

“Not many of you should become teachers.” Teaching requires the use of the tongue. Whenever we speak, we risk saying something that is not true, not fully accurate or not helpful for building people up. If we glean our information from someone who is deliberately false and do not have the wisdom to discern the error, we might easily lead our hearers astray. Some “fake it until we make it.” The certainty of stumbling is common to fallen people, and we are all fallen. “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”

Speaking about bridles, “If we put bits in the mouths of horses and they obey us, and use bridles to guide their whole bodies as well,” you’d think we could bridle our tongues to guide our bodies! To change the metaphor. Large ships, driven by strong winds are guided by a small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. One would think that the tongue could control our lives to a satisfactory end.

Sadly, this seems not to be the case! **“The tongue boasts great things.”** In fact, the tongue is more like a fire, the spark of which can set a whole forest ablaze. “It can stain the whole body and set on fire the entire course of life. No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

“Let me see your tongue” may seem like a simple request by our doctor. But it reveals so much!

Who Can Tame the Tongue?

Text: James 3:7-12

⁷“For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers,^[c] these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”

At the dawn of the creation of mankind, we read these wonderful words of blessing:

“And God blessed them. And God said to them “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the seas and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Gen 1:28.

Included in that blessing was mankind’s capacity to tame all kinds of creatures. It is not presumptuous to suggest that in the garden the communication between the male and female was tame. That is, it was clearly expressed and clearly received. Celebration, consummation, oneness, along with nakedness without shame prevailed. So, what happened? In James’ exposition of the topic of the tongue he alludes to the serpent’s destruction of that communication bliss. The tongue that now stains our body and sets on fire the entire course of life (is) “set on fire by hell.” (Ja. 3:6)

The crafty serpent raised a question. “Did God really (actually) say?” When the woman indicated the few restrictions that God had given them, the serpent spoke again. “You will not surely die.” Succumbing to the serpent’s falsehood destroyed the communication between Adam and Eve and between them and God. The fact is quickly revealed when the Lord God came into the garden in the cool of the day to commune with the couple. Rather than approaching him, the guilty pair hid from God and upon discovery they began to make wild excuses characteristic of humanity with unbridled, untamed tongues.

Humanity’s abuse of the tongue is characterized by restlessness, deadly poison and inconsistency. In other words, our tongue is out of control, extremely harmful and hopelessly unpredictable. It contradicts everything God established in nature. We bless God for making us in the image of God, but turn around and curse people who are made in the image of God. We present sweet water words and then add words full of salt and bitterness. Figs trees do not bear olives, grapevines do not produce figs. But we produce an unpalatable mix of sweet and sour, blessing and cursing. These contradictions ought not be so.

The answer to this massive wrong must be found outside ourselves. But where? We get a picture of the taming of the tongue in Isaiah 6, and a complete revelation of the taming of the tongue in Acts 2.

When Isaiah saw the Lord and heard the seraphim cry out,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory,”

he said in response,

“Woe is me. For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:1-7)

In response to Isaiah’s repentant word, God sent one of the seraphim to touch his lips with burning coals from the altar. This purified his mouth and freed him to speak for God. But God did more. On the day of Pentecost, he sent fire from heaven to rest on each believer, and they were all filled with the Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:3-4) **God and God alone can tame the tongue. Ask Him! He will keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.**

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

James gathers several themes he has previously introduced in this section of his letter. “Who is wise and understanding?” He could be referring to those who have admitted their lack of wisdom and who have asked our good, generous and gracious God. (1:5) These are the truly wise. However, he has just raised the issue of the tongue, and the teachers who use their tongues to guide others. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers.” (3:1) These are only wise “in their own understanding.”

Truly wise Christians are those whose positive actions speak louder than their words. The actions of the good (lovely) teachers are shown in the “meekness of wisdom.” Burdick’s word study helps us understand meekness when he writes, “The better translation might be ‘gentleness’ but not a passive gentleness growing out of weakness and resignation. It is an active attitude of deliberate acceptance.” (Burdick:190)

James contrasts this good life with the bad life of those who are boastful and are false to the truth. Such actors may claim to be wise, but their “wisdom” comes from a heart of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. James insists that this is not the wisdom that comes from above. Instead, he calls it “earthly, unspiritual, demonic.” The source is bitter like the salt water which ruins the sweet water that should flow from the tongue. (See James 3:11)

The result of such jealousy and selfish ambition is ugliness, or as James puts it, “disorder and every vile practice.” These teachers, wise in their own eyes, have not applied the lesson James introduced earlier when he admonished those dispersed in the world to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.” (1:21)

There is a better way. The wisdom from above is first of all **pure**. “This is its basic characteristic, its inner quality. It is the absence of the sinful attitude or motive, the opposite of the self-seeking attitude.” (Burdick:191) Several outward manifestations flow from purity. “The wisdom from above is peaceable, gentle (considerate), open to reason, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (without hypocrisy).

The results of living out the wisdom that is from above is described as sowing in peace by peacemakers resulting in a harvest of righteousness. Peace is the first fruit of a life brought forth by the word of truth, continued to completion in a full harvest. (See James 1:18) This is the good life, the holy life. This is the life that is unstained by the world (1:27)

Will these positive results come easily? We should not expect that for a moment, for James has already told us we face trials and testing of many kinds, some coming from demons and others from the world and the flesh. The next verses will remind us of the battle that rages.

4 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions^[a] are at war within you?^[b] **2** You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. **3** You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. **4** You adulterous people!^[c] Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. **5** Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? **6** But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

No one can accuse James of sugar-coating the truth. He is not a people pleaser; he's a God pleaser. His approach to issues of immaturity proves this again and again. We would rather blame God than ask God for wisdom to face the trials of life. We would rather go along with the status quo of the world than challenge it. We would be happy to talk the religious talk in a self-deceiving and other-impressing way, if we weren't challenged to go through the hard work of putting the truth into practice. But God resists such pride in us!

Nor will James let us settle for such nonsense. To settle for these ways is to remain in the condition of those bound to the earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom of the world. "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." (See James 3:13-16)

The really wise show their works in the meekness of wisdom. The rest hold onto their pride and implode when pushed. They engage in fights and quarrels that James identifies as murder. What causes this? ***Your passions are at war within you. You ask wrongly to spend it all on your passions.***

"Passion" in itself is not the problem. God gives us passion. The problem is that our passion, "our strong desires are allied to, and are at the service of, a sinful nature. Consequently, the sinful self, setting its heart on the satisfaction of this or that, will not allow anything to stand in its way." (Motyer:142)

James puts it even more bluntly, "***You (are) adulterous people!***" You are having an affair with the world even while you profess to be in a love relationship with God. This friendship with the world is enmity with God. Such friendship makes us enemies of God. (James 4:4)

All the time you are acting out your love affair with the world, the Lord is jealous toward you. "***He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.***" (Ja 4:5) This Scripture is a reflection of the reaction of God toward Adam and Eve. He breathed his spirit into them in the first place and they became living, embodied souls. He gave them dominion over all creation and maintained communion with them. He walked with them in the cool of the day. When they succumbed to the temptation of the serpent, He came looking for them in the garden. He is a jealous God. He made us for himself.

But notice what comes next. Rather than coming with total condemnation to obliterate Adam and Eve, "***He gave more grace.***" He covered their naked shame with skins of animals he had created. He cursed the serpent and put enmity between the serpent and the woman. He promised to separate with an enduring enmity those who followed the serpent (his offspring) from those who followed Eve's God-pursuing offspring. Finally, he promised that one day her offspring would bruise the serpent's head.

The passage is a call to the people of God. Leave your friendship with the world behind. Reorient your passion toward Jesus Christ. Ask the Lord with a humble heart to reawaken a single passion for Him.

The Way Up is Down

Text: James 4:7-10

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

The "ten commandments" in verses 7-10 flow reasonably from the mention of God's grace. "Since God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, believers should submit to him." (Burdick:194) Here are the imperatives that reorient our passions toward him.

"Submit yourselves therefore to God." Arrange your life under his authority. He is sovereign, you are not. Surrender and actively await his commands that you might do his will.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. You have an adversary. Peter reminds us that he "prowls like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him!" (1 Peter 5:8-9) You were captive in the past, do not fall back under a yoke of slavery. Live a life liberated from the evil one.

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. You have maintained friendship with the world long enough. Now deliberately cultivate a friendship with God. He opened the door to nearness with him in the first place. Don't be a stranger; respond to him. Draw near, and you will see him draw near to you.

Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Deal with whatever hinders you from honoring God. It may be outward acts of wrong doing (hands) or inward disloyalty (hearts that remain divided). This is the only proper response to the God who has initiated his gracious purposes in us. This is the work of sinners to accomplish. This is the beginning of true confession and repentance.

Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. The journey of the soul toward wholeness is a journey away from the grip of the devil and from a superficial and distant relationship with God to an intimate and pure relationship with God. The more we consider our tepid responses to his grace, the more we will long for the intimacy with God that he offers. Such longing for the better will include weeping and mourning of our wretched condition and our happy go lucky, casual responses to God.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Living a humble life before God is God's plan for human life. Simply put: The way up is down. Motyer puts it this way.

"The purpose of God is to lead us down into the lowest place of self-awareness and lamentation (9). This is the goal of the programme: the decisive taking of sides (7) leads into the practice of the presence of God (8a). This in turn prompts the longing (8b) to be like him in holiness. As always, the more we pursue his likeness, the more deeply and sorrowfully our sinfulness and shortcomings are exposed (9). But the Lord sets the downward path before us because there is no other way up (10)."

Who Am I to Judge?

Text James 4:11-12

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.^[d] The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

This short paragraph takes us one step further down toward the humble life that God has called us to live. "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." James has already told us about the problem of improper speech. He has admonished the brothers: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry. He has identified an unbridled tongue as evidence of self-deception and of worthless religion.

Those who would be teachers within the church must listen up most carefully to this warning. Judgment is stricter for those who cannot tame their tongue! Their inflammatory speech is contradictory at least; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. It has the capacity to set a forest a blaze in a world of unrighteousness.

To speak against another may appear to be a proper work for the wise in the church to practice with erring brothers. What does James say? No! **"Who are you to judge your neighbor?" (4:12)** Such speaking is really speaking against the law and judging the law. If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law. It is a case of taking the place of God, the one lawgiver and judge.

Neither the Lawgiver nor the law of God is flawed. To judge the law is to make ourselves arbiters of the law. It is to "take the law into our own hands," to change it as if it is somehow inadequate, irrelevant or inferior to our own ideas. All this judging of brothers and hence, judging of the law reveals our intent to circumvent the law. **We want to be in control of defining the good life and deciding what to do with law breakers.**

Only God can define the good life. He is the law giver and his laws define the good life. Only God can properly decide what to do with law breakers. He alone has the ability to save and destroy. **Rather than participating in destructive speech, James says that we are to speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. According to this law, "mercy triumphs over judgment."**

Are we worried that justice will not be served? The Scriptures alleviate this concern. When Paul presents the reality of sin and the remedy for universal unrighteousness, he presents "Christ [who] died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6) Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "He (Christ) became sin for us who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) Peter adds to the testimony declaring about Christ, that "He himself bore our sin in his body on the tree (cross) that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds we are healed." (1 Peter 2:24) Again Peter reminds us: "Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God." (1 Pet. 3:18)

We are not called to speak against one another. We are called to speak **favorably** (tenderly – Isaiah 40:2) to our brothers and sisters about the lawgiver and judge who is able to save and destroy. His decision was to die in our place so that we could live to righteousness and experience full redemption through his suffering. Knowing that "God's mercy triumphs over judgment," we pray for ourselves and introduce to others, the prayer: **"God be merciful to me, a sinner." (Luke 18:13)**

¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

What kind of harvest are you preparing for? James is burdened to lead the church to aim for a harvest of righteousness. That’s what pure and humble, spiritually wise, peace-loving saints produce. But not everyone is sowing in peace in order to gain a harvest of righteousness. James confronts those who are presumptuous about their prospects, and proud of their financial results.

Come now! (“Now listen!” in the NIV) appears in James 4:13. This is a pointed call to those who put together their business plans with boastful self-assurance. It will appear again in James 5:1 where he addresses those who are proud of their financial results.

Some of those who scattered when the persecution began took it in stride. They were business travelers who were used to coming up with business plans. Their “four steps to success” included 1) Going to this or that city at a certain date; 2) Spending a year there; 3) Carrying on business; 4) Making a profit.

So, what could possibly go wrong? “There’s always a bull market somewhere and I promise I’ll find one just for you.” (Cramer) “Read my book and you will find ‘Unstoppable Prosperity.’” (Charles Payne)

First of all, observe that **“God has no place in the plans of these business people.”** They may recite the creed and say their prayers on Sunday, but on Monday they return to their domain – the world of business. Their lives have become compartmentalized into two realms: the realm of the spiritual and the realm of the secular.

Second, **their business plan doesn’t take into account their limited knowledge of the future.** They have not calculated the possibility of chaos emerging from natural disasters or political interventions. Earthquakes, fires and hurricanes were at an all-time peak in 2023 according to NOAA. The invasion of Ukraine is in its second year, and on October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorists broke through the borders of Israel in an attack that killed 1,300 people and resulted in widespread taking of hostages. The repercussions have only begun, but more lives will certainly be lost in the Middle East as these two forces confront each other. James insists that people come to grips with reality in this fallen world.

Thirdly, James reminds us that **their lives are uncertain.** He makes the point by answering a profound question: “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” Mist appears in the morning, but is gone by noon. “We must stop planning as if we will be here forever.”

James urges these business planners to take a better approach. **“You ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills we will do this or that.’”** Burdick states the case clearly: “No Christian can safely assume that he can live independently of God. For a believer to leave God out of his plans is an arrogant assumption of self-sufficiency, a tacit declaration of independence from God.”

Boasting in one’s arrogance is evil. In fact, this is the essence of sin. For “whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” The right thing to do is to yield oneself entirely to the will of God and by doing so declare our dependence upon our good, generous and gracious Lord of life.

5 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote, **“There is nothing that fails like success.”** In his context, the failure referred to was being linked to the successful political opportunists and the worldly wise. James says the same thing about those business magnates who beat the odds with their godless, ignorant, time defying plans.

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.” We may fairly ask: what failure is foreshadowed in the successes of the rich? And which rich are in for a day of reckoning? Are “the rich” as a class of people guilty when they become successful?

It appears that James believes that the rich carry a high degree of fault. For example, in James 2 James points out that the rich tend to accept more attention and honor than the poor, they display their possessions in ostentatious ways, they oppress the poor, drag them into court and in many cases blaspheme the honorable name by which the people of God have been called.

But succeeding in becoming wealthy is not necessarily sinful. It is how you get it and what you do with wealth that matters. Here are four problems to address.

First, **“You have laid up treasure in the last days.”** (James 5:2) To amass wealth for the sake of wealth is an indicator that your security is based on your fortune not on your Savior. But Jesus said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Mt 6:19-21). In case his disciples were to miss the point, he said in the parable of The Rich Fool: “take care and be on guard against all covetousness. For one’s life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions. (Luke 12:15)

Second, **you have kept back by fraud the wages of the laborers.** The laborers’ rightfully earned, but unpaid wages cry out against you and their cries have reached the ears of the Lord. What kind of fraud was employed? Who knows which kind was utilized at this moment, but God knows, for he has observed the cheating from the time of Jacob and Laban to the time of Israel in Egypt, and from the days of ill-gotten gain in Judah during Isaiah’s day to the oppression of the poor in Jerusalem in Nehemiah’s day.

Third, **you have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.** Extravagance, wasteful, unrestrained displays of success are obnoxious insults to those who are living on a shoestring. The rich fattened themselves, not knowing they were readying themselves for slaughter.

Finally, **you have condemned and murdered the righteous person.”** In *The Tale of Two Cities*, we are led to understand that the French Revolution was fomented by men such as Monsignor the Marquis, who runs over and kills the poorest of the poor without a conscience. He possesses everything. Yet, anyone who gets in his way forfeits his life. The slaughter of the aristocracy was sure to follow! “There is nothing that fails like success.” Is there another remedy? Yes. The righteous one gave his life as a ransom for many.

Patience Until the Coming of the Lord

Text: James 5:7-12

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

We tend to laugh at the errant prayer: "Lord, give me patience and give it to me right away." But that is how we often live. 'I will allow only so much time to pass in these circumstances. I expect to see things change right now.' To counter our impatience, James presents three examples.

The farmer waits for the precious fruit. He is patient about its arrival until he receives the early and late rains. After planting the seed, the rains come in October and November. Then they do not come again until March and April. If he assumes a crop failure in December and will not wait until the middle of the spring, he will not see a harvest. Like the patient farmer, "you also be patient."

The way to do that is to "establish your heart." The word suggests more than a cardio work out. Live with confident expectation. In face of the opposition by the rich which was the subject of the previous verses, patience will include self-restraint that does not retaliate against the oppressor. But patience also must be practiced in relation to your fellow believers. Brothers and sisters can be irritating. Rather than sighing, groaning or demonstrating bitterness or withdrawing from one another, patiently endure.

The prophets practiced patience through the difficult circumstances they faced. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea among others could be cited as examples of patience, for they all experienced suffering. Isaiah was sent to a people who would not see, hear or understand his message. "How long," Isaiah asked? To this the Lord replied: "Until the cities lie waste and only a stump remains." Jeremiah was put in stocks, thrown in prison and lowered into a well. God's only "comfort" to Jeremiah was the challenge: "If you have raced with men and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? Hang in there, Jeremiah! Hosea's family situation was his burden. His wife was unfaithful and his children were unloved. God told Hosea to go and woo his wife in the wilderness and bring her back.

Job provides the final illustration. But notice, though we often hear about "the patience of Job," James tells us about the perseverance of Job. Perseverance is defined as "the temper that does not easily succumb under suffering; it is tenacity, stick-to-it-iveness. It is to be resolute. It is standing on one's feet and facing the storm." (Burdick: 202 and Motyer:182f)

The course of growth to maturity is rugged right to the end. But it is not a fool's errand. Its destination is sure and hopeful. The coming of the Lord is at hand when he will judge with righteous judgment. The blessing of the Lord will reverse the curses imposed upon us by the world. The purpose of the Lord when complete will reveal itself in compassion and mercy. We will get better than we deserve.

Who grasped this better than the Apostle Paul, that friend of James at the end?

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. (Romans 8:18-19)

Do not Swear

Text: James 5:12

¹² But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

On first glance, this verse seems strangely out of place and unrelated to the deep things that James has raised. Why would James raise the issue of swearing and oaths "above all?" He's written to us about caring for widows and orphans as the measure of true religion, He's challenged us to take the side of the poor, to be doers of the word, to keep ourselves unstained by the world, to walk away from worldliness in all its forms, to reassess our attitude toward business practices. How can this issue of swearing and oaths be "above all?"

It is of course related to the first issue of maturity: That of receiving the word of truth with meekness and of relating to one another with a listening ear – quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. We do have trouble taming the tongue. In fact, James says, no one can tame the tongue. ***Is swearing and oath taking then the last frontier in the battle for well-guarded speech? Perhaps.***

When we swear by heaven or earth or by any other oath, we may think we will to impress others with our seriousness. 'This fellow is really serious, he means what he says,' we might say. But there's another angle to consider. This fellow may simply be boasting, and by doing so, disguising his/her real intent, which is to escape what is required of him.

One of my friends told me a secret about how he used to get off the hook to attend gospel meetings. Rather than saying 'I'm not coming,' or 'I do not want to come,' he'd say, "I'll be there, I'll be there." It worked time and time again. He got his pursuing brothers off his case and he got to do something other than attend the meetings. Later, he'd think of an excuse for why he missed the meeting he'd promised to attend and add to his duplicity. Fortunately, my friend finally learned to say "yes" to God's people. When he did so, he heard the gospel and repented. He became a new creation in Christ.

Jesus, who knew what was on every person's heart, said in his Sermon on the Mount. "Do not take an oath, either by heaven...or by the earth." Let what you say be simply 'yes' or 'no.' Anything more than that comes from evil." (See Matthew 5:33-37)

It would appear that James was listening to this half-brother's sermon in writing this admonition, though it took some time for him to become a genuine follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. James words are as close to an exact quotation from the Sermon on the Mount as one can come.

Making a vow is a solemn thing. The preacher who speaks to us in Ecclesiastes tells us, "When you vow a vow to God, do not delay in paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger, that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?" (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6)

Prayers of Faith Have Great Power

Text: James 5:13-18

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.^[b] ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

James appealed to those who were suffering, sick, sinful and otherwise stuck in a culture that dishonors God by calling God's people to prayer.

Individuals who are suffering should pray. Your life might be like those of the prophets who suffered because they spoke in the name of the Lord. How did they make it through? The same way you will. Pray in the midst of suffering, Praise God in the midst of joys. Keep talking to God as you work through the circumstances of life. "Pray without ceasing."

Those who are sick should call the elders to pray for healing. The elders of the church are instructed to pray over the sick and to anoint the sick with oil in the name of the Lord. Both healing (saving the one who is sick) and forgiveness are promised as a result of this ministry of prayer within the local church.

Next, we might observe ***the prayers offered by friends*** (pray for one another). The church emerged from a prayer meeting that took place in the upper room. "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers. James was one of those brothers. What he learned from that prayer meeting impacted the rest of his life.

From that first prayer meeting, to the last prayer meeting leading to the return of the Lord, confessing sins to one another remains the key to a healthy church. ***James expects that we would have such close relationships with each other that when we have sins to confess, we will find that friend, confess our sins to each other and be healed.*** We sometimes talk about having accountability partners in the 21st Century. That is all well and good, but we must make sure that mutual confession of sin is at the heart of it. This is what brings healing, wholeness, oneness, and the advance of the gospel.

Finally, we are told ***"The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."*** Do you know any people who are fervent in their prayers on behalf of others? James asks us to consider Elijah. He was a man with a nature like ours. He fervently prayed and a widow's dead son was returned to life. He prayed that it might not rain until Ahab's wicked rebellion was exposed, and that came to pass. He prayed again that he might hear the sound of the rushing rain. When the rains came, with the king still resisting him, Elijah ran for his life and hid himself in the wilderness. At that place, the Lord met Elijah and spoke to him in a still small voice about the final duties he was to fulfill. He would anoint kings in Syria and Israel and call forth Elisha as a successor prophet to replace him. Prayer releases God's power!

Prayers of faith have great power. So let us pray on our own, with the elders of the church, with our accountability friends. As we live in a corrupt culture let us look to the Lord to answer our prayers.

"O, our God ... We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." (2 Chronicles 20:12)

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

What do we do when someone in the church is “slipping away into sin and death?” (Motyer:209). This is happening more than we realize. Some announce their repudiation of the faith and walk out in a storm. Other simply walk away and quietly quit. The number of “nones” continues to grow. These are the people who, when surveyed about religious affiliation, answer “None, or none of the above.”

What happened? James described them as people among you who wander from the truth. Who can explain the reasons for such wandering from the truth? Each situation is different, yet, ***the world, the flesh and the devil are behind such apostacy. Each are powerful forces.***

Becoming aware of the challenges of the world is an enormous challenge in this age. The world has made a decision against God’s authority. It encourages people to participate in sexual promiscuity and to defy gender identities and moral limits. Moral anarchy is practiced openly in this world. Christ-followers are called to beware of these wiles of the devil. Believers must address the challenges coming from the world with each other and within our families. We must seek to preserve our families.

But James points us in another direction. He commends **the “someone” [who] brings him back.** This is at the heart of pastoral care. This ministry saves souls from death and covers a multitude of sins. It is both an evangelism ministry and a compassion ministry, and we should be about both of these.

Some of the wanderers never made a good profession of faith in Jesus Christ. They need to hear that Christ died for sinners and that by doing so, he opened the way for rebels to become friends, to be reconciled to God and redeemed from bondage, to be brought near to the community of faith by the blood of Christ and to be built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. In a world that is radically dividing, this unifying movement known as the church is the most attractive place on earth.

Some of the wanderers need to know that they can come back after falling into sins of every kind. Wanderers are aware of the stain of sin; they sense that they are stuck, so they hide because they think that there is no way back. But that is not the case. Jesus told those who judged the tax collector, Zaccheus, in his hearing, “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.” (Luke 19:10) He told the woman caught in adultery, “neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” (John 8:11)

Paul, who was once the chief of sinners, came to faith in this gracious God and reached the Corinthians who had wandered into all forms of sin. He told them: “And such were some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. (1Cor 6:11)

When the church becomes fully grown, its maturity and wisdom will be demonstrated in the welcome to sinners that it extends. As the wanderers return, the gathered multitude will sing the joyful song:

Jesus! what a friend for sinners, Jesus! lover of my soul.
Friends may fail me, foes assail me, He, my Savior makes me whole.
Hallelujah, what a Savior; Hallelujah, what a friend!
Saving, helping keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.”