

Sound Living

James

Jerry Nelson

James is blunt, confrontational and maybe even harsh in his indictments of illegitimate Christianity. He tells us that a true Christian is a person who manifests in his life that his claims to repentance and faith are real. He says a faith that doesn't result in mercy and charity is no faith at all and genuine Christianity flows from a changed heart.

In just five short chapters, James, the brother of Jesus, show us what genuine Christianity is.

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Table of Contents

1. The Good Life pg. 5
James 1:1-12
2. The Source of Temptation pg. 17
James 1:12-18
3. Walking the Talk pg. 25
James 1:19-27
4. The Condemnation of Partiality pg. 39
Presented by Dr. Rich Peterson
James 2:1-13
5. Faith's Litmus Test pg. 51
James 2:14-26
6. Faith and Words pg. 67
James 3:1-12
7. Faith and Wisdom pg. 81
James 3:13-18
8. Wholly Surrendered, to God or the World pg. 97
Presented by Dan Luebcke
James 4:1-10
9. Words that Destroy pg. 113
James 4:11-12
10. Satisfying Dependence pg. 125
James 4:13-17
11. Compassion in a world of Haves and Have-Nots pg. 137
James 5:1-6
12. Prayer—Proactive Patience pg. 153 James 5:13-20

Appendix A	pg. 169
Appendix B	pg. 173
Appendix C	pg. 177
Appendix D	pg. 193
Appendix E	pg. 201
Appendix F	pg. 205
Appendix G	pg. 207
Appendix H	pg. 217

The Good Life
James 1:1-12

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 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. 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. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. 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. 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". (James 1:1-12)

A man who was a very popular Christian author for a number of years tells an interesting story. Frank Foglio's daughter had been injured in an automobile accident. Her brain was severely damaged and despite thousands of prayers she continued to deteriorate and was finally placed in the mental ward for the terminally ill. After seven years it

seemed completely hopeless and the situation took its toll on Frank's previously unshakeable faith in God. On his way to the ward one day, he was complaining to God about the whole situation—"How could you be a God of love; I wouldn't permit such a thing to happen to my daughter if I had the power to prevent it. You could heal her but you won't."

*James is talking about everything from minor
discomforts to major tragedies.*

Frank could feel his anger rising when he had the distinct impression he was being spoken to and the voice simply said, "Praise Me!" Knowing it was God, Frank replied, "What for?"

In response, Frank heard, "Praise Me that your daughter is where she is."

"Never!" Frank responded. He felt God had no right to expect him to praise God when God was not doing what he could to help his daughter.¹ The author of that book was suggesting that Christians should praise God for the bad things that come into our lives.

Several years ago, I read an account of a father and mother who seeing their children killed in a fiery car crash, knelt down by the side of the road and began to sing praise to God. I remember thinking then as I still do in large part, "That's crazy!" Then I recall reading this from the book of Acts 16:22-25: *"The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing*

hymns to God..." They were not just reciting quotes from favorite hymns to buoy their spirits; they were singing to God! Well, I'm not inclined to call the Apostle Paul crazy and I'm much less inclined to call the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, crazy.

Which brings me back to our text, James 1:2: "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...*" Is James serious? I think he is. But this is so counterintuitive! It sounds absurd?

- They foreclose on my house, and I'm supposed to thank God?
- My child lies in a city morgue and I'm supposed to be grateful?
- I have a debilitating disease that plagues me every day of my life and I'm told to consider it pure joy?

Let's first of all be certain we know what James is talking about.

What are these trials? "Trials" is a word that also means test or temptation. It is linked to the word for attack or our word "pirate." James says trials come at us in many forms; they can be the result of simply living in a fallen world where disease, natural disasters, and the evil perpetrated by others come on us as well as on others. God Himself may also send trials or they may be the attack of Satan. So again they come in many forms; they may be a financial reversal, the death of a loved one, physical illness, opposition from others, even opposition to our faith. And such trials come often unexpectedly. James says, "***whenever you face trials.***"

Unlike the Apostle Peter who spoke mostly of suffering that comes as opposition to our relationship with Christ, James speaks of **all** the bad stuff of life. So James is talking about everything from minor discomforts to major tragedies. So

we come back to the command to us Christians: *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds..."* And again, I say, that sounds absurd. What does he mean, "Consider it pure joy?"

First of all the word, consider, means to think about it. James is not saying God commands you to feel giddy and happy when something bad happens. No! We are not called to be masochists—"hit me again, I love it!" With that in mind, it is true that we are not called on to pretend that everything that happens is good: evil is evil, disease is disease, death is death. Some people misunderstood the old King James Version of Romans 8:28 thinking that we must somehow consider all things as good—"*...all things work together for good to them that love God...*" The NIV gets it right when the emphasis is not on trying to pretend that all things are good but that "*...in all things God works for the good of those who love him...*"

So in this "considering" James is not calling us to an emotion but to a point of view; he says, *"consider it pure joy."* One author writes, "Joy," in turn, speaks of a state of being rather than an emotion. Joy proves quite different from happiness, so that this verse does *not* support the idea that a Christian must smile all the time! Joy may be defined as a settled contentment in every situation or an unnatural reaction of deep, steady and unadulterated thankful trust in God.² So it isn't that we take joy in the negative experiences of life; we take joy in the outcome God is working.

Verse 3 makes that abundantly clear. How can you consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds? *"Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking*

anything.” (James 1:3-4) Again, I am not called on to delight in the difficulty; I’m called on to think about the good that God will produce through this difficulty. And I’m called on to so trust Him for that good that I can thank Him even before I see the good or even if I never see it.

James says that these trials are a testing of our faith. They are not testing to see if we will fail but testing to prove the genuineness of our faith. Here’s the way the Apostle Peter said it in 1 Peter 1:6-7: *"for a little while you may have had*

We take joy in the outcome God is working.

to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

In fact, James says, these trials are what develop and mature your relationship to God. The testing of our faith develops perseverance and perseverance develops our character. Perseverance is not just dogged determination; it is not just gritting our teeth and coping with the situation. Perseverance is a constancy of our actions because of our confidence in God—it is acting with a conviction that God will bring good through these circumstances. And it is that perseverance, forged in the trials of life, which results in spiritual maturity—becoming full-grown in Christ. Or to say it differently, it is these trials that shape us to become like Jesus.

When I was asked to be the pastor of this church, nearly 30 years ago, one request made of me was to tell the committee what the most trying time in my life had been and what I had learned from it. Well I was only 19 years of age (joke!) , or maybe a little older and I didn’t have a lot to say. I didn’t, then, understand the significance of that

question the way I do now. I pause here to reflect on what I consider to be a huge assumption James makes about his readers as he begins his book. Apparently he assumes his readers want to be spiritually mature. When James writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds," I think he has a very different agenda for life than most of us have. He assumes I'm more interested in character than in comfort. What's our definition of the "good" life? Is it material affluence or spiritual maturity?

The Bible says the life to come is the objective and this life is to learn, grow, and prepare.

If you could be like any other person in the world, whom would you most want to be like? Please notice that I didn't say whose possessions or fame would you most like to have. Ask most kids or for that matter too many adults who they'd most wish to be like and they immediately begin listing the superstars or the superrich. But I'm asking, when you think not of what they have but what kind of person they are, who would you most want to be like? Yes, I'm talking about personality, about character. Would you rather be like Mother Theresa or Donald Trump? Would you rather be witty, urbane, and sharp or wise, humble and without guile? Would you rather be powerful or one who loves? So again, not what do you want to have, but who would you want to be like?

Let me cut to the chase; if over the next 10-20 years you could be reshaped into the likeness of Jesus, would you want to be? When you hear character traits such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control," do they sound appealing? When you hear "temperate, self-controlled, respectable,

hospitable, gentle, approachable and content,” do you really want to be like that? The problem many of us have with James 1:2 and why it sounds so absurd is that we aren’t striving for the same objective. Our definition of the “good life” is so different than God’s definition.

A popular author and pastor of the largest church in America encourages his readers to dream, “Someday, I’ll earn more money, and I won’t have to worry about how to pay the bills.” “God wants to increase you financially,” “Even if you come from an extremely successful family, God still wants you to go further” “Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough.” “Many people settle for too little...He further explains that this quest for financial and material increase is actually pleasing to God. He claims that “God *wants* to pour out ‘His far and beyond favor.’ God wants *this* to be the best time of your life.”³ You see, according to him, God particularly wants you to experience His goodness, in physical, financial, and social ways, here and now. Many around us and too many Christians chase power, fame and money; the Bible calls us to humility, obscurity and contentedness. The world says this life is all there is so grab the brass ring, go for the gusto, and *carpe diem*. The Bible says the life to come is the objective and this life is to learn, grow, and prepare.

To understand James 1:2, I must get my definition of the good life straightened out so that it matches God’s definition—a Christ-like character. James addresses this in verse 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.*” (James 1:5) James words this statement in such a way as to imply that we are all in this condition—we all lack this wisdom. Wisdom is not information. Wisdom

is much deeper; it is seeing things as they really are, to perceive trials for what they really are. Wisdom is “to cease to live by what appears to be true and to live, instead, by what actually is the truth of the matter.”⁴

We look at our difficult or tragic situation and we are easily convinced there is no hope, there is no purpose, and there is nothing good that can come from it. In that temptation to despair, we are instead commanded to turn to God and ask Him for wisdom—to enable us to see with faith even while we are still blind and to know with confidence even while we still don’t understand. It is the wisdom to believe what I cannot see or even imagine. That wisdom is a gift from God, James says. We must ask for it and God will give it.

Warren Wiersbe tells of a former secretary of his who had a stroke. Her husband had gone blind and he was then taken to the hospital where it was assumed he would die. When Wiersbe saw the woman in church the next Sunday he said that he had been praying for her. She asked him, “What are you asking God to do?”

He was startled by the question and said, “I’m asking God to help you and strengthen you.”

She then said, “I appreciate that, but please pray about one more thing. Pray that I’ll have the wisdom not to waste all of this!”⁵ When we are sick or out of work or face a tragedy, how do we tend to pray? “Oh God change my circumstances!” Now understand, no merit is gained with God for being in pain. It is perfectly natural and right that we should want negative circumstances to change. Our loss is in not understanding why God allowed that pain in the first place and our carping at God when He doesn’t change it. Why? Because we ought to know something others don’t know; we know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that we

may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

One theologian wrote: "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change those things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference." But while the wisdom of James 1:5 starts there it is more than that—this is the wisdom not only to know and accept what can't be changed but the wisdom to believe what God is doing through it. But James does indicate one condition for receiving this wisdom: *"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. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."*(James 1:6-8)

Wisdom is "to cease to live by what appears to be true and to live, instead, by what actually is the truth of the matter."

James is not saying you must never question God. He is not saying you must have perfect faith. In these verses he describes the kind of man who will not receive this wisdom when he asks for it—it is the man or woman who has not made up his or her mind about God. It's the person who hasn't yet decided whether it is character or comfort that will define the "good" life for them. It is the one who has yet to decide if he will most love God or money. And so he vacillates. But the one who has made the decision to follow Christ, the one who has looked at the alternatives and sees them for cul-de-sacs they are, the one who has decided to throw his lot in with God, come hell or high water, this one will receive wisdom if he asks.

It is Joshua who said, *"But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."* (Joshua 24:15) The writer of Hebrews said it this way: *"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."* (Hebrews 11:6) I don't understand God, I don't understand a lot of life, I certainly don't understand how this or that particular evil that has come into my life can be used for good, but I have made the decision, weak as it sometimes feels, that I will trust God. The writer of Proverbs said: *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."* (Proverbs 1:7) My awe, respect and trust are in Him; that's where wisdom starts.

"The providence of God is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action."

1998 to 2000 were some of the most spiritually defining years of my life and for others in my family as well. I have several times referred to those 30 or more months as the most soul-searching as I came face to face with whether I really trusted God or not. The boy in our home, who was to become our son, was for those early years unprotected and we feared for his very life. I remember I was preaching in Genesis at the time and specifically Genesis 22 where Abraham is asked to offer his son as a sacrifice. I recall that I readily admitted that I did not know how Abraham could do that. Did I trust God enough that if he took Paris from us and especially if God allowed the horrible conditions for that boy that we anticipated, would I still trust God? You recall your own experiences or the experiences of ones you love, and you say, "What good could possibly come from

that?" I can hear the words, "Pastor, you don't know our situation!" Believe me, I hear you! My own mother lay for two years in a lock-up Alzheimer's ward and I can't yet even imagine how God would bring good out of that. Maybe for you it is the death of a child, or betrayal by one you trusted, or the grinding anxiety of joblessness, or the debilitating effects of a chronic illness. But in all of that, where can we go but to God? And what is there to believe, but the Providence of God. "The providence of God is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action."

James then uses the rich and the poor to illustrate the universality of this principle of dependence on God. Both the rich and the poor are greatly tempted to put their faith in riches and social status. The poor want it and the rich want to hang on to it. There is probably no other issue of life where we are more tempted to compromise our relationship with Christ than over the issue of money. So instead of trusting God, we truly trust more in mammon. But, James says, the wise Christian man or woman who is poor in the eyes of the world, glories in his rich relationship with Jesus. And the man who is rich in the eyes of the world glories in his absolute dependence on Jesus. Being rich or poor is not what life is about. Wisdom from God enables us to see life as it really is rather than seeing it merely as it appears. Whether we think James' command is absurd or not probably depends completely on our definition of the good life.

So again I ask, "If, over the next 10-20 years, you could be reshaped into the likeness of Jesus, would you want to be, more than anything else? If you would, then James' words make great sense:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your

faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 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... 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."(James 1:1-5, 12)

End Notes

¹ Merlin Carothers, *Praise Works, 1,2* – I don't recommend this book or his other books. Even this title is obnoxious, as if praise were utilitarian. But in spite of the bad theology Carothers has built out of this idea, he has touched on one idea from James 1:2 that is important, which we will discuss in this sermon.

² Craig Blomberg, yet unpublished manuscript on James, p. 38

³ Daryl Wingerd in critique of Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*.
<http://www.ccwonline.org/osteen2.html> (p.11)

⁴ Alex Motyer, *The Message of James*, p. 44

⁵ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Mature*, p. 29

The Source of Temptation

James 1:13-18

In the 1991 movie "Grand Canyon" an attorney attempts to bypass a traffic jam only to find himself in a very bad neighborhood when his car stalls. Waiting for a tow truck he is surrounded by a group of young thugs who threaten him. Just then the tow truck arrives and as the truck driver hooks up the car the young thugs complain that he is interrupting their fun. The truck driver then takes the leader of the gang aside and attempts to give him the following lesson in life. "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, that this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here."¹

Yes, something has distorted life. And that something is not just natural disaster or disease. What most distorts and damages life is sin. The world doesn't talk much about "sin" anymore but we all certainly live in the midst of it. Whether it is on the school playground where children exclude another, in the office where false reports ruin a career, or worst of all, in the home where what ought to be the safest relationships turn out to be the most treacherous, we live in a world polluted with sin.

Earlier we looked at the trials, the difficulties of life, and God's use of them to strengthen our faith. Now we look briefly at what too often happens to us in the midst of trials—the temptation to sin against God and each other.

To the issue of trials James wrote: *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance..."* (1:2-3) To the issue of temptation he wrote, *"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."* (1:14-15) James says that in the midst of life's hardships don't blame God. And especially, don't you dare blame God for the sins you commit.

Nate Larkin was raised in a religious home. He graduated from seminary and began to pastor a local church. He was successful in the eyes of his congregation as the ministry flourished. Four years into his marriage, Nate mentioned to his wife that he struggled with pornography. When he

What we knew to be wrong, we now imagine being no big deal.

didn't mention it again, she assumed he had gotten over it. But Nate's use of pornography, which began in adolescence, intensified over time. His double life is illustrated, at it worst, by his paying for sex while on his way to lead a candlelight Christmas Eve service at his church. It was when his wife found condoms in his possession that she blew the whistle and Nate was ready to begin changing.²

I can so easily imagine Nate's thinking:

- "God made me this way! How can I help it?"
- "Why would God give us such a demanding appetite for sex, if he didn't intend for us to satisfy it?"
- "I need more than my wife can provide."
- "I'm actually being kind to my wife by meeting my

needs other ways.”

- “If God doesn’t want me to do these things, he can take away my desire.”

But James wrote, *“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”* To say “the devil made me do it” is ridiculous but to say “God made me do it” is blasphemous. Proverbs 19:3 says, *“A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.”* It is not God, it is not Satan; it is not some outside force—it is us. Romans 5 makes it clear that in Adam we all sinned and we became sinners.

We may have a legitimate longing for pleasure, for security, for significance or whatever, but we pervert it by consuming others on the way to satisfying our own longings. Our evil desires imagine all kinds of “good” outcomes if we do certain things. We imagine how good it will feel, how alive it will make us feel, and the like. At first we know that what we contemplate doing is wrong. But the more we mull it over, the less evil it appears. In fact as we turn it over in our minds, it begins to look better and better. We consider its advantages rather than its dangers. Very quickly, what we knew to be wrong, we now imagine being no big deal.

- “It is a small thing, it can’t cause much harm.”
- “I won’t go very far with this thing. I’ll just indulge it a little and then quit.”
- “God won’t mind, after all, He made me this way.”

Then we become obsessed with it. It becomes, in our thinking, the only thing that can give us the pleasure we seek and imagine we deserve. Again we see that our problem is not the tempter from outside but the traitor within—our own evil desires.³

James writes, *"after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."* The sin was not in the temptation—we are all tempted. The sin is when we engage the thought rather than dismissing it, when we ponder it and savor it. And doing so, any desire becomes more powerful. James describes desire as a parent that gives birth to sin. And sin gives birth to the next generation, death.

We've all experienced it. We entertain the desire and we become increasingly desensitized. We become dehumanized—living less as we were designed to live, in giving and loving, and more corrupted until it is only our own perceived needs that we demand to meet. Cornelius Plantinga wrote that "We become internally lawless; like some mad charioteer, we now run our lives with more speed than direction."⁴ And the end of it all is death—death of conscience, death of emotion, death of relationships, death of the society, and finally the disintegration of the human spirit.

It is nothing but the common grace of God and special grace of God that has kept the human race from annihilating itself long before now. James 1:16-18 says, *"Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."* All sin perverts what God intended, pollutes what was to be pure and finally kills the very life it pretends to offer.

Now, let's give our attention to one killer in particular. The God-given gifts of sexuality and sex have been perverted. What was intended for good has been used for evil. "This

perversion of sex is pervasive in our culture. Sensuality has been unleashed in our country and around the world, leaving a path of sin and destruction in its wake. Nearly every week we, on staff, are dealing with the effects of such sin. We can no longer remain silent.”⁵The issue is pornography.

James describes desire as a parent that gives birth to sin.

- 40 million Americans regularly view Internet pornography
- Every second 28,000 people are viewing porn.
- 20% of men and 13% of women admit to viewing porn at work.
- In 1998 there were 72,000 pornographic Internet sites. Today there are over 4,000,000.
- 25% of all online searches are porn related.
- U.S. annual sales of pornography top \$13 billion.
- It is \$96 billion worldwide.

In a Christianity Today Leadership Journal survey it states:

- 37% of pastors say porn is a struggle for them.
- 51% say it is a temptation
- 25% of all calls to Focus on the Family’s “clergy care line” were porn related.

And most surveys say that this problem is even more pervasive among others, than among pastors. And this matters to every one of us:

- Average age of first exposure to Internet porn is 11 years.
- 90% of 8-16 year olds have seen online porn.⁶

Pornography touches every family. Pornography is shaping and thus destroying relationships. It affects how every woman in our culture is perceived. Whether we are 12 or 92, man or woman, it is, unfortunately, a subject with which we must deal. This isn't just the stuff of mass-murderer Ted Bundy or Law and Order—Special Victims Unit.

- This is the stuff of soft-core porn we so readily watch in many PG13 and R rated movies today;
- It's the stuff used by Christian couples to stimulate their sex lives;
- It's the stuff people are surfing on their computers.

It ensnares, desensitizes, dehumanizes and destroys.

We believe there is something you can do about it. By God's grace boys and girls, men and women, can be made more aware and some can be set free from the bondage they are in. We want to address this subject, not crudely but candidly. What followed were two presentations:

Speaking to the women was Dee Dee Woodman, a long-time friend of ours and counselor in our city.

Speaking to the men was Jason Martinkus with New Life Ministries.

(The audio of Jason's and Dee Dee's presentations are available online at www.soundliving.org)

Please see Appendix A for more notes

End Notes

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, p. 7

² From Christianity Today, March 2008, p. 34-35

³ John Owen, *Sin and Temptation*, p. 111

⁴ Plantinga, *Ibid*, p. 48

⁵ GLN letter to leaders, April 2008

⁶ Sources for the above statistics:

2008 Top Ten Reviews <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html#anchor1>

August 25, 2005 *Christian Science Monitor Leadership Journal* Winter 2005 p. 8

Walking the Talk
James 1:19-27

Have you ever heard of a “lapsed” Catholic? They were raised Catholic, maybe even went to Catholic schools, but they no longer go to confession, pray the Rosary, or even believe most of what they had been taught. Have you heard of a “jack” Mormon or a “cultural” Muslim? You can easily guess that each describes someone who once claimed an allegiance to that particular religion but no longer lives it. Have you heard of a “nominal” Christian? “Nominal” means “in name only.” It describes millions of Americans, who were raised in Protestant or Catholic families but as adults their Christianity has no real bearing on their lives, even if they may still go through certain religious motions such as attending church.

Surveys from recent years demonstrate that a high percentage of people who call themselves “Christians” have worldviews, values and lifestyles that are no different from those who make no claim to be “Christian.” Their choices in entertainment, their beliefs about premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality, their primary pursuit of pleasure and plenty, and the unavailability of their time and money to help others are the same as the general population. These are “nominal,” in name only, Christians.

In James 1:19-27, James draws a sharp distinction between true and false Christianity. It is a text that might make us uncomfortable. He says you can tell a real Christian by his or her conduct. James won’t allow for merely a private spirituality. There are some who would say, “I’m a Christian. I believe in God and Jesus.” There are others

reared in evangelical homes and churches who would add, "I asked Jesus into my heart when I was 6" (or whatever age). Still others might say, "We can't judge each other, because we can't tell what's in another person's heart." And so we accept the idea that one can be a Christian in the private interior place of the mind even if there is no evidence in the exterior actions of life. James will have none of that!

As we will read, James says there is a lot of self-deception going on, especially on this issue of our relationship with God. This is a huge reality check for a lot of superficially religious or superficially spiritual people. But it also gives even the person who takes his faith very seriously cause to evaluate his or her life. Read carefully the Word God gave to us through James, the brother of our Lord Jesus:

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

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 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. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 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 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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.”(James 1:19-27)

The relationship of these verses to the previous verses and to the following verses is maybe best seen by giving a very broad outline of the entire book. I’m indebted to Craig Blomberg, in his yet unpublished commentary on James, for some of this outline. In the first 12 verses, James mentions the three main themes he will deal with in the book:

1:1-12 initiates the three themes:

- :2-5 trials
- :6-8 wisdom for living
- :9-11 rich and poor

In the rest of the first chapter he reiterates those three themes:

- :12-18 Trials/temptation
- :12-26 Wisdom for living
- :27 rich and poor

In the rest of the letter, James expands on those three themes:

- 2:1-26 Rich and Poor
- 3:1-4:12 Wisdom and speech
- 4:13-5:18 Trials and Temptations

Because James both begins and ends his letter on the subject of persevering in the midst of trials and temptations I think it is possible that the entire letter is designed to help Christians persevere, to remain faithful in the midst of life. In this passage he deals with our reaction to the Word and will of God in our lives. To say it more pointedly, real

Christians, live it; they walk the talk.

Again, James makes us uncomfortable because he doesn't coddle or pamper us. When my son played sports in the YMCA leagues, everyone was a winner; everyone got the same "participation" award. Everybody was treated the same, whether they could actually play the sport or not.

James treats us like adults. He says in essence, "man up!" Stop deceiving yourselves—either you walk the talk or the truth is you don't have Christ. A relationship with God and the right reaction to His Word looks like something—you can tell the real thing. Verse 19 sets the agenda for the rest of the chapter: *"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry..."* Notice that in what follows James deals with these same three ideas, though he takes them in different order:

- Verses 20-21 deal with anger;
- Verses 22-25 deal with listening;
- And verse 26 deals with speaking.
- Then verse 27 summarizes.

All the verses together show us something of what a real Christian looks like. Specifically they speak to the issue of how a real Christian responds to the Word of God, the will of God.

Though he only briefly touches on it, James begins by saying we are to be "slow to become angry." That certainly leaves the door open for some anger. Paul, likewise, speaks of being angry without sinning, which suggests some anger is okay. We like to call it "righteous" anger. But the truth is that few of us (certainly not me) can legitimately speak of expressing righteous anger, because even in our best moments our motives are so complicated that we have lots of other kinds of anger mixed in.

Some years ago, I had spoken on the subject of biblical manhood and womanhood. And a person wrote to me a week later saying:

"I have waited a week to write to you so I would not write in a fit of emotion and so I could check my perceptions with others. It was the most conservative, traditionalist sermon I have ever heard on the question in my life. One thing that I find troubling about your sermon was the sloppy exegesis used to support your position." Three pages later, he concluded, "You have closed the door. I see no possibility for further growth, or influence, or ministry for me in the church. I would therefore be grateful if you would remove my name from the membership list. I cannot stand before God with a clear conscience, and be part of a church that does not...teach the truth about the full liberty and equality

The entire letter is designed to help Christians persevere, to remain faithful in the midst of life.

to be found in Christ." Now the author of that letter was considerably younger than me, had not had any theological training, and had a particular agenda they had been pushing in the church for some time. So when I got that letter I must admit my thoughts were not sweetness and light.

So let's admit that James' next statement is most often true: "*man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*" (James 1:20) James wrote about the trials we encounter in life. When we think we are being unjustly treated, we get very "bent out of shape." And our anger begins to color everything—even our own time reading and responding to God's Word. We think about

how such and such a sermon would sure have been good for that person to hear. A lady, long a member of her church, shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning. "That was a wonderful sermon," she exclaimed, "just wonderful! Everything you said applies to someone I know."¹ And we also rationalize away our responsibility to do anything about what we hear by claiming we have been too offended to obey God at this time. Our anger interferes with our ability to live as God wants us to live. It is expressly contrary to Jesus' command to love our enemies. It usurps God's role as judge and vindicator.² Anger can stop us dead in our tracks in our walk with Jesus.

If we are Christians, God's Spirit can enable us to choose to lay our anger down.

So James says in James 1:21, "*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.*" "Moral filth" and "evil"—those are strong words! When I think of moral filth, I think of sexual perversion. When I think of evil, I think of murder, rape and abuse. Is James serious? Does my anger deserve that strong a definition? In a passage that is quite parallel, Peter says it like this: "*Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.*" (1 Peter 2:1-2)

As we will see in a minute, Peter, like James, is talking about accepting or craving the Word of God so that by it we may be saved or said differently, that by it we may continue to grow up in our salvation. James called it "moral filth" and "evil." Peter calls it malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy

and slander. When James calls it “moral filth” he is talking about all the sins against another our anger leads us into. And James says, get rid of it and *“humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”* He clearly believes we have the ability to forgive. If we are Christians, God’s Spirit can enable us to choose to lay our anger down. Even choosing to do so over and over again, if necessary.

Not only does James tell us to be done with the anger, but he also says in verse 21 *“humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”* The “word planted in you” is none other than the gospel that has by God’s grace, taken root in your life. Back in verse 18 he said we have been given “birth through the word of truth.” In verse 25, he will write of “the perfect law of liberty.” John Piper, in a sermon preached in early 2008, spoke of the internal word of God and the external word of God. I think this helps explain what James is talking about. The implanted word is the truth of God’s Word about Jesus and salvation in Him alone that the Spirit plants internally, that we then trust for life. Our souls require that implanted internal Word. But our souls also require the regular feeding from the external Word—the Bible.³ James, I believe is speaking of both the internal and external Word when he says we must come to it humbly. To come humbly is to come to the Scripture in a submissive, open-minded way, with an eager readiness to learn and with a genuine desire to bring every area of life under its reforming control. Be “slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

Building on that same idea, James then leaves the issue of being slow to anger and goes on, in verse 22, to the second issue of being quick to listen. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22) There’s a difference between

“listening” and “listening.” How many times have I told my children to do something only to have them not respond? I will then say something like, “Are you listening?” or “Did you hear me?” What would be the major indication that they were listening? How would I best know they were hearing me? If they did what I told them to do! Pity on them if they did nothing but still said, “Yeah, I heard you.”

When you read the Scriptures, do you merely move the bookmark forward or do you listen to God?⁴ When you listen to a sermon, do you merely sit compliantly or do you listen. In Acts 10:33 we read, they said to Peter, *“Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”* But again, James put the real test to our listening when he defined it as “Do what it says.”

How are we deceived? We deceive ourselves into thinking all is well between God and us because we’ve put in the right amount of religious “time” in church or we have said the right religious words. James says the proof is in the “doing.” He then uses an analogy. James 1:23-24 says *“is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”* This man “looks”—the word means he really looks, he really sees. But after seeing, he goes away and promptly forgets what he saw—he does nothing about it. Men, earlier in our study of James we looked into the mirror. We talked about moral integrity, about pornography. What did you see? What did you do with what you saw? Did you forget about it?

In contrast, James says in verse 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.”* This man

continues looking into the Word continues to see himself as God sees him. He doesn't do it one day and quit. He keeps on doing it. And then seeing himself, he doesn't go away forgetting, he does something about it—he acts. One of the surest ways to stifle our growth in Christlikeness is to refuse to obey when we have been shown something to do.

Do we know that we are to *"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you"* and yet we hang on to anger toward someone who hurt us deeply, refusing to let it go? (Colossians 3:13)

James put the real test to our listening when he defined it as "Do what it says."

Do we know that sharing with others the wealth God provides is our responsibility and privilege but we continue to get ourselves further and further in debt?

Do we still engage in premarital sex or indulge impure thoughts even though God said, *"each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."* (1 Thessalonians 4)

James 1:25 says, *"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."*

But James moves along to the third issue—slow to speak: Verse 26 says, *"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives*

himself and his religion is worthless.” In John Bunyon’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* there is a man. “His name is Talkative. He is the son of one Say-well; he dwelt in Prating (chatter) Row; and is known of all that are acquainted with him, by the name of Talkative in Prating Row; and notwithstanding his fine tongue, he is but a sorry fellow...for he is best abroad; near home, he is ugly enough...religion has no place in his heart, or house, or conversation; all the religion he has lies (only) in his tongue, and his religion is, to make a noise therewith...Thus say the common people that know him, ‘A saint abroad, and a devil at home.’”

Throughout the Old and New Testaments the writers are clear about the fact that a true relationship with God results in a concern for what concerns God.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, “*Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.*” The reality of our religion is revealed by the words of our mouth. Gossip, slander, the maligning of another’s character, angry vindictive words, belittling words, and so much more reveal the true nature—of the speaker. By outward appearances he’s religious—he attends to religious activities. By stated preference he’s religious—he says he’s a Christian. But he deceives himself, as evidenced by his loose rein on his tongue. James says the truth is that his religion is worthless; it is empty. Again that is a strong and uncomfortable indictment.

In verse 26 James spoke of “religion that is worthless.” Now he ends these remarks, in verse 27, with a description of authentic religion. This is not intended as a full description of genuine Christianity but he does encompass all true Christianity when he touches on the internal and the external. Because, as we’ve seen, true Christianity has

both interior and exterior dimensions.

First the exterior: *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..."* (James 1:27) Throughout the Old and New Testaments the writers are clear about the fact that a true relationship with God results in a concern for what concerns God. The point is, don't pretend to love God if you don't love whom he loves. Isaiah 1:10-17 says, *"Stop bringing meaningless offerings!...When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen...Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."* James will have much to say on that subject in the coming chapters.

But there is as well an interior dimension to true Christianity: *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: ...to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."* (James 1:27) The world's pollution is immorality, dishonesty, greed, selfishness, violence, envy, arrogance, blasphemy, cruelty, materialism, obsession with pleasure, and its rejection of God. Do we think you can live among that all day, every day, and not be touched, influenced, and stained? We must consciously:

- Reject its standards
- Repulse its lies
- Repel its pressures
- Resist its temptations⁵

Be aware of the air we breathe and stand against it by steeping ourselves in the Word of God, consciously depending upon the Spirit of God, and surrounding ourselves with the people of God.

So James gives us two descriptions of genuine Christianity: Social justice and personal purity. It is not either/or but both/and. Some people opt for the personal purity, separation from the world, alone. Picture an isolated, separated, inwardly focused, rule-keeping, and paranoid people identified most of all by what they don't do. Separation alone is faulty religion. On the other hand, picture Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision whose heart bled for the poor of the world but whose family ended in shambles with children who hated him. Or picture Martin Luther King Jr. or Ted Haggard or too many others, who led the charge for justice or compassion but lacked moral integrity. Activism, social justice, alone is faulty religion.

James 1:27 says, *"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."* James never for a minute says or believes that we become Christians by doing the right things. Salvation is by grace through faith not by works. But James joins the Apostles Paul and John and Jesus Himself in saying that true salvation yields a changed and changing life.

Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will obey what I command."* (John 14:15) John wrote, *"Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."* (1 John 2:6)

1 John 2:15 says, *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."*

And, 1 John 3:14 says, *"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death."*

Paul said, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through*

faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...”(Ephesians 2:8-10)

Jesus said, "by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”(Matthew 7:20-21)

Oh Christian, we dare not be passive in our response to God’s holy Word. James 1:22 says, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* And for some maybe this is the reality check you needed to help you understand that for all your pretence in the past, you are not a Christian and you desperately need Jesus to save you from your sins and sinfulness.

Years ago Al Martin, a pastor in Pennsylvania, wrote an article titled, "What is a Christian?" Through a mutual friend, I contacted pastor Martin and asked to reprint that article for all who come to Southern Gables. Here are his main points:

1. According to the Bible a Christian is a person who has faced realistically the problem of his own personal sin.
2. A Bible Christian is one who has seriously considered the one divine remedy for sin.
3. A Bible Christian is one who has wholeheartedly complied with the divine terms for appropriating the divine provision—repentance and faith.
4. A true Christian is a person who manifests in his life that his claims to repentance and faith are real.

Martin ends with this and so do I:

"Can you make your claim to be a Christian stick from the Bible? Does your life manifest the fruits of repentance and

faith? Do you possess a life of attachment to Christ, of obedience to Christ and confession of Christ? Is your behavior marked by adherence to the ways of Christ? Not perfectly — No! Every day you must pray, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. But you can also say, 'For me to live is Christ', or 'The world behind me, the cross before me, I have decided to follow Jesus.' That is what a true Christian is. How many of us are real Christians? I leave you to answer in the deep chambers of your own mind and heart. But, remember, answer with an answer that you will be prepared to live with for eternity. Be content with no answer but that which will find you comfortable in death and safe in the day of judgment."⁶

See Appendix B for further study.

End Notes

¹From Stephen Cole's sermon on James 1:19-27 at <http://www.fcfonline.org>

²Peter Davids, NIBC James, p. 39-40

³John Piper, sermon at www.desiringgod.com on Jan 6, 2008

⁴Alex Motyer, *The Message of James*, p. 65

⁵John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, p. 111

⁶http://www.the-highway.com/Gospel_Martin.html

The Condemnation of Partiality
James 2:1-13
Presented by Dr. Rich Peterson

I thought this Family Circus cartoon provided a great word picture of the Christian community and the diversity without disunity that is ours in Jesus. Crayons can teach us a good lesson: "...they're different colors, have strange names, but all learn to live together in the same box." When we enter the household of faith, we long to feel the joy expressed by the psalmist: *"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD'."* (Ps 122:1) We long to come into a place where everybody is a somebody. A place where even "nobodies" are somebodies. A place where mercy matters most and love reigns supreme. This is James's vision of the Christian church!

Doug Webster says we long to come into a place where "the relational strategies of preferential treatment and pragmatic interests are laid aside. Stroking egos gives way to praising God. Mercy overcomes manipulation. The Lord's Supper replaces the power lunch. Instead of courting one another's favor we rejoice in God's favor." But Dr. Webster continues, "the problem is that the way we operate all week does not dust off easily on Sunday. Without the Spirit's direction and purposeful resistance, we fall back into the habits of human nature and custom. Christian service turns into customer service, and favoritism evaluates every relationship in terms of profit or loss. We size people up. We are as sharp as Sherlock Holmes in spotting the telltale signs of prominence, prestige, influence, and control." Like a lone voice in the worldly-wilderness James cries out as pastor/prophet, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious

Lord Jesus Christ don't show favoritism." James mandates three actions in this passage. Two are rather general and one is very, very specific.

In general James writes: *"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom."* Then a little more to the point, *"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' you are doing right."* And then very, very specifically James tells us: "Show no partiality." Why be so specific at this point? Because partiality runs completely contrary to the character of God. God does not show favoritism; how we treat others is the evidence of our relation to Christ. The church of Jesus Christ is the one place where everybody matters!

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

"Don't show partiality." And just what is partiality? Partiality is the undue, unfair respect of persons that panders to someone because he is rich, influential, or popular. To be partial is to distinguish, decide, and judge. But as John Piper suggests partiality means that you base your treatment of someone—or your attitude toward someone—on something that should *not* be the basis of how you treat them. That is on whether they are rich or poor. Now we have seen and heard this kind of thing before. In Jesus we watched as *"the spies questioned him, 'Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth'."* (Luke 20:21)

"Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity, you aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the ways of God in accordance with the

truth" (Mark 12:14). In Peter we watched as the Holy Spirit opened his heart to the new reality of those who would follow after the ways of Jesus in his encounter with the Gentile, Cornelius. *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"* (Acts 10:34).

With respect to different races, Paul emphatically teaches, "God does not show favoritism." (Rom. 2:11) With respect to social and economic status Paul writes, *"And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."* (Eph. 6:9) And here with the gentleness of a pastor, the firmness of a prophet and the guidance of an older brother in the faith, James echoes the same truth, *"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."*

Partiality—it is one of the truly multicolor words in the letter of James. The word literally means, "that which receives face or that which lifts up the face." Both meanings could fit here as the word may mean "to receive the face of another person in an evaluating way." Such an attitude scans the features of a new face coming into the church. An instant evaluation takes place. Immediately the evaluation categorizes the newcomer socially, educationally, racially, and economically. On the basis of such a decision, fellowship is given or withheld. Or James may have in mind the idea that many people can't conceal their reaction to a newcomer. Their emotions write themselves on their faces. So, perhaps James is referring to the accepting smile or the rejecting frown on the faces of church members when they react to new members.

Whatever the case, James condemns such superficial distinctions in the community of Christ. The church of Jesus is the one place where everybody matters because at the final judgment, every rank and category of people will stand on level ground. On that level ground before the Cross you want to experience the mercy of God and not His judgment only!

A couple of weeks ago I had my hair cut by a young man by the name of "Anthony" who had stopped attending church because of a felt injustice done to him and his family when he was a child. His mom was a widow and worked a blue-collar job to help support a family of five. They attended a church in hopes of growing in the Lord and locating a family of faith. Because of their impoverished situation, the mother handmade all of the family's clothes. Anthony told me of a conversation he overheard the leaders of the church having regarding his Mom's "unkempt appearance" and how the family was such an embarrassment to the church. These church leaders wondered within hearing distance from Anthony why the family couldn't just find another church that would be more "appropriate" for them. This conversation and the prejudicial attitudes that came with it were so disturbing to Anthony that he has never again set foot inside a church.

How we treat others is the evidence of our relation to Christ. James condemns partiality because it so completely contradicts the character and glory of God. Some older translations of this passage read, "*Show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*" Or as some have paraphrased it, "In proclaiming your faith, do not play favorites in the church."

If our most passionate desire is for human glory we will most certainly continue to show favoritism. But if our most

passionate desire is the glory of God then His illuminating light will enable us to see and value all people as Jesus does. In the new community of Christ—everybody matters!

Then James takes it a step further when he implies that in this place even “nobodies” matter. Pretend for a moment that, *“a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 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,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”*

How we treat others is the evidence of our relation to Christ.

Focus on that last sentence for a moment: Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Here is, I think, an example of how the “pollution” of the world has invaded the church of Jesus Christ. Along with the moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent inside our hearts (and James has already addressed this issue in chapter one) the pollution of the world shows up in the way we treat the less important—the widows and orphans, the helpless, the voiceless, the powerless, the forgotten, the poor. The pollution of the world seeps into our pores and works its way under our skin. It ever so insidiously affects our breathing in and out of the Holy Spirit. No doubt the world values people who appear important. The world is enamored of celebrity, holding certain people in higher regard than others on the basis of wealth, achievement, position, and prominence. These are the folks given the best seats in the house.

In fact, we have become so used to these distinctions that they are normal for us. Of course, the rich will sit in the \$750 seats on the floor of the Nuggets game. Of course, the affluent will occupy the box seats at the Bronco game. Of course, those who can afford it will sit in first class. So why should it be different in church?

This may be why the wealthy man in James's story receives special attention. Maybe the one who led this prominent man to his seat of privilege was in the habit of catering to the wealthy every business day. He may have thought why should a worship service be any different from the workplace? What makes the house of God different from the office?

*In the church of Jesus Christ
everybody matters.*

If the Christian community were merely an extension of the world this would make perfect sense. But the Community of Christ is not an extension of the world—the community of Christ is otherworldly and most radically a different place. The only place in fact where even the “Nobodies” and perhaps especially the world’s “nobodies” are God’s somebodies!

When we started our ministry with the developmentally disabled one of the first things Shushawn, the leader, suggested was that we create “prime seating” for those in wheelchairs within our sanctuary. Create spaces in the center of the worship center so that those in wheelchairs can easily access and participate in the corporate worship experience. So we did this and the results have been very interesting. From one of our Abled-Hearts women we learned that this single gesture became the very thing God

used to bring her to saving faith in Jesus Christ. So impressed that a church should care enough for the disabled as to reserve the best seats for THEM, she began to wonder if there was something to these Christian's faith. It was a great privilege for a couple of us to introduce this woman to the Lord Jesus and an unforgettable experience for me personally to literally carry her into the baptismal waters.

On the other hand, when we made the arrangements for such seating one of the men in our church confronted me one day with the question, "Are we just doing this because the government has somehow forced its way into the church and mandated special treatment of these folks? Why can't they just park their rigs in the back and be satisfied with that?" To which I responded, a little too quickly and not without a bit of anger—"No, not the United States government—the government of the King of kings!" Not surprisingly there wasn't much conversation after that regarding the matter—sometimes my passion gets ahead of my mouth and overrides my brain!

But still, I do believe that it is with a great deal of passion for such things that James declares, "have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" In the church of Jesus Christ everybody matters. It is the one place in the entire world that even "nobodies" matter and not only that James implies, it is also the one place where those who matter to no one else matter intensely to God!

"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? 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? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?"

Wait a minute—did we read that right? “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith?” Pastor Joel Gregory provides some helpful insight here when he writes, “The large number of poor people in the church in James’s day betrayed no accident of fate. Deliberately, God had chosen the people who were poor in the material realm to be rich in the spiritual realm.” In a sharp call to attention James demands our focused interest. 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? It is a rhetorical question and the only answer is “Yes.”

But wow, James points to something almost unfathomable to those who have been spiritually food poisoned through thoughtless consumption of so much prosperity preaching offered at so many religious venues and included on so many “evangelical” menus today. Literally, God chose the poor for Himself. Now folks, even after having been a part of this church for half a decade, even after that many years and that many sermons in this place, God’s election of individuals and groups still remains for me one of the Bible’s great mysteries. The doctrine of election means that God saves people because He intends to do so. God chooses to save and those who respond to Him in faith become part of His elect. James tells us that a vital part of God’s elective intention is the salvation of the poor. This doesn’t mean that no rich person can be saved and that all poor people are chosen for salvation, but it does reinforce God’s interest in the poor by His own sovereign choice.

As the Son of God, Jesus reveals God's special interest in the poor. Jesus' first Beatitude: "*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*" (Luke 6:20) *Jesus began his first sermon with the affirmation: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."* (Luke 4:18) When the imprisoned John the Baptist wanted to test the authority of Jesus' ministry, Jesus sent him the evidence: "*The poor have good news preached to them.*" (Luke 7:22)

It would appear that no matter how you slice it the central appeal of the gospel was to the poor people of the land. Hannah's haunting cry echoes throughout the Scriptures:

- He raises up the poor from the dust
- He lifts the needy from the ash heap.
- To make them sit with princes
- And inherit a seat of honor (1 Sam. 2:8)

In Jesus, even the poor have hope of an inheritance which is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1 Peter 1:4).

Literally, God chose the poor for Himself.

Not long after he became pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, W. A. Criswell had a life-changing encounter with the poor that encouraged his downtown church to continue reaching out to all people. As the story goes, Dr. Criswell went to the church early one morning and noticed a group gathered around one of the doorways of the sanctuary. Curious, he worked his way through the crowd. He saw a man on the steps with his hands stretched out toward the church door. The man was dead. He died reaching out to the church in the heart of the city. This episode led Dr. Criswell to design a whole spectrum of "Good Shepherd" ministries to reach the neediest and poorest people in the community.

The commission to reach out in love to those who matter most to God seems clear enough, and yet so few churches feel compelled to make outreach to the poor a central concern of gospel ministry. God has chosen the poor. “But you have insulted the poor.” Have the poor persons who live in the midst of the American dream become an embarrassment to the very people who claim the name of Christ? Should we as middle-class Americans step back and ask ourselves some serious questions in this regard?

How have I insulted the poor? Is it through my denial of charity? Or maybe my denial of dignity? How do I treat the person who serves my family dinner at Chili’s—with respect or disdain? Have I become like the godless rich who exploit the poor for their own advantage? How might I be doing this even in subtle fashion? Do these attitudes and behaviors break God’s heart? Is my self-interest, self-concern, self-protection choking me to death spiritually?

The commission to reach out in love to those who matter most to God seems clear enough.

What would it look like for me to creatively and innovatively take this passage seriously and with the aid of the Holy Spirit apply it to my own life? Is Jesus’ truth statement that the “poor you will always have with you” an invitation for me to engage in ministry or an excuse for my continued complacency?

These (and questions like these) were hard for me to wrestle with as a pastor of an inner-city church in Dallas. As I indicated before—I feel like I got about 25 years of ministry experience in 5 as our impoverished little community of faith sought to meet the enormous needs of

the urban poor. But as much as that experience helped shape some of my passions, and even as much as I like to refer to my time there. The true heroes for me remain the people who spent their entire lifetimes in that church on Maple and Douglas; ministering to the urban poor, the down-and-out African-American, the impoverished family of immigrants fresh from Mexico, the young man struggling with addictions, the destitute homeless single mom whose four kids had four different fathers.

Of all the heroes who compassionately ministered the gospel of Jesus Christ to those people, one name stands above the rest. Ellis Watkins. Ellis was the Director of the Dallas Transportation District. He was extremely well respected, well-to-do and well—just a giant of a man in the Dallas area. But somewhere along the line Ellis began to see that all those things didn't matter much if he didn't use his influence for the cause of Christ. And there was no greater cause to which Ellis would give his life then to the ministry of the gospel to the poor.

He accomplished this feat by the choices he made on a daily basis. Choices like the kind of car he would drive, the kind of modest house he would own, and the kinds of people he would be seen with most often. When I traveled back to Dallas in 2002 for the church's 100-year anniversary, Ellis asked me out to lunch. I thought we would go somewhere nice (read expensive). Why not, after all I had invested time in this church as their Senior Pastor, come all this way from Denver to be with them.... When we were through with the worship services that day we made our way to Ellis's car. To my chagrin and later shame two others followed us to the car. "These are new friends of mine", Ellis said, pointing first to the dirty, unkempt woman in the wheelchair and then to the clearly homeless man standing next to her. "I've asked them to join us for lunch

today, as I knew you wouldn't mind."

As I was seated in the backseat, because the woman needed to ride "shotgun" it occurred to me that when it came to "really keeping the royal law" when it came to living my life "by the law that gives freedom, "I still had a long way to go. It also occurred to me that day dining with these "diverse" people in that dingy, hole-in-the-wall Mexican food restaurant that this might be as close as I would ever get to "heaven" this side of glory.

This is James's vision of the church of Jesus Christ:

- A place where everybody matters
- A place where even the "nobodies" matter.
- A place where those who don't matter to anybody else matter to God
- A place where love is the only law that really matters
- A place where mercy matters most.

Faith's Litmus Test

James 2:14-26

Several months ago, I was listening to our local NPR affiliate, KCFR and heard one of those non-commercial commercials that ended with these words: "Judaism your way!" They were serious, and I went online to see what else they might say and found this: Judaism your way: "We're not here to tell you who is Jewish and who is not. We're not here to tell you how to observe Judaism the right way... We're a place for you to connect on your terms."¹ I can understand why a fast food restaurant says you can have it your way, but a religion? I was honestly nonplussed. Then I wondered, is that not what many have done with Christianity? In America haven't we in fact allowed people to define Christianity "on their terms?"

Several years ago Leadership Magazine published a cartoon; it was a church marquee, which advertised the following:

- 24% fewer commitments
- Home of the 7.5% tithe
- 15-minute Sermons
- 45-minute worship services
- Only 8 Commandments—your choice
- Everything you've ever wanted in a church...and less!²

So what is a Christian? Is it whatever you want it to be? Someone says, "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for my sins. I asked him into my heart when I was ten. Am I a Christian?"

Another says, "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for my sins. I asked him into my

heart when I was 10. Since that time, I don't know if I still believe all of that. Am I a Christian?"

Still another: "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for my sins. I asked him into my heart when I was 10. I still believe all of that but I readily acknowledge that I don't have any real interest in Jesus setting the course of my life or of obeying what the Bible says on some things. Don't get me wrong, I think murder is wrong but when the Bible says I need to give a significant portion of my money away or that I shouldn't do certain things I enjoy, I see no reason to do what it says. Am I a Christian?"

James challenges the genuineness of our faith if it isn't evidenced by works of charity toward others.

And yet another: "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for my sins. I asked him into my heart when I was 10. Since that time I've worked hard at knowing what the Bible says and being careful to maintain moral integrity but this stuff about me caring for widows and orphans, me feeding the poor and me changing my lifestyle to do so, I don't get too worked up about that. Am I a Christian?"

With those scenarios, I raise several issues:

- What is the essence of saving faith?
- Am I still a Christian if I choose from the Bible what I'll obey or not obey?
- If I'm orthodox in my beliefs and moral in my lifestyle, can I still be a Christian if I'm not all that concerned about caring for the poor and social justice?

I'm certain that many of you have heard that the Bible "comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable." Well James certainly does the latter! He makes us very uncomfortable. He does so by challenging the genuineness of our faith if it isn't evidenced by works of charity toward others.

Now look at James 2:14-26. I included the English word "works" in several places where the NIV translates the Greek "ergon" as "deeds," "action," "do," "does," and "did." That Greek word is most literally translated "work" or "works." It is possible the NIV translators wanted to soften the apparent contradiction with Saint Paul by using very legitimate but different words.

"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds (works)? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 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? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action (works), is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds (works).' Show me your faith without deeds (works), and I will show you my faith by what I do (works). You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds (works) is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions (works) were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did (works). 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. You see that a person is justified by what he does (works) and not by faith alone. In the same

way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did (works) when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds (works) is dead.”(James 2:14-26)

Those of us reared on Evangelicalism’s emphasis on salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and not of works, find this passage to be troublesome. It is especially troubling for us who have recently been studying Paul’s letter to the Romans where Paul writes in 3:28, *“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing (works of) the law.”* It sounds to us as if James is contradicting Paul. But that is not the case. First, because James was most likely written before Paul ever penned Romans or Ephesians, James wasn’t arguing with Paul. Secondly, James is emphasizing a different aspect of Christianity than Paul is. Paul, in texts we will look at later, is emphasizing how one becomes a Christian; James is describing how genuine Christianity is lived out.

But before we look at the relationship of faith and works, I want to remind you of the context of these verses. As I said, James is not having a theological debate with Paul. Instead, James is concerned about describing genuine Christianity. Specifically he’s concerned about those whose so-called Christianity is not demonstrated in their relationships with the poor and disadvantaged. We see that throughout the letter, even in the first paragraphs: *“The brother in humble circumstances...the one who is rich...”(1:9-10)*

In the next section of his letter he addressed the difference between mere appearance and reality—*“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”(James 1:22)* Then in James 1:27 he says it “point

blank": *"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."* In the paragraphs we looked at earlier he says it again, *"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."* (James 2:8)

And as we have already seen, he continues that theme in this text with the very first illustration he uses to make his point: *"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 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?"* (2:15-16) So while we will digress to reconcile James' statements with Paul's, it appears that James' concern is that genuine faith results in charity.

James is concerned about those whose so-called Christianity is not demonstrated in their relationships with the poor and disadvantaged.

But first we will look at the relationship of faith and works. With two rhetorical questions, James clearly points out that a faith that doesn't result in works is not genuine saving faith. *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?"* (James 2:14) His answer is in verse 17: *"faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* James says there are people who claim to have faith, they claim to be Christians, but their kind of faith is "dead," worthless faith, and unable to save them.

What is their kind of faith? What is this so-called faith that is worthless? James has already described it one way saying it is a faith that is not accompanied by action (works). I think James says, if love for others, especially others in need, doesn't flow from this faith, then it is not saving faith. In verse 18, James says their kind of faith is the kind that defines faith as unconnected to deeds (works). "But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.'" (James 2:18)

- This person wants to separate faith and deeds.
- They want to separate justification (becoming a Christian) from sanctification (living as a Christian).
- They say there are two separate pieces of the Christian experience—getting saved and living as one.
- They argue that you can be truly saved even though there is no fruit of it.

In today's language there are those who argue that there are three kinds of people: unsaved people, worldly Christians and spiritual Christians. Misunderstanding 1 Corinthians 3, they suggest, as I said, that there are two kinds of Christians—worldly and spiritual. They argue that

Saving faith embraces the person of Jesus—we trust Him.

both are truly Christians, it is just that worldly Christians aren't living as they should. Too many times I have heard this kind of theology especially at funerals. Some well-meaning Christian friend or family member will say of the deceased, "I know he didn't live like a Christian but I'm so glad that he asked Jesus into his heart when he was a child." Or, "He wasn't really into the Bible or going to church and stuff but he believed in Jesus."

What is James' response to that kind of thinking? "*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons*

believe that—and shudder.” (Verse 19) Genuine faith is more than knowledge! Knowing that God exists and even knowing that Jesus died on the cross for sins is not true saving faith. Genuine faith certainly includes knowledge of the truth but it also includes assent, agreement with that truth. But genuine faith is more than knowledge and assent or agreement. Even the demons know and agree that God is God so much so that they “shudder.” They live in fear but in their stubbornness they won’t trust Him. Knowing that God exists and even knowing that Jesus died for sins and then even assenting or agreeing with the fact that Jesus died for your sins is not true saving faith. One person wrote, “It is a good thing to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us.”³

True saving faith is more than knowledge (the mind) and assent (the heart); it also includes trust (the will). Saving faith embraces the person of Jesus—we trust Him. Several different New Testament words are used for this three-fold faith: “Believe,” “receive,” “accept,” and “trust.” You see, they speak of much more than merely knowing or even agreeing—they speak of embracing, yielding to, and attaching yourself to. This is not merely a mental exercise; this is a relationship. Now James’ point is that this relationship looks like something. If a faith-relationship doesn’t result in a different life, a changed life, then it only proves that what someone called faith was not genuine saving faith.

Beginning with verse 20 James gives two illustrations to prove that faith without works is not real faith. And those of us who are familiar with the Apostle Paul’s writings find James’ illustrations and wording troubling. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of*

God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” And then Paul wrote in Romans 4:1-3, “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness?’”

But James writes, *“Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete (reached its goal) by what he did. 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. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”* (James 2:21-24) How many times have you heard me and others repeat the great Reformation theme I cited earlier, that the gift of salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?

So who’s right, Paul or James? They both are! I want you to see that James and Paul are using Abraham to make two different points. And they will use the same words but in different ways. James 2:23 quotes the same Genesis 15:6 verse that Paul quotes in Romans 4:3. But the earlier illustration about the offering of Isaac that James uses to make his point about Abraham’s righteousness is from Genesis 22, which came later in Abraham’s life.

Paul is describing the initial righteousness or justification of a sinner. And Paul’s purpose is to declare that that righteousness, that declaration of justification, that new right standing with God, is by grace through faith and it is not, in any way, earned by works, by what we do. James,

however, is describing the on-going righteousness, the faithfulness, of a saved sinner. Have you ever heard the saying, "I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved?" Obviously that saying has to do with not only the initial coming to faith in Jesus, but also the on-going results of that faith and the final outcome of it. We sometimes speak of it as justification, sanctification and glorification. So with this word righteousness: I have been declared righteous, I am being declared righteous and I will be declared righteous. When Paul uses the term, he most often uses it to refer to that initial justification which we often refer to as being "saved."

The gift of salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But in Matthew 12:37 Jesus used the word of a future declaration of righteousness. "*For by your words you will be acquitted (declared righteous), and by your words you will be condemned.*" In Matthew 25 and in Revelation 20, the Bible speaks of a future judgment when believers will be publicly recognized and declared as righteous. What has been true of them will be announced by God as true. Now here in James, he uses the word "righteousness" to refer to God's present declaration of Abraham's right standing with God. Abraham had been declared righteous by God when, in Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed God, placed his faith in God and it was credited to him for righteousness. James, in verse 23, acknowledges that, but in verse 20 James refers to a later time when by Abraham's faithful actions God declares him righteous. To James' point: Saving faith results in works. No works, means no faith.

Someone might misunderstand verse 21 to suggest that Abraham was declared righteous only by what he did, as if

faith were not even part of it. But in verse 22 James corrects such a possible misunderstanding. He writes, "*You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*" It wasn't works versus faith. James here proves that Abraham's faith was not the mere knowledge and assent that some call faith. Abraham's real faith, including knowledge, assent and trust, expressed itself in obedience. Again remember that James is not describing initial justification; he is describing the results of genuine faith and justification.

Genuine faith always reaches its goal in good works.

When James says that Abraham's faith was made complete, he doesn't mean that it wasn't faith until it was coupled with works. He means that by his obedience Abraham made complete or reached the goal of his faith—faith results in obedience. Similarly, in 1 John 4:12 we read "*If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*" It doesn't mean that God's love is incomplete or lacking until we love but that one goal of God's love is that we love one another. So in James 1:22, it is not that faith is not genuine until it is joined with works but that genuine faith always reaches its goal in good works.

Probably the most difficult verse for us is James 2:24 "*You see that a person is justified by what he does (erga, works) and not by faith alone.*" I think we understand Paul and James when we realize, "Paul (was) dealing (as one man said it) with obstetrics, with how new life begins; James, however, is dealing with pediatrics and geriatrics, with how the Christian life grows and matures and ages."⁴ As others have said it, "Where Paul denies the need for 'pre-

conversion works,' James emphasizes the absolute necessity of post-conversion works." James calls a 'faith' that does not bring about a changed life dead, lifeless, and useless. (Such faith) does not work to save a person, (because) it cannot, lacking life itself. A 'faith' which is purely doctrinal and does not result in pious action (i.e. charity) is a dead sham, totally useless for salvation."⁵

But as we have pointed out so many times, Paul also deals with this on-going life of a believer and he is in complete agreement with James when he writes:

- Romans 1:5 says we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.
- Galatians 5:6 says "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."
- Ephesians 2:8-10 says *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

The Apostle John declares the same:

"Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:7-10)

Luther, the champion of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, wrote, "O it is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are."⁶ That is what James is talking about.

Now let's return to the context and the application of this text: James has declared that if you claim to be a Christian and you claim to have faith but it doesn't result in good works, you are only fooling yourself; your faith is spurious, worthless, in fact, it is dead. And even more to the point of the larger context, James says that if our faith doesn't result in charity toward the poor and disadvantaged, it is a false faith. The illustration James uses is consistent with what he has been teaching all along in his letter: "*Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 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?*" (James 2:15-16)

There are at least three dimensions to true Christianity. First is "Doctrinal orthodoxy"—we believe true things about God. Our doctrinal statement is biblical. We believe the right things. But if our Christianity stops there, it is no better than the bogus faith James describes here. There is a second dimension to genuine Christianity: "Moral integrity." Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20: "*Flee from sexual immorality...Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you...You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*" Many Christians desire to carefully obey God's laws and as

James said it, “keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” But that is where it stops with too many of us. We are orthodox and moral but uncharitable!

James, consistent with all the rest of Scripture, also emphasizes that third dimension of genuine Christianity: Merciful Actions. We evangelicals pride ourselves on orthodoxy and we talk much about morality, but we too often let the liberals deal with charity rationalizing that we don’t want to get trapped in works-righteousness. James punctures our self-deception and says that a faith that doesn’t result in mercy and charity is no faith at all.

The illustration continues James’ concern for the poor among us. Instead of giving him anything, we bless him (“Go in peace”). We see the situation for what it is (a person in need) and we do nothing other than what costs us nothing—we bless them. “I’ll pray for you!” “Hope something changes.” “I hope God blesses you.” (soto voce—“because I don’t plan to.”) One man wrote, “It is not the form of the statement (the blessing) that is reprehensible, but its functioning as a religious cover for the failure to act.”⁷

Another wrote that we are those who have “studiously learned the art of dismissing socio-economic disparities that may at times be glaring but remain unseen due to class blinders well in place. The poor, the homeless, the ex-convict, or the street beggar merely receives a perfunctory ‘greeting’ as the Sunday-only comfortable Christian hurries by, scarcely seeing the needy ‘neighbor.’ While it is true that one can get killed trying to be the good Samaritan today, this possibility is no warrant for distancing oneself from virtually every opportunity to extend Christian mercy.”⁸

We at SGC want to present you with opportunities for involvement in the lives of those who are in need. Consistent with Paul's teaching, we don't do these things to merit God's favor but, consistent with James' teaching, we do them as an outgrowth of the grace of God in our lives, as acts of obedience to our Lord. But you might say, "What if I have no desire and I only feel obligation? Doesn't that ruin it?" Obedience isn't always preceded by feeling but by choice. I can choose to obey not out of fear but out of commitment, out of a relationship. For example, my wife asks me to get up in the night to get her some medicine. I don't have to pretend I like getting up, but I can choose, for her sake, to do it.

When it comes to charity, do I hide behind the fact that I pay taxes that in our country we redistribute the wealth through taxes and therefore I am helping the poor when I pay taxes?

- Do I also hide behind the fact that I give more to charity than most Americans when I give to my church, which has a benevolence committee, and thus I am doing my part?
- Do I also hide behind the fact that we have a division of labor in the church? I can't do everything and I invest time and energy in some kinds of ministry to people (teaching and leading) while others invest time in prison ministries or feeding the poor.
- Do I also hide behind the fact that so many efforts toward helping the poor are fruitless?

I and two other pastors started Mile High Ministries; many of you served with me in tutoring, refurbishing buildings, landscaping, serving meals, and all apparently for nothing. We want to fix the situation and when we find that we can't, we tend to give up. Deuteronomy 15:11 says, "*There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and*

toward the poor and needy in your land." Jesus didn't ask us to fix it; He asked us to be generous! One man wrote, "Our faith becomes practical when it is expressed in two books: (our appointment) book and (our) checkbook."⁹

I struggled with this text; what will I do about it? What if instead of trying to protect time for hobbies and recreation, I made serving others my hobby, my recreation? It doesn't have to mean either/or but it probably means cutting back on the protected personal time. Maybe it means:

- Meals to those in difficult situations;
- Child-care for a mom in distress;
- Helping a single mom move;
- Visiting someone in the hospital at those inconvenient times;
- Tutoring a child;
- Visiting someone in prison;
- Making donations and helping at a food bank;
- Inviting a lonely person or a new family over for dinner and conversation;
- Just random acts of kindness;
- Helping build a house for a needy family (Habitat for Humanity; Mexico trips; and others)
- Driving the bus to pick up the developmentally disabled.

We criticize those liberals who think they can work their way to heaven by doing good. Worse, are those supposed evangelicals who think they can faith their way to heaven without the good works that prove the genuineness of their faith.

James 2:14-26 says, "*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds (works)? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 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? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action (works), is dead."

See Appendix C for further study notes.

End Notes

¹ www.judaismyourway.org

² Leadership, Summer, 1983, p.81

³ Mitton in Moo, James PNTC, p.130

⁴ Francis Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James*, p. 106

⁵ Martin, Moo and Davids in Blomberg, p. 159

⁶ Luther in his preface to Romans

⁷ Johnson in Blomberg, p. 158

⁸ Keenan, The Wisdom of James, p. 83. in Felder, "James," 1795 in Blomberg, p. 176

⁹ Elton Trueblood cited in Baker and Ellsworth, *Preaching James*, p. 76

Faith and Words

James 3:1-12

Romans 12:1 speaks of offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God. That language about “sacrifice” conjures up images of laying our bodies on an altar as an indication of our willingness to yield ourselves to God. The story is probably apocryphal, but after one convicting sermon on the subject of gossip, a person, long known for causing trouble came up to Evangelist Dwight Moody saying that she wished to lay her tongue on the altar. Moody supposedly replied, “We don’t have an altar long enough.”¹

The tongue—a mucus-laden muscle weighing only about 2 ½ ounces but oh, how much we use it! One man wrote that “we speak about 18 to 25 thousand words a day.” We speak the equivalent of “a 54-page book every day. And in a year, we would probably produce about 66, 800-page books...You will, if you’re a normal person, spend one fifth of your life talking.”² Whether we speak of the mouth or the tongue, we not only talk a lot, but we also talk a lot about how we talk a lot.

- We put signs on our desks: “Be sure brain is in gear before engaging mouth.”
- We criticize another by saying, “When he opens his mouth all he does is switch feet.”
- We even chastise ourselves with, “Well slap my mouth!”

Every one of us has probably, at one time or another, wished we could take back some words we have spoken in haste. Well, just as a medical doctor might look at our tongues as an indicator of our health, so James asks us look at our tongues as an indicator of our spiritual health.³

If our last text on works (what we do) as an evidence of true saving faith was hard, this week’s text on the words we speak, is harder still.

Look at James 3:1-12: *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 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. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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. 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. 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. All kinds of*

What comes out of the mouth is the gauge of true saving faith!

animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

It might be tempting for us to think of this text as simply a moralism—an attempt by James to get us to be more careful about how we speak. The effect would be that some of us would feel a measure of guilt about how careless we have been with our words and then would

pledge to ourselves to do better. One man wrote, "The Christian way of life is not simply to see ourselves as we are, to see our faults and concentrate on overcoming them, to set our teeth and doggedly cultivate our characters and so save our souls. That method is not successful; it does not make good Christians, but at best, (it makes) self-righteous Pharisees."⁴

No, this text is not a moralism merely about self-improvement; it is much more serious than that. I want to take you to the conclusion of this passage given to us in verses 11-12, "*Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*" What is James' point? What comes out of the mouth is the gauge of true saving faith—an indication of whether one is truly a Christian. That is consistent with how James got us into this whole discussion. Look back to 1:26 where he first mentions this subject:

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

In James 2:14 we saw, "*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*" All through that text James answered those questions with these words, "...Faith without deeds is dead." (2:26) Likewise here in chapter 3 we see strong language speaking of the reality or unreality of our Christianity.

So in this text, James is not just encouraging us to clean up our talk, he's saying that our everyday speech reveals the genuineness of our faith. I think this text is as serious as whether we are truly Christians or not. Now, to help us think through this text, I want to suggest an outline:

- 1-2a The transition from 1:26
- 2b-5a The tongue is powerful.
- 5b-6 The tongue is capable of great evil
- 7-8 The tongue itself is uncontrollable.
- 9-10 The tongue is duplicitous.
- 11-12 The tongue reveals who we truly are.

In chapter two, James talked about faith and works. At the beginning of chapter three he starts out talking about teachers. It seems that he is switching subjects. I don't think so. If you will allow me to imagine what James is thinking, I suggest he knows that just as he has been comparing faith and works so he is next going to compare faith and words. In the transition, he thinks about those who use words more than most—teachers of religion. Whether he has in mind the Jewish rabbis or the Christian teachers in the church, he makes the point that people should be careful what they aspire to. So James writes, *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways."* (3:1-2a)

Teachers of the Word of God hold a sacred and fearful duty to say what God has said, no more and no less. That was true for the prophets of old where we hear Micaiah say in 1 Kings 22:14, *"As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me."* It was also true for teachers in the church. Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."* But teachers should note that those who use words more than others are in a place of greater vulnerability and will be judged more strictly. This judgment doesn't necessarily mean eternal damnation for James includes himself ("we") as he speaks

of the stricter judgment.

Luke 12:47-48 says, *"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."* If you agree to be a teacher, you live under greater scrutiny and your words become even weightier. How you live and talk matters even more. This isn't to discourage some from teaching, but it does make it a serious matter because words matter.

Now, quickly moving along to the main points James wishes to make, he says in 2a "(because) we all stumble in many ways." Though it is left out of the NIV translation, the word "because" is in the Greek and connects it more clearly to what James has just said. We who speak a lot know that

Teachers of the Word of God hold a sacred and fearful duty to say what God has said, no more and no less.

we do in fact stumble. Earlier in his letter, James makes it clear that "stumble" for him means "sins." He wrote, *"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."* (James 2:10) Maybe James is thinking of even our inadvertent sins. But with that James gets to his first point: The tongue is powerful. *"If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."* (James 3:2b) So powerful is the tongue that if you can control it, you can control everything about yourself, thereby demonstrating that you are in fact spiritually mature.

James then draws two analogies to illustrate how powerful the tongue is to control the way we live. James 3:3-4 says, *"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 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."* The first analogy illustrates that if you control the mouth you control the whole animal. It's interesting to me that the word the NIV translates "animal" is more literally "body," the same word James used in verse 2. If you control the mouth, you control the whole body.

If you've ever ridden a horse you know the power of a bit. That metal bar is placed between the front teeth and molars of the horse on the fleshy and tender gums of the mouth. It doesn't need to be painful to the horse to work, but if you need to encourage the horse to obey, you have

James goes on to say the tongue is capable of great evil.

the perfect way to do it. James says you can turn the whole animal. I remember when my brother and I were boys we sometimes tended the bulls on our farm. My father would put a ring in the bull's nose when it was very young. If nothing pulled on the ring, there was no discomfort. But it was amazing when the animal grew to 2000 pounds and dangerous, as a 12-year-old boy I could hook a six-foot pole to that nose ring and lead that huge animal wherever I wanted it to go.

With the next analogy James especially emphasizes the issue of size. *"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." (3:5) Several years ago my family and I were in Newport News, Virginia and saw the newly built aircraft carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan. That ship is three-football-fields-long and it has 4.5 acres of flight deck. The weight of the rudders on that ship compare to the size of the ship in about the same proportion as the tongue compares to the human body. That huge ship is controlled by those relatively small rudders. And so James concludes with his point: *"Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts."* (3:5) The "boasting" here is not necessarily negative. His point is that a small thing can control a large thing. The tongue may be small by comparison to the rest of the body, but it is very significant in the way the whole life goes.

But James isn't interested just in making the point that the tongue is small but mighty. He goes on to say the tongue is capable of great evil. James 3:5b says, *"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark."* Here James' words turn quite negative. Not only can a bit turn a whole horse and a small rudder a great ship, but another small thing (a spark) can cause great destruction. Many of us grew up hearing Smokey Bear's warnings. Many of us have seen what the fires southwest of the city did a few years ago. I remember driving through Yellowstone a year after the fires that destroyed so much. With that image in mind, James says so it with the tongue: *"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."* (James 3:6) "Fire" here, in the first part of the verse, is the same Greek word translated "spark" in verse 5. The human tongue is a spark that sets off a whole destructive fire.

How destructive is it? James begins by speaking of what

our words do to us. It corrupts the whole person—it stains everything. We shape our words and then our words begin to shape us. We like to think that we say what we believe, but more likely, we believe what we say. We speak ill of someone and we become negative toward them. That brings us to the next phrase: The tongue *"sets the whole course of his life on fire."* Our words begin to shape our actions. I have found true that what we say we tend to believe. Our words have great power not only in others, but also in us. I sometimes caution family members not to entertain certain thoughts and especially not to articulate those thoughts because when we speak the words, we have an ownership of them unlike merely thinking them. To us, the words become truer when we speak them. And believing them, we act accordingly.

Someone wrote, "Spread gossip, and people will not trust you. Speak with sarcasm and insults, and people will not follow you." Yet what is especially on James's mind is not the reaction of others to your speech but the spreading of sin from your speech to the rest of your life. Be hateful with your tongue, and you will be hateful with other aspects of your behavior. *If you do not discipline and purify your speech, you will not discipline or purify the rest of your life.*"⁵ And when James says the tongue *"is itself set on fire by hell,"* he may mean either that hell itself is the ultimate source of such evil (John 8:44) or that hell is the ultimate destination of such conduct. Either way it is very serious.

"The boneless tongue, so small and weak,
Can crush and kill," declares the Greek.

"The tongue destroys a greater horde,"
The Turk asserts, "than does the sword."

The Persian proverb wisely saith,
"A lengthy tongue—an early death."

Or sometimes takes this form instead,
"Don't let your tongue cut off your head."

"The tongue can speak a word whose speed,"
Say the Chinese, "outstrips the steed."
The Arab sages said in part,
"The tongue's great storehouse is the heart."
From Hebrew was the maxim sprung,
"Thy feet should slip, but ne'er the tongue."
The sacred writer crowns the whole,
"Who keeps the tongue doth keep his soul."⁶

In verses 7-8, James moves on to say more: The tongue is uncontrollable. *"All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."* (James 3:7-8) My uncle, in

"If you do not discipline and purify your speech, you will not discipline or purify the rest of your life."

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, trained his Doberman Pinscher dogs to stand perfectly upright and still even when he placed fresh meat on the bridge of their noses. They would stand for many minutes not touching that meat until he spoke a command. Then with merely a flick of their noses they would toss the meat up and catch it with their teeth and gulp it down. We can tame many living things. But verse 8 says no one can tame the tongue. James is not sewing hopelessness when it writes this. He is making a statement that is generally true. He is emphasizing how powerful, deadly and difficult to control the tongue is. As Christians we know that by God's help some, or even great, control is possible. But we will have to learn that idea from other places in the New Testament.

James then gives us two more reasons why the tongue is so hard to control: *"It is a restless evil, full of deadly*

poison." (James 3:8) The word "restless" was translated "unstable" in James 1:8: "*he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*" It is also legitimate to translate the word as "uncontrollable." The tongue is not able to control itself; it is unpredictable and can lash out at any moment. It is restless, constantly looking for ways to express evil. It has a propensity for saying the harmful, hurtful thing.

Not only is it a restless evil, but James also describes it as "full of deadly poison." (See Psalm 140:3, et al). And what does the poison look like or, more accurately, sound like? Many years ago, Morgan Blake, a sportswriter for the

This person tries to call himself a Christian while at the same time speaking ill of people God created.

Atlanta Journal, wrote, "I am more deadly than the screaming shell from the Howitzer. I win without killing. I tear down homes, break hearts and wreck lives. I travel on the wings of the wind. No innocence is strong enough to intimidate me. No purity pure enough to daunt me. I have no regard for truth, no respect for justice, no mercy for the defenseless. My victims are as numerous as the sands of the sea and often as innocent. I never forget and seldom forgive and my name is gossip."⁷

Even if we don't gossip, we might be guilty of innuendo. Innuendo is a negative insinuation without having to actually say it. The captain of the ship writes in his log, "mate drunk today." So the next day the sailor writes in his official log, "Captain sober today."⁸ And if we don't use gossip or innuendo, we might try flattery. Gossip is saying behind someone's back what you'd never say to his face; flattery is saying to someone's face what you would never say behind his back.⁹

Maybe more common is criticism. Jean Paul Satre wrote, "Words are loaded pistols." Lord Randolph Churchill was Winston Churchill's father. On the occasion of Winston's graduation from the military academy, Sandhurst, where Winston failed to score high enough to make the top ranks, his father wrote: "Do not think I am to take the trouble of writing to you long letters after every failure you commit and undergo...I no longer attach the slightest weight to anything you say about your own acquirements and exploits...If you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle useless unprofitable life you have had during your schooldays & later months, you will become a mere social wastrel one of the hundreds of the public school failures, and you will degenerate into a shabby unhappy and futile existence. If that is so, you have to bear all the blame for such misfortunes yourself." He ended the letter with "Your mother sends her love."¹⁰ The tongue—how destructive and how hard to control.

Then in verses 10-11, James says it is even worse than that. The tongue is duplicitous—it speaks out of both sides of the mouth. "*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.*" (James 3:9-10) This person tries to call himself a Christian while at the same time speaking ill of people God created. He or she praises God with the same tongue they criticize, flatter, curse or gossip about others. Ringing in our ears are those words we have spoken about others or to others in the car as we drive to church to recite the Apostles' Creed and sing praise to God.

With that James quickly moves to his conclusion: The tongue reveals who we truly are. "*Can both fresh water and*

salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." (James 3:11-12) What answers are implied? No! No! Jesus said in Matthew 7:17-20, *"Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."* James and Jesus are saying the same thing: What comes out of the mouth is the gauge of true spirituality!

This takes us back to where we started: *"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."* (James 1:26) And to 2:26: *"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."* We may take seriously such sins as adultery, murder, idolatry, dishonoring of parents, and stealing. But how many of us understand James in putting our speech in the same category of seriousness?

When the Apostle Paul describes the condition of sinful condemned people he writes of their words, *"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."* (Romans 3:13-14) And when Isaiah describes his sinful condition before a holy God, he exclaims, *"I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."* (Isaiah 6:5) A man wrote, "We rarely stand alongside Paul (or Isaiah) in finding in our speech the primary evidence of our fallen state."¹¹

So what do we do with this passage? Are we just supposed to feel guilty for the bad things we've said to others and try to do better? I think James' has two audiences in mind.

First of all are those who believe all the right things and even do good to others but their tongues betray the true nature of their souls. They are not Christians. Just as we saw in chapter 2, “their kind” of faith is bogus. If it hasn’t begun to change their tongues, it is not real faith. I say to you, listen to the Spirit of God. If He is revealing to you that you have a form of godliness but it is bearing no fruit in your speech, James would say with Jesus and Paul, repent and trust Jesus that He can begin to change you from the inside out.

I think the other audience James has in mind are those believers who are trusting solely in Jesus for salvation but realize that they have been lax in attending to this important fruit of saving faith—God-honoring speech. (Ephesians 4:29) The Bible teaches both Divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But where genuine saving faith exists, there fruit will grow. Those who trust in Christ alone, now have the God-given ability to obey and thus the responsibility to obey. Again I say, we are not saved by good works or good words but those who are truly saved respond with good works and good words.

James already said this in 1:25: *“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.”* Someone well wrote, “All of us sin. The difference between the Christian and the unconverted is not that the Christian does not sin (for we do as Paul and James confess), but that we are not content to sin. We know that by faith in God’s grace we may hope to resist sin; and when we do fall, we know that if we genuinely repent we may repair the sin by God’s grace through Christ.”¹² The same man wrote, “James’ theology is simply, ‘You know what Christ would have you

do; do it and leave the rest to him. You know his promise.”

So what do I do?

- I ask God to forgive me.
- I pray, seriously asking God to enable me to guard and use my tongue only in ways that please him.
- And I discipline myself in this matter, making my speech as much a part of my conscious effort as remaining moral in my conduct, generous in my charity or orthodox in my beliefs.

What will you do?

See Appendix D for further Study notes.

End Notes

¹ Commonly told but never sourced

² John MacArthur sermon on James 3 at <http://www.biblebb.com>

³ Ibid

⁴ Donald Baillie quoted in James Adamson, *James*, p. 458

⁵ George Stulac in Craig Blomberg, p. 207

⁶ Cited in Baker/Ellsworth, p. 43 from *James Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, p. 475*

⁷ Upper Room, “Daily Reflections,” October, 2000

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *James*, p. 140

⁹ John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, p. 108

¹⁰ David Nystrom NIVAC *James*, p. 200

¹¹ Alex Motyer, *The Message of James*, p. 119

¹² Adamson, *James*, p. 458

Faith and Wisdom

James 3:13-18

When Jesus was here on earth, the people He continually had the most difficulty with were those who thought they knew the right things and did the right things and were therefore okay with God. Destitute and desperate people responded to Jesus far differently than did the wealthy, the learned and the self-righteous. The blind man and the adulterous woman reacted very differently to Jesus than did the rich young ruler and the Pharisees. It's a well worn quote, but the old evangelist Vance Havner used to say, "You can't get people saved until you get them lost." I would add, paraphrasing Jesus, from Matthew 9, "It is only when you realize you are sick that you will call for a doctor." (Matthew 9:12-13) In James 3:13-18, James will again show us our need for a doctor.

Before I studied James as intently as I have recently, I thought of the book as practical application of Christian theology. I thought we would learn how to endure suffering, how to guard our tongues, how to rightly treat the poor, and, among still other things, how to pray. Those are important issues but I learned that James is going deeper than that. But I didn't realize how much deeper James would go. James intends to challenge our very understanding of what true Christianity is. And as he does so, he raises our awareness of how desperately we need a doctor—the Great Physician, Jesus—to heal our souls.

I feel like this is the same song and we are now singing the third verse. Three texts in a row, James challenges us. The text before us now, as with the earlier texts, raises the

question, "Am I a real Christian?" The prophets of the Old Testament often challenged those who claimed to belong to God to think again. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 2, takes considerable time demonstrating that many who call themselves God's people, are not. Here, James brings the same challenge.

Earlier we learned that if a person's faith doesn't result in changed actions, he or she hasn't been truly saved. James 2:14,26 says, "*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ...Faith without deeds is dead.*" Consistent with the rest of the New Testament, James knows that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But also consistent with the rest of the New Testament, as we point

James calls true wisdom a changed heart—the innermost evidence of genuine Christianity.

out so often, James knows that when God saves a person, it results in a changed life. As someone said, "We are saved by faith not works, but faith that saves, works." The specific illustration James used in that 2nd chapter was about how we treat the poor and disadvantaged. If our salvation doesn't result in a change in the way we treat people, it is not real.

Earlier we learned that if a person's faith doesn't result in a change in our tongues, our speech, he or she hasn't been truly saved. James says the way we talk reveals who we truly are. James 3:12 says, "*Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*" On the same subject, he already startled us with these words back in chapter 1:26, "*If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a*

tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." It seems possible to me that James is proceeding from the outside inward. He first spoke of our actions (faith and works), next he spoke of our speech (faith and words), and now in this next text he will speak of our very hearts (faith and wisdom).

Paul wrote something similar in 1 Corinthians 13:1 and 3: *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal... If I give all I possess to the poor...but have not love, I gain nothing."* Right actions and even right words are possible, but true Christianity goes even deeper; it goes to the very heart. Isaiah spoke negatively to the same issue: *"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."* (Isaiah 29:13) Their religious actions were technically correct but their hearts were unchanged.

Please listen to James speak of this innermost evidence of genuine Christianity—a changed heart. He calls it true wisdom.

"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. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." (James 3:13-18)

I want you to see why I think heart and wisdom are related in this text and maybe even used nearly synonymously. In verse 13 James asks who is the wise person? Who has wisdom? Notice that James doesn't give a one-sentence definition of wisdom but he does describe it: He "show(s) it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." If James had said only that "he shows it by his good life, by deeds...", I think he would have said no more than he had already said in chapter two about faith and works. But James goes deeper than the deeds; he goes to the heart behind the deeds when he writes, "by the deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

To understand this I think we have to have a fuller understanding of wisdom as the Bible uses that term. It is tempting to think of wisdom superficially merely as great knowledge. We think of really smart people. We might better understand wisdom as the ability to apply great knowledge in the right way; a person who makes smart decisions. Bill Gates or Warren Buffet might be examples. We might still better understand wisdom as the ability to apply great knowledge in great ways (for the good of others). Again Warren Buffett might come to mind as we remember that he has given 85% of his \$40 Billion net worth to the Gates Foundation to help people in need.

But the Bible gives wisdom an even greater definition: Wisdom is the ability to apply great knowledge in great ways for the glory of God. Biblical wisdom is anchored not in the head but in the heart, in allegiance to God. Psalm 111:10 says, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*" One author wrote, "Having a proper respect for God as God, a proper regard for God as God is basic to a proper perspective on life. And when we have that perspective on life, we are able to live life skillfully; we are able to live life as God meant it to be lived. (That

perspective) purges away our sinful delusions and opens our eyes to what is truly important in life."¹ Real wisdom is a changed heart toward God; James calls it humility. This wisdom, this humble heart, means a proper perspective on God and thus a proper perspective on ourselves. And that means our intentions change and our motivations change:

- Matthew 6:33 *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness."*
- Matthew 22:37 *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*

Wisdom is the ability to apply great knowledge in great ways for the glory of God.

Now in verses 15-18 James contrasts two wisdoms—a false wisdom of the world and the true wisdom from God. I would paraphrase that to say he will show us two hearts—the unchanged heart of an unsaved person and the changed and changing heart of one who truly is a Christian.

He contrasts them in terms of where they come from, what they look like, and what they result in.

	15-16	17-18
Origin	not from heaven earthly unspiritual of the devil	from above
Character	envy selfish ambition	pure peace-loving considerate submissive

15-16

17-18

mercy
fruit
impartial
sincere

Results disorder
 every evil practice

harvest of
righteousness.²

In verses 15-16 he describes a non-Christian and an un-Christian heart: *"Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."* (3:15-16) James is here describing the "wisdom" that isn't real wisdom. Notice he's describing the heart—envy, selfish ambition—the intentions and motivations of the heart. And James uses very strong words to indicate the origin of such a heart:

"Selfish ambition" is a deep desire to have one's own way for ego's sake or personal gain.

- Earthly—not from God, but out of the natural, unsaved heart
- It is unspiritual—In Jude 19 and 1 Corinthians 2:14 this describes a non-Christian, one without the Spirit of God.
- It is of the devil—its origin is demonic.

These words are most consistent with one who is not truly a Christian.

And what is the fruit of such worldly wisdom, a heart anchored only in itself? James says it is bitter envy and selfish ambition. James is talking about the root of our

words and our actions. Again, I remind you, these are attitudes of the heart. One author describes it this way: "This kind of envy seeks the best for oneself, regardless of what might be good for another person, always wishing for others to have less than oneself, whether with possessions or with opportunities. In a group setting, 'bitter jealousy' may manifest 'a fierce desire to promote one's own opinion to the exclusion of those of others.'"³

We hear it in our own thoughts:

- "I wish I had thought of that!"
- "Do you understand I am the one who thought of that?"
- "Do you know it was my idea?"
- "Jim's getting the credit when it was my idea and my work."
- "It's okay if they get some credit, maybe even that they get equal credit, but not more credit or at the very least not that they get credit and I don't even get mentioned."
- "Do you realize I gave that money to you or to the church?"

And "selfish ambition" is very similar in meaning to "envy;" it is a deep desire to have one's own way for ego's sake or personal gain.

- It happens in a family where one attempts to get others to agree with him or her against another who holds a different opinion.
- It happens in the neighborhood where one homeowner is attempting to line up other neighbors to confront yet another.
- It happens in a Sunday school class or small group when the group divides over what to study next or when to hold the meetings.

- It happens at work when we are trying to get our idea promoted in the department or company.

We size up the opposition, we determine to have our way, we line up our supporters and we make our move. And in every situation we are willing to sacrifice relationships, to turn away from those who disagree, to cut them off—all for the sake of being right. And James further warns, saying, “do not boast about it or deny the truth.” Don’t claim to have real wisdom, real Christianity, and thereby deny the truth of what real Christianity is. I’m reminded of James 2:19 *“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that...”*

Real Christianity is not creed for creed sake, it is creed for God’s sake and for others’ sake—it is relationships. God so loved the “world,” reconciling “us” to Himself, that where He is we may be also. If our Christianity isn’t resulting in a changing heart of allegiance to God and His purposes in the world, it isn’t real Christianity. In Romans 2 where Paul describes the very religious person who isn’t saved he says, *“You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”* Don’t claim to be a Christian if you are living a self-centered existence.

And in verse 16, James says that a self-centered heart will result in all kinds of problems. Let me illustrate that. When Paul was speaking of business and social commitments he said don’t be unequally yoked—don’t enter in legal or social contracts with an unbeliever. The problem is even if they claim to be Christians but aren’t they do not have the same Holy Spirit in them overcoming bitter envy and selfish ambition. That’s why it is so imperative that a Christian marries only another Christian—so you have the Spirit of God working in your spouse just as He is working in you. If

left to your spouse's spirit alone it will be envy and selfish ambition that eventually takes over resulting in disorder and every evil practice.

It is also true in the church. We depend on each other to encourage, to teach, to discipline, and to help. But when the church is filled with people in whom the Spirit does not dwell, the "glue" of love and unity are gone, and it is replaced by the self-centeredness described in verse 15 and then anything can and usually does happen. In every church there are pretenders—pretending to be Christians

If our Christianity isn't resulting in a changing heart of allegiance to God and His purposes in the world, it isn't real Christianity.

when they are not. There are also those who are self-deceived, thinking they are Christians when they are not. James wants us to know that real Christianity results in something. If you are a pretender or you have been deceiving yourself, hear James now and repent asking God's grace to truly save you. Listen to his plea for you in chapter four: *"Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."* (James 4:8-10)

In contrast to a false wisdom, a false heart, when we read verses 17-18 we find James describing the opposite—a wisdom from above, a heart anchored in allegiance to God, a heart that has changed and is changing. *"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. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." (James 3:17-18) The word "pure" seems to be the general heading described more fully by the characteristics that follow. James says (this) "wisdom...is first of all pure; then..." And again notice these are all attitudes, intentions and motivations of the heart. To be "pure" is to be innocent, morally blameless. This person is not just trying to be regular in church and not use vulgar language, but is committed to following Christ's example of obedience to the will of God.

As we already noted, "pure" is now defined by seven words or phrases. The construction of the sentence in Greek suggests three groups.

- The first is made up of three: peace loving, considerate, submissive.
- The second group is: full of mercy and good fruit.
- The last couplet are: impartial and sincere.

"Peace loving."

I remember early in my ministry at Southern Gables Church, there were theological threats to the unity of this church and in my readiness to take on theological error mixed with a strong desire to be proven "right," I wanted to do battle. Wiser heads on the elder board kept urging peace and unity. I at times thought they were too willing to compromise truth but with Godly peace and loving wisdom they realized that unity was also crucial. This isn't peace at any cost, but a heart that beats with Jesus' concern for unity. Someone wrote, "Let's say you've just had a Christian friend uncharacteristically share with you some gossip that, if you were to share, would really bring division in a family or in the church. And you decide that (you're) not going to pass that on. That piece of gossip that (you) just heard is going to die with (you). It's not going

anywhere else. That is a peace-promoting Christian.”⁴

“Considerate” and “submissive.”

“Considerate” means gentle, non-combative, willing to yield to others. This person doesn’t demand a strict interpretation of everything, he gives room, doesn’t always have to stand up for his rights, but yields to others and allows for change. This is not weak or soft but open to others’ ideas and particularly open to the person; he doesn’t quickly dismiss or break off relationships.

“Submissive,” likewise is not weak or easily run over but a willingness to defer to others and their ideas. This is a teachable, even gladly corrected person.

This person is committed to following Christ’s example of obedience to the will of God.

“Full of Mercy and Good Fruit”

The second set of words: “Full of mercy and good fruit,” speaks both of a heart of compassion but also of the result of that compassion. We saw this in James 2:8-13 when James spoke of us seeing a brother in need.

“Impartial and Sincere”

Lastly, James describes this wisdom, this changed heart as “impartial” and “sincere.” I think the NASB translation gets at the meaning of these words more directly, “unwavering without hypocrisy.” They are undivided in their loyalty to God and what you see is what they truly are. They are not merely playing a part; they are committed to God.

James ends his description by speaking of the results of this kind of wisdom. “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” Those who have the

characteristics of verse 17 are peacemakers—they promote peace among people. The result is that righteousness flourishes. Righteousness here is not justification as in Romans 3-4, but righteousness as godly living. The Phillips translation may capture it best: *"And the wise are peacemakers who go on quietly sowing for a harvest of righteousness in other people and in themselves."*

Do the words of verse 17 describe our hearts? Do they describe the overarching purposes of our lives, the motivations that drive our actions and words? Oh, we may live under enough social pressure that we conform to good religious practices and we may have enough self-discipline that we usually curb our tongues, but are our hearts changing? When I read James' description of godly wisdom, of a pure heart, of real Christianity I cannot help but think of Jesus. Without doubt, he is the quintessential example of verses 17-18. For just a couple of minutes watch him with me.

When John the Baptist was executed the Bible says in Matthew 14:13-14, *"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."* What did Jesus need? I think He was grieving. I also think He was tired. I think He needed some space (as we call it). But the text goes on to say, *"The crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick."* Tired, grieving, needing alone time, what did Jesus do? And where did that ministry come from? Was there resentment? Obligation? No, it flowed from a heart of compassion.

And we see it over and over again—toward a blind man, a leper, a woman sick for 12 years, and countless others. Watch Him and hear Him again. The rabbis were strict

teachers, intolerant disciplinarians, often harsh in their penalties. Jesus said in Matthew 23:4-5, "*They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see.*" But Jesus said of Himself in Matthew 11:29, "*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" That is what James calls "considerate, submissive, and merciful."

*Jesus is the quintessential example
of godly wisdom.*

See Him washing His disciples' feet. See Him again, this time with a woman caught in adultery, circled by angry, accusing, vindictive leaders. Jesus rebuked those leaders and then we see His challenging but gentle, considerate response to the woman.

"At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'" (John 8:9-11)

See Him yet again with Peter. Peter had denied the Lord and was filled with remorse and repented. Later in Galilee when Jesus appeared to the disciples, He spoke specifically to Peter. With no felt need to rebuke, to correct, or to make a point, but with gentleness and patience, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" When Peter responded, Jesus repeated what He had said to Peter three years earlier, "Follow me." Can you imagine how Peter felt? Such grace!

See Him still one more time, on the cross: *"When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'"* (Luke 23:33-34) And in 1 Peter 2:23: *"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."*

That's what I want to be: not just act like but be like! I know I am saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. I know God is doing His work in me. But I still see, oh so much, envy and selfish ambition. Those old patterns of thinking and acting are still too much with me. I want to be rid of those attitudes, those motives, those intentions. In Jesus, and by His grace, I see the possibilities of a changed heart. Listen to an old hymn but this time let's hear it not only for the one seeking initial salvation; let's hear it for ourselves:

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure. "

If you are truly trusting Jesus, by His grace He has done the former (saved from wrath) and by His grace He is doing the latter. Yes, Christian, we are responsible to use the means of grace, the Word, worship, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and others. But in all of that we realize that unless God acts, we remain unchanged. And so we always cry out:

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to the cross I cling;

naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly;
wash me, Savior, or I die.”

Or in more contemporary, if less substantial, words:

“Change my heart O God
Make it ever true
Change my heart O God
May I be like You.”

If that is your desire, I want you to pray with me, a prayer of confession and petition.

Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We confess that even our good deeds have been done out of pride and selfish motivations instead of pure humility that comes from your wisdom. We have harbored bitter envy and selfish ambitions in our hearts.

We have boasted and denied your truth. We have relied upon earthly and unspiritual wisdom which has brought about disorder and every evil practice.

Change and renew our hearts and minds so that our wisdom comes from heaven. Full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Make us Peacemakers who sow in peace and raise a harvest of righteousness. Amen

End Notes

¹ Grover Gunn <http://www.grovergunn.net/andrew/anscr.htm#59jam>

² Alec Motyer, *James*, p. 134

³ Craig Blomberg, *James* p. 216

⁴ Ligon Duncan <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/James>

Wholly Surrendered—to God or to the World

James 4:1-10

Presented by Dan Luebcke

Who in this room grew up having the Bible read to them by their parents? I can't raise my hand. You have something that I don't have in your story, growing up reading the Bible. But my kids are living your story today. And they're reading the Bible. One of the fascinating things to me is that I don't have many memories growing up wrestling with the Bible. I was thinking about my children, and when we first adopted Noah and then Julie gave birth to 2 children, the first song we sang to them in their ear was "Jesus Loves Me This I Know," and I thought that was pretty special. That's what you're supposed to do to your kids, right? You're supposed to tell them that Jesus loves them. So my life changed when I started reading the Bible to my children. Because I realized that in the Bible there is very, very strong language that isn't as easy as "Jesus loves me this I know." And it's in the first four chapters. So I was really excited to read the Bible to my kids, because that's what you should do, especially if you're a youth pastor, you should read the Bible to your kids.

So I started reading it to them and I got to Gen. 4 and you'll remember it's the story of Cain and Abel. What's fascinating about the story is that they both, they *both* brought an offering to the Lord and this is what the Lord said: "The Lord looked with favor on Abel but not on Cain. And so Cain became very angry and his face was downcast." So Cain said to his brother, hey, let's go take a walk!" And then he killed him. You should have seen my boys' faces as they both looked at each other and realized

that one brother just killed the other. Josiah looked at me and said, "Dad, that's mean! We're not supposed to get angry and we're not supposed to kill!" Well, you're right, but it's in the Bible. So all of a sudden I had to start thinking about the Word of God in the context of my children hearing it for the very first time. I had to explain to them that night that both of them could bring an offering to the Lord but He might not like yours, and He might like yours. To which Noah said, "He will definitely like mine." And then Josiah's face went downcast, but he didn't kill him!

James writes to the person that is a deep-seated affectionate lover of the world.

All of this comes in the context of this verse in James, "*God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.*" When I sang in the ears of my kids I did not sing, "Jesus opposes you this I know, for the Bible..." that would have been horrible. So why did I sing "Jesus loves me," and then how do I talk about Jesus opposing them? And so we come to our text in James. Let's read this unbelievable text, and I want you to find the really, really harsh language, and I want you to think about how you would explain it to a child.

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

think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.'(James 4:1-10)

If we listened carefully we see why God is resisting us, why God is opposed to us in our verse. There are fights, there are quarrels, there's a battle, there's killing, there's coveting, there's a quarrel, there's fighting, there's adultery, there's hatred, there's the word enemy and the word opposes. This is very, very strong language. The wisdom that was in their hearts that Pastor Nelson preached on earlier is now being lived out in relationship with people, so James asks the question, why are you fighting, why are you quarrelling?

But before we get to looking specifically at that, we want to look at the phrase, "friend of the world." This word "friend" is not just a high-five in the church hallway saying, "That's my friend." This is literally having a deep-seated affection for something or someone. So James writes this very harsh language to two groups of people. The first group is the person that is a deep-seated affectionate lover of the world. You love the world. You're a friend of the world. You kill, you covet, you fight, you commit adultery, you're a friend of the world. James uses harsh language to wake us up. Wake up!

But there's another group; it's those of us who are in the church, who have 30 years of Pastor Nelson's preaching, or

students that have been seniors and sat in the student ministry for 4 years. And you may not be a deep-seated lover of the world, because you love the Lord Jesus, but if we were to evaluate your life, you would see that there are some areas of your life where you are a friend of the world. And you need to repent. So James uses very harsh language to get our attention. So let's look at the first thing he says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" It's not just one fight and it's not just one quarrel, it's plural; it's not just fighting and quarrelling that you're thinking about, we're talking about all out engaged war and specifically very intense battles found in the church.

The verbs here are present tense, which means they are on-going; it's continually happening and James is saying, how can this be? And it's true, isn't it? There's fighting and quarrelling in my life and in yours and in this room and on our staff, I'm assuming, and in your office and in your marriage and in your parenting. As my children are getting ready to go to bed and it's 9 o'clock, I say, "Let's go, let's do this, come on, hustle it up! Let's get in bed, all right, I'm outta here." Meanwhile I'm going downstairs to watch the Rockies game. So I say, "Hey, we're going to make our prayers quick tonight."

When we brought Noah home, it was an unbelievable day. Then we had Josiah and brought him home and again, it was an unbelievable day. But things changed when Josiah started walking because he figured out that he could take things from Noah. So I specifically remember watching them interact with each other and I'd see Josiah go and take something from Noah and run away and Noah coming across to smack Josiah across the head. Josiah hit the floor and Noah said, "That's mine." Okay, now think about this for a minute: in the life of my children, why was that visible action present? It wasn't because of this: I didn't have to

teach my children to respond that way. So the question I have to ask myself as a parent and you have to ask yourself is, "Why is that true?" James answers the question, when he says, *"Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but you don't get it, you kill and you covet, you cannot have what you want, you quarrel and you fight."* You see he flipped the words quarrel and fight from fighting and quarreling. The selfishness is not just a wisdom from the devil that's in your heart. It's now being expressed in every area of your life. It's all about me. That's your problem.

James has been doing this all through the book. This is his 8th test of whether or not our faith is genuine. His first test was trials, his second test was temptation, his third test was the Word of God, his fourth test was caring for people in need, his fifth test was works, his sixth test was words, and last week it was wisdom in your heart and now all of a sudden we come to this climax of the book where James is saying, "Listen, God is opposing you if you don't pass the

You need to repent. So James uses very harsh language to get our attention.

test." And when I look on the outside, it's not about behavior modification in the life of our teenagers, parents; it's about what's going on in their heart.

The word is *hedonism* from "your desires, this relentless and ruthless pursuit of pleasure at nobody's expense." And so watching the Rockies was more important than praying with my kids. It's all about me. Look at the passage: *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 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. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

It's the battle inside of you. The quarrel and the fight on the outside is not my problem, is it? It's what *they* did to *me*. No, it's inside of you. And that's why we're so horrible at admitting it because we don't want to deal with the real problem, because we can't just separate people and not talk to each other. That doesn't change anything; it's about changing us from the inside out, it's all about you. I was thinking about a time I met with a student who shared with me their intense battle with anger. His mom called me and wanted me to go meet with him because he got in a fight at school. She wanted me to "fix him." So I met with him. I

*Hedonism—all I care about is spending things that
God's going to give me...for me.*

said, "Dude, why'd you hit him?"

"Dude, he made me mad."

"Dude, I know."

But then he said something that I think is fascinating, "You know, Dan, that's really not who I am." Ding! "You're wrong, that's *exactly* who you are." And this high school student is weeping because he's been living a lie. He's sitting in the church being a pretender, offering something to the Lord that from the outside looks amazing. But God saw something very different, didn't He? Now it's who you are. I found this really funny story about President Lincoln. He's walking down the street with his sons and they're both crying and somebody asks him "Mr. President, what's wrong with your boys?" And he said, "What's wrong with my boys is what's wrong with the world, I have three

walnuts and they each want two." That's what's wrong! I want that toy! I want to be right in my marriage. I want my kids to obey me. So I get angry. And I'm not killing anybody, I hope not, but James says, if you don't control or work on the inside, you will kill. Then I hear Jesus talking to a bunch of people, "Hey, if you hate somebody, it's like killing them."

It's inside you, it's inside me. He goes on to say at the end of verse 2, and beginning of 3, "*you don't have because you don't ask God and when you ask God you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives so that you can spend what you get on your pleasures.*" What's fascinating about the people in the church is that they go to God with their requests to show that they're spiritual. It's like the high school student "Oh, God, I didn't study, I was up late partying, help me get an A, Lord, I need to graduate." On Facebook, so many teenagers and college students this week: "Pray for me, I have finals." I'm like, well, did you study? How could I pray for you if you didn't study? There's nothing for God to use there. That root word for *hedonism* shows up again here. So all I care about is spending things that God's going to give me for me. So I pray for that. This *spend* word is actually the word the prodigal son used when he went and spent everything he had, remember, when he "wasted everything away." He spent it all on what? Himself. When I think of this prayer, it's not praying for the Kingdom, it's praying for my kingdom. And I can't help but remember Timothy McVey's words on the top of his poem, before he died, "I am the captain of my own ship." If you're a friend of the world, you're the captain of your own ship. You're fighting, you're quarreling, you're killing, you're coveting and you don't get so you want it more. It's a deep-seated affection that you will go to any cost; you will do anything to get it fed because you are the captain of your own ship. You'll even

go to God and then you'll blame God.

So what's James' conclusion for you and for me? *"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."* (4:4) You're breaking the covenant; you're committing adultery. "You say you love Me, but you don't love Me." And maybe nobody else sees it, maybe not even your spouse, your kids, your parents, your siblings, but God does. "Anyone who chooses..."—you make choices and your choices make you.

This really spoke to me this week in the book of Jude. Jude says something powerful:

"Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire...Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain." (Jude 3-7, 11a)

You've taken your stand against God. But you're sitting here in church. You adulterous people. If you are a friend of the world, you are an enemy of God. What's amazing about this group of people in the book of James is that not only do they go to prayer to try to look like a Christian, but James says they're trying to misuse scripture. In verse 5 he says, "*Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?*" The Bible doesn't say the evil is there for nothing. There are evil impulses in man that drive him to lust after the world and not God.

I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

What's the point? God opposes the proud and He gives grace to the humble. If you're an atheist, you're playing God in your own life. What James is saying here is that if you're a friend of the world, you are taking your stand against God. Whatever image you want to put in your mind. Because you are running your own life, you're the captain of your own ship, and I know it. It's not just the wisdom that's in your heart that's from the devil:

- it's the actions in your life;
- it's the way you talk to your kids;
- it's the way you use your money;
- it's the way you talk to your boss;
- it's the way you talk to your spouse;
- it's what you think about your parents;
- it's how you treat your parents;
- it's how you yell at your kids;
- it's everything that's going on in your life;
- it's no longer just inside, it's on full display for everybody to see and I'm going to call you out on it

now—you're an adulterer, you're an enemy, so wake up.

But—that's a big "but"—God "gives grace to the humble." He gives us more grace. To the enemy He gives unbelievable grace and to the Christ follower He gives just another reminder of grace. So as we read through these ten imperatives that James gives us that are a picture of repentance, a picture of turning away from the world and turning towards God, be mindful of which one grabs your heart. This is not a prescription for forgiveness, and if you do all ten of these things in the next ten minutes you're going to go to heaven, but this is how you become a friend of God.

First, you submit yourself to the Lord. Literally meaning you align yourself under the authority of another. And here's how I like to think about this specifically with the teenagers we have the privilege to work with at this church. Often times I think students and maybe most of us think that when we submit ourselves to God the first thing we say to Him is "Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord." But when I read Jesus I hear something different: "*Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.*" The first word Jesus asks you to say if you want Him is "No." To yourself. To follow Jesus means it's "no" to me! Deny myself. No to self is yes to God. Then you begin to understand what it means to "take up your cross," then you begin to understand what it means to "follow me." So submit yourself. If you want to humble yourself before the Lord so God will give you grace, say no to yourself and yes to God.

Second, "take your stand against the devil and he will flee from you." Literally, take your stand, just like the enemy of God has taken his stand against Him. So when you repent you take your stand against the enemy. So here's the

problem: you're always going to be somebody's enemy,— whose do you want to be? But you have this unbelievable promise that if you choose to submit and say no to yourself, you can stand against the devil. What's funny about this is I think this all gets back to the Christmas Story. Look at Luke 2:11: *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."* And I did not grow up in the church, but when I talk to students who grew up in the church, they can tell me the Christmas story affirming Jesus as their Savior. But none of them understands Lordship. Because Jesus was my get-into-heaven free card at VBS and everyone thought it was great and I was going to heaven. I am not saying that's bad, but Christ as Savior also came as Lord and there are people in the church who got their "get-into-heaven-free" card and they're going to swipe it and Jesus is going to say, "I never knew you."

When I read Jesus I hear, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me."

Third, "draw near to God and he will draw near to you." Come near to God and He will come near to you. It's about drawing near to the Lord. It's about an intimate relationship with a father. So think about your dad, your earthly father, and how he did loving you. Men, how are you doing loving your children? Ladies, how are you doing loving your kids? What picture of authority do your children have? If you can't say God is drawing near to you, it's your fault. It's not your parent's fault, it's not your spouse's fault, it's not because the sermon was horrible; it's your fault! You're making a choice, you're submitting to God, you're resisting the devil and now there's this unbelievable thing here called intimate relationship where it's not just acting like a robot Christian, but it's engaging in intimacy. Paul says this on

Mars Hill in Acts 17 when he talks to a bunch of people who didn't know the Lord, and he says, *"God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him, feel him."* Paul did not just offer an intellectual argument to believe in God. He said you can feel it.

Can you feel Him? If you haven't, you have a promise to just come near. In whatever stage of life you're in you can come near, and He will come near to you, and you will be able to resist the devil and he promises to flee from you and you will be living out Jesus' call to deny yourself.

I want to take a moment to remind you of a story from the Old Testament. See what David said to Solomon, *"And you my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever."* (I Chr. 28:9) Don't you think that as Solomon is walking around during the day some of that is echoing in his heart and has brought him to the place where he was able to be used by God? Because his dad understood the Lord and said, Solomon, this is what it is all about. Serve Him. Or if you forsake Him, He will reject you. Unbelievable. That would change your parenting.

Submit, stand and draw near, and then he offers two pictures: "cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts." First, cleanse your hands; it's the action! Repentance is visual—your actions change! Does anyone see the change in your life? I think a lot of parents of teenagers get stuck on this one because they want to change their kids' behavior. So teenagers learn to modify their behavior to please their parents. They're one way with my mom and then they're completely another way with

their friends. So James doesn't say it's about just changing your actions; it's also about purifying your heart. It's an inward consecration to set your heart and not be double-minded. Operate with one mind; your hands and your heart need to be cleansed.

And then three powerful words: grieve, mourn, and weep. First look at the word grieve. James says feel retched about your sin. Yes, there's amazing joy about being a Christian, but if someone's caught in sin, don't use joy to get them out of sin. He says grieve, feel miserable, have shame! Grieve and then, mourn. This is funeral like grief. This is losing someone grief. So for those of us in this room who have buried people that we've loved and we've wept bitterly, when was the last time you felt like that over your fighting, your quarreling, and your coveting? And that's how he finishes off with weeping. Misery is the recognition of the state and the mourning is how the spirit responds,

Submit, stand and draw near!

but weeping is how the body responds. So how did Peter's body respond after he basically cussed Jesus out three times? What did he do? The Bible says he wept bitterly. I love Victor Hugo's quote, and I think it is powerful, "He does not weep who does not see." Do you see enmity before God? So stop and see your sins today. Whether it's for the first time or whether you've loved the Lord for 30 years and you're treating your grandchildren horribly, just stop and see it now and say, "I'm going to be one step closer to Jesus today by cleansing my hands and purifying my heart."

And he closes with this unbelievable phrase "Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up." Humility is to make yourself low. What happened when the

prodigal returned home? What did his father do? He lifted him up, he threw a party for him, because he made himself low; he came back with this full-body repentance and said, "I love you more than I love myself." Do you think God will lift you up?

What I find utterly unbelievable is how God chose to lift us up. Listen to how Paul said God gave you more grace:

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature^{of} a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."(Philippians 2:5-11)

Yes, God is opposed to you if you are a friend of the world. But He did not leave you with a list to remedy the situation. He sacrificed His son so you could live forever. His opposition was poured out on His Son for me and for you and that's why we read in Isaiah, *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."*(Isaiah 53:5)

Oh it is great grace, isn't it? It's unbelievable! Listen to the words written by Jeremy Riddle in his song, "Sweetly Broken."

"Sweetly Broken"

To the cross I look, to the cross I cling
Of its suffering I do drink
Of its work I do sing
For on it my Savior both bruised and crushed
Showed that God is love
And God is just

Chorus:

At the cross You beckon me
You draw me gently to my knees, and I am
Lost for words, so lost in love,
I'm sweetly broken, wholly surrendered

What a priceless gift, undeserved life
Have I been given
Through Christ crucified

You've called me out of death
You've called me into life
And I was under Your wrath
Now through the cross I'm reconciled

In awe of the cross I must confess
How wondrous Your redeeming love and
How great is Your faithfulness

Words that Destroy

James 4:11-12

Business woman and Author Claire Colvin wrote of herself: "Pictures of me as a little kid are really cute—curly blond hair, a quick smile and eyes always looking for the next adventure. I had the confidence that comes from knowing you are truly loved...I was the product of an almost perfect childhood, but I didn't stay that way.

"Around grade six I became the kid everyone picked on. Maybe I didn't wear the right clothes, maybe kids are just mean sometimes, for whatever reason, it started and it kept going. By high school there was a group of four or five guys who every single day told me I was stupid and ugly. I believed them. It is amazing what you accept as truth when you hear it enough times.

"As my confidence faltered and my self-esteem withered away, I stopped talking in class, in groups, or in the hallways. I dreaded lunch hour, never stepped foot inside the cafeteria and the thought of class presentations literally made me sick. I stopped smiling. They tell me I went a whole year and never smiled once.

"My whole life revolved around being as invisible as possible. I thought that I couldn't get hurt if everyone forgot I was there. I had so little respect for myself and I was so afraid that I considered suicide."¹

What we say to others and about others is a big deal. The words that come from our mouths matter. And they matter to God. We should remember that one of the issues that made the list of the Ten Commandments is "you shall not

give false testimony against your neighbor.”

In a sermon from three years ago entitled “Sticks and Stones...” from that commandment in Exodus 20:16, I learned that this commandment prohibited not only telling something untrue about another but also prohibited even telling something true, if the intent or even the result is to harm that person’s reputation. Our words matter; so much that it made God’s “top ten” list. Likewise when we come to the New Testament and hear Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount talk about the 10 commandments, we find again that words matter. In a sermon from several years entitled “The Theology of Planks and Specks” from Matthew 7, I learned that when Jesus said “Do not judge...” He was speaking even of the intentions behind our words. How we speak of others was a principle theme of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

“Speaking against” is not so much about the truthfulness of what is said as it is about the intention behind saying it or the result of saying it.

So important is this matter to God that the Apostles Paul and John speak much about it throughout the New Testament. And likewise in our current study we find that James gives it a great deal of attention. Earlier, from James 3:1-12, we learned that the words that come from our mouths are a primary gauge of the genuineness of our faith. So important is this matter that James picks that theme up again in James 4: *“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. 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?” (James 4:11-12)

The command is strong and clear: Do not slander one another! The Greek word translated “slander” at the beginning of verse 11 is basically the same word that, later in the same verse, is twice translated “speaks against.” Our English word “slander” technically refers to saying things about someone that are not true. Using subtle distinctions to rationalize our words, we like to ask, “Is it slander if it’s true?” or even more subtly, “Is it wrong, if it’s right?” But the Greek word used here by James is broader and includes both the untrue and the true things we say about another that have the intention of demeaning that person’s reputation. Thus various other translations of this word “slander” include “criticize” (NLT), “speak evil against” (NRSV, ESV), “malign” (Berkeley), “disparage” (TCNT) and “backbite” (Tyndale).²

“Speaking against” is not so much about the truthfulness of what is said as it is about the intention behind saying it or the result of saying it. Helmut Thielicke wrote, “All human judgment has a touch of egotism. When I judge (another person) I put myself above the other person and imagine that I am better than he is. This is the secret Pharisaism that dwells by nature in the judge. In judging I elevate myself and seek to put the other person down.”³ John Calvin spoke of it as fondly exalting ourselves by putting others down.⁴ Isn’t it odd that we think if we lower others it raises us? The truth is we have just lowered everyone including ourselves. Our speaking against others is not just harmless idle speech—it is about our twisted pride and it is the very opposite of what James just instructed when he wrote, “humble yourselves before the Lord...”

So what does this “slander,” this “speaking against,” sound like? As you’ve undoubtedly heard, “confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation,” nonetheless I’ll tell on myself. A long-time pastor friend called me last week admitting an adulterous affair. He has resigned from the church he served. I prayed with him and then when the conversation was over I prayed for him. Later when I saw my wife, I said “did you hear” and I told her what had happened. Why? I didn’t then have in mind that we would pray for him and his wife. I didn’t even have in mind then that we would reach out to them in some way to comfort them. I just told her because it was interesting in a perverse sort of way. What was I doing? I was “speaking against” my friend.

Years ago we had to ask a staff member to resign. He was very angry with me and vindictive in his words to others about our church and me. When later I heard that he had been fired from his next pastoral position, I said to the staff, “did you hear” and I told them. Again, why? There was no redeeming motive or result from repeating what I had heard. It had only one effect—to reiterate his failures and make us/me look “right” in our earlier decision. It was “speaking against” him.

The following scenarios are ones I imagined but it wasn’t hard to do:

Another kid beat Brad’s son out of the last starting position on the high school basketball team. Brad’s own pride was so tied to his son that Brad was embarrassed and angry. When he tried to explain to a friend that his son didn’t get the position he added “did you hear” the other kid had had a personal coach for a couple of years and that he’d heard the kid was even taking some special performance enhancing “vitamins.”

Tom had been ridiculed and criticized by a fellow salesman for not having what it takes to close deals. It wasn't long until that salesman lost one of the company's largest accounts due to his aggressive and deceptive methods. The next day Tom was at the water cooler asking "Did you hear..." Tom found himself reveling in conversation about the other salesman's failure and future.

Meredith had always been irritated by how everyone seemed to think another woman in the church was some kind of super-mom shepherding perfect kids. When one of those "perfect" kids went AWOL Meredith couldn't wait to get on the phone with her friends—"Did you hear?"

James says slander and speaking against someone shows our heart.

The Sunday school class leadership was discussing whether to invite John to join the teaching team. Everyone else was talking about his knowledge of the Scriptures and his ability to express himself when you felt compelled to add, "Well, I've heard that his employees have a slightly different take on John; let's just say they don't think he walks on water."

Three high school girls were talking about another girl in the youth group who was going to a special event with the best-looking guy in the group when one of the girls says, "I know how that happened; I heard she just threw herself at him."

I know there are many ways that this "speaking against" is expressed, but when you hear these words coming from your own mouth or the mouth of another watch out: "Did you hear...?" "You'll never guess what I heard..." "Can you believe...?" "Has anyone told you...?"

When I think of the many things I have said or repeated about others, I realize that too much of it falls under this heading of “speaking against.” James demands that we re-think the way we talk.

As I thought of this, I couldn’t help but think of the short video we watched here together on Mothers’ Day. A young man was making a video of himself talking about mothers. We could only see him but off camera we could hear his mother making suggestions to him throughout the recording. At one point, after he criticized his brother, she said that if he couldn’t say something nice he shouldn’t say

When we judge another person in the way Jesus prohibits we see something worthy of condemnation and we turn it into someone worthy of condemnation.

anything at all. At which point, promptly and rather obnoxiously, he simply sat there saying nothing at all. That’s almost the way I feel when I read James’ command—it would so radically alter our speech that maybe just being quiet is the only solution.

James goes on to describe this “speaking against” someone when he writes, “Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him...” I brought it up earlier, but here again this “judging” gets at the causes behind the “speaking against.” Jesus said, “do not judge...” As many other occasions show, He clearly didn’t mean we are never to make judgments, for in fact He commands us to judge properly. What He prohibited was being judgmental. We are told to be discerning just not damning. The judgment we are told to suspend is the judgment of condemnation. Judging is fault-finding—quickly noticing and even looking for the negative. Judging is to assign negative motives to others’ actions and

being ungenerous toward their mistakes.

There is a deeply rooted and sinful human tendency to judge others.

- A woman walks into church with a neckline that's a little too low and a skirt that's a little too tight. Judgment: She's immoral.
- You learn that your daughter is hanging out with the kid from school whose father is perpetually unemployed and whose mother is absent. Judgment: He's white trash.
- You're about to go into business with a man when you discover that he had filed bankruptcy several years earlier. Judgment: He's irresponsible.
- You confided a weakness to your best friend who promptly told someone else. Judgment: She can't be trusted.
- Someone in your Bible study group "goes on" about the great weekend they had gambling in Las Vegas. Judgment: He's an immature Christian.
- Someone doesn't say hello to you in the hallway. Judgment: They're angry with me and so I'm angry with them.
- Your child gets hurt playing at the neighbors'. Judgment: The adults are irresponsible and the neighbor kid is a bully.

When we judge another person in the way Jesus prohibits, what are we doing? We are drawing a conclusion and drawing a line. We draw a conclusion that they are different and we draw a line that excludes them from us. We see something worthy of condemnation and we turn it into someone worthy of condemnation. And then consciously or otherwise, we administer the condemnation with our words. One man wrote, "Defamation begins and lives on in the mind. It is something we say to ourselves long before we pass it on."⁵

So why is “speaking against” someone so wrong? James gives us two reasons, the first found in verse 11: *“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.”* How is speaking against someone, speaking against the law? James assumes we are conversant with the Old Testament and with Jesus’ words. Leviticus 19:15-18 says, *“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people...Do not hate your brother in your heart...Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”*

Jesus certainly reiterated those commands both about not being judgmental and about loving our neighbors as ourselves. James himself already referred to the law when he wrote in James 2:8, *“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.”* So James says that when you speak against someone, in direct contradiction to what God says, you put yourself above the law—you are judging or deciding that this command is not important enough that you should have to obey it.

I was driving through the town, the speed-trap, of Bow Mar recently. I know the speed limit is 25 and I didn’t pay attention to it. I wasn’t consciously, intentionally attempting to break the law, but I had such low regard for the law that I wasn’t careful to obey it. And yes, I got a ticket! You see, I know stealing is wrong and I make every effort to avoid stealing in any of its forms—whether by padding an expense account or using the office postage meter. I’m careful! But I also know “speaking against” someone is wrong but I don’t hold that prohibition in the same high

regard so I don't guard my tongue.

What is so disturbing about it, when we think about it, is that we have become the judge of the law. Behind the disobedience is an attitude, a heart that is so proud as to say, I don't have to obey this law. One man wrote, "To speak against a brother is tantamount to saying, 'That command of God is stupid, ridiculous, insane; I will not bother to even think about it.' 'Blasphemy,' you might say. And I fully agree with you. But when we speak against a brother we have fallen into the blasphemous pit of denigrating God's law."⁶

James says that when you speak against someone, in direct contradiction to what God says, you put yourself above the law .

James also gives us a second reason why it is crucial that we not speak against someone else. James 4:12 says, "*There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy.*" God is the one who makes the law and God is the one who ultimately judges how anyone does in keeping the law. And how serious is this point to James? James reminds us that God is the judge who has the power to save us or destroy us. When we "speak against" another person and thereby judge them, we are putting ourselves in God's place—we have usurped God's place. We push God out and put ourselves in the place of both lawgiver and judge.

When we feel like lashing out at someone or even speaking ill of them to another we must remember what God said about our role and His: "*Live in harmony with one another... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the*

Lord." Romans 12:16-19 (Deuteronomy 32:35) Instead we are tempted to become jury, judge and executioner with our words. And in doing so, we assume the position of God.

Does James really mean that? Look how he finishes the thought: *"There is only one Law-giver and Judge... But you—who are you...?"* (James 4:12) Two persons are contrasted in this context—God and you or me. James says he knows who God is—He's the lawgiver and judge who has the power to save and destroy. But you, who are you? Who are we to speak against someone? What right do we

That's what Peter is talking about; when you care about someone you cover, you squelch, critical conversation.

have? Earlier James told us our place: *"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"* (James 2:12-13) The only "right" we have is to show mercy.

The Apostle Peter said it this way in 1 Peter 4:8: *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."* Have you ever noticed how you and others will do most anything to protect the reputations of those you love? You wouldn't think of broadcasting the failures of someone you care about. You will even confront those who are saying things that are critical of the one you love. That's what Peter is talking about; when you care about someone you cover, you squelch, critical conversation. Proverbs 18:8 says, *"The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts."*

One British pastor wrote, "That is what keeps scandal alive, the delight in hearing of others' misfortunes. Sin has done this to our hearts. Scandal is like pornography, those people trapped by it can't get enough of it. But if it were ourselves they were speaking of, if we had had the baby out of wedlock, or been charged with some offence, or we did not have children, or we were single, or been divorced, or if our marriage were going through a rocky patch, or we had had a fall some time ago, or we were seeing a psychiatrist then we would not want half the world to be talking about it and getting the story wrong. You love your neighbor as yourself, and you resist the sweetness of bad news..."¹⁷

Imagine if, before we spoke about someone else, we remembered both the negative and positive commands of scripture! James 4:11 says, "*Do not slander (speak against) one another.*" And then the positive from Ephesians 4:29: "*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*" What if before I spoke negatively of others I actually trained myself to ask three questions:

- Is it true?
- Is it kind?
- Is it helpful?

Claire Colvin, whose story I began with today, said the words of junior high and high school classmates had so destroyed her that she considered suicide. She writes, "I got as far as choosing a method but decided that I couldn't go through with it. Suicide is something you can't take back. I was still thinking clearly enough to be able to consider what it would have done to my family..." Halfway through her junior year of high school, again words made the difference, this time bringing healing to what other

words had so greatly damaged. Others in her church youth group reached out to her, living out the words she then heard from God in Isaiah 41:9-10: "I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."⁸

Yes, what we say matters, it matters to others and James says, be warned, it matters to God, and to us. Listen to James 4:11-12 again: *"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. 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?"*

See Appendix E for further study notes

End Notes

¹Claire Colvin. "The Power of Words" <http://powertochange.com/changed/ccolvin/>

²Craig Blomberg, unpublished commentary on James

³Helmut Theilicke, Sermon on the Mount, p. 151

⁴Calvin in John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, p. 304

⁵Alec Motyer, James, p. 158

⁶Phil Newton of Southwood Baptist Church
http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/james_04.11-12.html

⁷Geoff Thomas
<http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/james20.htm>

⁸Claire Colvin. "The Power of Words" <http://powertochange.com/changed/ccolvin/>

Satisfying Dependence

James 4:13-17

In 1875 William Ernest Henley published what would become a rather infamous poem. You might remember it because of Timothy McVeigh the Oklahoma City bomber. McVeigh had no last words before his execution, but earlier he had asked that Henley's poem be released to the press as his last statement. The title of the poem is "Invictus" which is Latin for "Unconquered."

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

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

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of 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."

It is said that Henley wrote it after overcoming a near fatal disease and the amputation of one of his legs. The courage

and tenacity of the human spirit is often admired in severe circumstances. And this poem would seem to be simply the expression of such an indomitable spirit were it not for the biblical metaphors he uses. Such criticism could be made of the entire poem but especially the final verse: "It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll..." These are clearly references to Jesus' words about the "strait" or "narrow" gate and road that leads to life and to the judgment scroll on which are recorded the deeds of each life.

Here we have a person who is independently making plans with no thought of God's will in the matter.

To a Christian, such words are unconscionable. They express an arrogance and even an anger. We see the image of a man shaking his fist in the face of God. As I said, to a Christian, such open defiance of God is unimaginable. But open defiance is not the only way people treat God. Another is to ignore God. That seems to be the issue James is addresses in James 4:13-17: "*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.' 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. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'* As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

I believe, in verse 13, James is describing the day-to-day thinking of even many Christians: "*Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on*

business and make money.” Clearly James is criticizing a certain kind of thinking and acting. This person is making plans. Nothing wrong with making plans; God’s Word tells us to. But here we have a person who is independently making plans with no thought of God’s will in the matter. I will go, I will spend time, I will carry on business, I will make money.

Too many Christians think they have an after-life-insurance-plan called being saved. They know they have no control over what happens to them after they die, and so they accept God’s gift of eternal life. Then they live with the confident, or not so confident, assumption that when they die all will be well. But here and now, they make most of the decisions of life with hardly a thought of God’s will in the matter. They purchase homes, they take jobs, they date and marry, they select a school to attend, they invest their money; they live life as if their choice alone is the deciding factor. They act as if time is on their side and as if their ability and desire to get are the only issues to take into account.¹

Oh, they go to church and they try to be moral in their choices but, day-to-day, they live as if God has nothing to do with job, recreation or mutual funds. And it is manifest in their prayerlessness about most of life. Some may pray about really big decisions but they are prayer-less in much else—not remembering that God is here and active in the “now.” One of the negative results of the Enlightenment was the eventual removal of God from everyday life. Later, some, called Deists, believed in a God who originally set everything in motion but then withdrew to allow creation to take its own course. They imagined a “closed” world where God doesn’t intervene. Miracles didn’t exist, Jesus didn’t come from God, and humans are on their own to interact with the forces of nature and each other.

Years ago one man wrote: "Not that I call in question the existence of a supreme being; on the contrary it seems to me that the greatest degree of probability is in favor of this belief...(but) it is a theoretic truth with little practical value."² How many, even in our churches, are Christians by confession but Deists in practice. We tend to function as Deists—we think of the world, even our own day-to-day experience as "closed," cut off from God's direct influence. We assume all that happens is as a result of our hard work or our dumb luck or simply as a result of the way the world functions—gorgeous sunsets and tornados just happen. We simply don't think about God except in what we consider religious matters.

And why not? Have we been infected with "affluenza?" Though not a real word it is a real condition: Affluenza, n. a painful, contagious socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more."³ Arthur Simon, president of Bread for the World wrote, "An affluent culture turns our hearts towards fleeting satisfactions and away from God," while "unprecedented prosperity has left our lives full but not necessarily fulfilled." Simon concludes that "the problem is not that we've tried faith and found it wanting, but that we've tried mammon (money) and found it addictive, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient" and even thinking of Jesus as irrelevant.⁴ Others consider this the result of:

- seeing work as just a way to make the money we need to buy what we want,
- viewing material prosperity as a symbol of our independence,
- imagining God as aloof from mundane cares of money matters.⁵

We have effectively shut God out of much of our lives.

But the remedy is not in simply choosing to give some money to God. Neither is it a matter of witnessing to ones employees. It may include those, but it is deeper than that—it is actually making daily decisions and conducting ourselves with an awareness and dependence on God. It is to live with an awareness of what James Sire called “A universe, (everything around us), charged with the grandeur of God.”⁶ James 4:13-14 says, *“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.’ 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.”*

We simply don’t think about God except in what we consider religious matters.

James tells us why living as described in verse 13 is so foolish? It is because of the truths of verse 14. “Why, you”—There is an incredulity in the address—“how could people like you, fragile human creatures, “even know what will happen tomorrow?” The point is that you don’t know, even though you act like you do. To prove that you don’t know, don’t have control over life, James asks, “What is your life? You are a mist...” Psalm 39:5 says *“Each man’s life is but a breath.”* Outside in the cold winter air we see our breath; but we notice how quickly it becomes invisible. The steam rises from the teakettle on the stove but disappears by the time it reaches the ceiling.

My friend, John, went to the doctor for a routine physical exam only to discover that he had advanced melanoma, which took his life in a few short weeks. Another man was part of our church and only in his 40s. He finished work, ate a quick supper and went to play in his softball league.

He had a great evening then came home and sat down to watch the news. His wife came into the room to say she was going to bed only to find him dead in his chair. Steve was also part of our church. He awoke on a mid-week morning and went about his usual business. Later, he was driving alone eastbound on Hampden/285 when another car careened across the median into his car. I went to see Steve in the hospital; he was surprisingly okay. We talked and even laughed together about the "close call." 48 hours later Steve was dead.

Not only is each life brief, even fragile, but the truth is also we don't know what even tomorrow holds.

Read 1 Peter 1:24 and Matthew 6:25-33: *"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall... Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ... Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these... So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

Not only is each life brief, even fragile, but the truth is also we don't know what even tomorrow holds. Proverbs 27:1 says, *"Do not boast about (place your confidence in)*

tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." Jesus told this story in Luke 12:16-20: *"The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"* ' *But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.'"* Charles Spurgeon said our ignorance of the future is a fact and our dependence on the future is folly.⁷ It is tempting however! We put our hope, our faith, in the hands of the uncertain future; we assume stock prices will climb, that our job will give us greater income, and that our health will hold, rather than putting our faith in God.

James began this section by writing, "Now listen, you who say..." telling us where our confidence should not be placed. Now in verse 15 he writes, *"Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'"* Certainly James doesn't mean that we must repeat these very words, "if the Lord wills," like some magic mantra every time we talk about plans for the future. The phrase, "If it is the Lord's will," is the verbal expression of a condition of the heart. In a life over which we have so little control, where or in whom do we put our trust, our confidence? James says don't trust yourself, you may be gone tomorrow, and don't trust the future, you don't know what will happen.

But James's point is not merely that life is relatively brief and uncontrollable by us but also that our lives are in God's care. It's called providence: "God's providence is his completely holy, wise and powerful governing and preserving every creature and every action."⁸ Jesus said it

this way in Matthew 7:7-11: *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*

This life, this world is not a closed system—functioning only by what is seen. We don't live in just an obvious cause and effect world. We live in a world where God is active every day. "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." James calls us to live with that awareness of God's presence and control, a cognizance that everything we do is by God's permission. One man called it a "fixed perspective from which to view all of life."⁹ Imagine if we lived every day with that awareness of God.

I'd like to share a rather long illustration of this with you. Earlier I spent some time with Andy Schwab of our church. 6 years ago Andy was a very successful salesman, earning six figures with the house, cars, and toys commensurate with his income and status. He also had investments that would care for him the rest of his life. Andy was living the "American Dream." Then the "dream" turned to what many would call a "nightmare." The "dotcom," NASDAQ bubble burst, the market crashed and Andy's life seriously began to change. Then three years ago doctors discovered a cancerous tumor in Andy's brain. The subsequent surgery left him weak, unable to work and generally less-abled.

But Andy doesn't call it a nightmare—he calls it God's blessing. The disappearance of the house, cars and 401ks has been replaced by a day-to-day sweet dependence on

God.

- He has seen God provide an apartment when he lost his house.
- He has seen God provide just enough money to meet his and his son's needs.
- He has learned a confidence in the provision of God that is more secure than all the wealth he lost.

Still keeping Andy in mind, I want to tell you a little about me. By God's grace and the generosity of his people, Barbara and I have, through the years, been able to save money for retirement. We went from having no idea how we could make ends meet after we could no longer earn an income, to seeing that it is possible. I have discovered over those years that I'm tempted to change my thinking—actually tempted to change my trusting. I went from having no idea how to make ends meet but trusting that God would somehow provide, to having some investments and trusting that they will be sufficient.

*We live in a world where God
is active every day.*

Do you hear the difference? It is a subtle but significant shift in thinking and trusting. The great temptation is to start trusting more in the investments than in God. I can say and believe that God has provided, but my dependence could shift from God to the investments. Now let's bring Andy and me back together. While Andy was losing everything, I was gaining. Andy no longer has the option of trusting in health and investments. I still do. So where will my trust be placed? I said to Andy that I know of a way put myself back into the place where I can only trust in God. I could give my retirement investments to Andy. I would then have no option but to trust God. Then I would pray

what we call the Lord's Prayer with a new intention: "Father...give us today our daily bread."

How long has it been since we have seriously prayed that prayer or anything like it? Who here, honestly, does not know whether you will have food for breakfast in the morning? Except intentionally or accidentally, most of us in this room have never missed a meal. And some of us haven't missed more meals than others! In an age of affluence and refrigeration is this prayer for daily bread irrelevant? Not if we truly understand the prayer and have a realistic understanding of our actual situation. In few words Jesus teaches a mouthful (pun intended): "Father... give us today our daily bread," teaches us dependence and contentment.

We imagine that we provide for ourselves. The truth is we are dependent on God. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 the apostle Paul rightly asked, "*What do you have that you did not receive?*" James himself pointed out in James 1:17, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...*" The Psalmist wrote, "*The eyes of all look to you (God), and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*" (Psalm 145:15-16)

Do we forget that the money we have, was earned by using time, health and intelligence that were given to us? If God doesn't "give" to us we would have nothing. If my ability to earn an income or my investments for the future all evaporated, would I then learn even better what Andy has learned: dependence and contentment. So I asked Andy, jokingly of course, if he would take my money. In all sincerity, Andy said "no," he wouldn't want it. So positive is his experience with God's daily provision that he has no desire for the things on which most of us depend. No,

James is not saying we must get rid of all material possessions and pray to get sick. He is saying, look deeply and ask, "Has something other than God stolen your trust."

Maybe for you it is not a matter of trusting in investments or your own ability to earn money or whatever else. Maybe for you, rather than truly trusting God, your trust is in some other person—a spouse or parent or some other benefactor. Maybe a way to apply this issue, is to ask, "When you make plans in life, who do you involve in those decisions?" Does God care which school you go to, which job you take, who you marry, what vacations you take, where you invest your money...? I'm convinced it isn't so much that God has only one right answer to every question we might ask in life like whether we should buy Colgate or Crest toothpaste. But the point is that what God thinks matters and he is part of every aspect of our lives, even every decision we make—after all this is a relationship! I sometimes wonder, if God chooses to give us guidance in even the mundane matters of life, would we be available to hear Him or have we grown accustomed to simply moving ahead without Him?

"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.' 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. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." (James 4:13-17)

Read the Lord's Prayer again with this view in mind. I use this prayer often to remind myself of my true dependence on God for everything including life itself.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever."(Matthew 6:9-13)

See appendix F for further study.

End Notes

¹ Alec Motyer, *James*, p. 160

² James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, p. 60 – Frenchman Jullian de La Mettrie was actually an atheist but his expression is similar to Deism.

³ *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, John de Graaf, David Wann & Thomas H. Naylor

⁴ Church and Simon in Blomberg, p. 274

⁵ Barton, Veerman and Wilson, *James (LABC)*, p. 112 in Blomberg, p. 275

⁶ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, p. 20

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, from sermon on this text

⁸ Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English

⁹ Douglas Moo, *James*, p. 206

Compassion in a World of Haves and Have-Nots
James 5:1-6

Just east of Pueblo, Colorado is an organization called Los Pobres ("The Have-nots") This facility and workers, like Mary Crofton, are dedicated to helping migrant farm workers. Mary worked at St Mary-Corwin Medical Center before going to Los Pobres about 7 years ago. She and others say that housing is a major problem for many of the migrants. Within a ½ mile of \$300,000 homes are informal migrant camps made up of Tuff Sheds, dilapidated mobile homes and other makeshift shelters, usually without utilities except for an occasional portable toilet. Employers are not required to provide housing for the workers and even when provided, many can't afford the company housing. "If growers provide the housing, it must meet high state and federal standards. Anybody else can rent substandard housing to migrants and pile them 10 to 20 in one house."

Mary went to one of those homes and there she met the Hernandez family of 10 from Brownsville, Texas. Bertha, the mother, and the two oldest daughters work in the fields and the 7 other children stay at home. They lived in a trash trailer south of Avondale. Before that they lived out of a van. The Hernandezes are typical of the migrant families that have come to rely on the services offered at Los Pobres Center. Services include recycled clothing and shoes, food staples, health, dental and prenatal care clinics, and a place to take a shower. One of the Los Pobres workers said, "Every day is a crisis. (Workers) have shut-off notices, sick children and rain (days they can't work)." According to these reports, these migrant workers earn between \$30 and \$50 a day, depending on the type of

work they are doing.

I complain about the high cost of a cantaloupe at the grocery store and then I hear that laborers in the San Luis Valley may make minimum wage. I did the math: If they worked 10-hours/day/6-days/wk/52-wks/year they'd make less than \$22,000/year.¹

The workers I've just described could be on the farms just north of Denver or the men and women we see every day working in the restaurants we frequent or doing the landscaping in our neighborhoods or even here at our church. I thought the plight of some of the American migrant workers was particularly apropos in light of James 5:1-6: "*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has*

A faith that doesn't result in mercy and charity is no faith at all.

rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. 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. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you."

When I read that text, I feel defensive! I'm tempted to say that my opening illustration has nothing to do with this text or at the very least this text has nothing to do with me. I find James' words unsettling. Let me tell you up front if we

hear James clearly, it will affect our bank accounts, it will affect our lifestyles, and it will affect the goals of our lives. When I decided to do the spring sermon series from the book of James I did so for several reasons.

- One, I knew I needed a relatively short book to fit into the three months of April-June.
- Two, I hadn't ever preached all the way through the book.
- And three, I thought after preaching for so many months through the heavily doctrinal book of Romans, the shorter and eminently practical book of James would be good.

In fact, we titled the series "Shoe-leather Christianity."

But the more I study it the more convinced I am that I mislabeled the series. James is blunt, confrontational, and maybe even harsh in his indictments of illegitimate Christianity. I think a better series title might have been, "The Tests of Genuine Christianity."

- He confronted us early on in chapter 1:19-27; a true Christian is a person who manifests in his life that his claims to repentance and faith are real.
- It came again in chapter 2:14-26; a faith that doesn't result in mercy and charity is no faith at all.
- And again in chapter 3:1-12, what comes out of the mouth is a principle gauge of whether one is truly a Christian.
- And yet again in chapter 3:13-18, genuine Christianity flows from a changed heart.
- And in chapter 5:1-6, he writes about our money. How we get and use our money is an indicator of the genuineness of our Christianity.

This is not a contradiction of the Bible's teaching that a right relationship with God is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For we believe equally strongly that

the Bible teaches that true salvation results in a changed and changing way of life. Nominal Christianity is no Christianity at all. Jesus said, "*By their fruit you will recognize them. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord... Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*" (Matthew 7:15, 22-23) As we have seen, James clearly believes that. And he challenges his readers over and over again to test the genuineness of their faith.

I discovered that the scholars debate whether this text in James is addressed to Christians or non-Christians but I wonder if it matters? Because while not all Scripture is written to us, it is written for us.² And even if James were addressing those in the church who weren't truly Christians, he could as one author put it, "easily expect errant Christian brothers and sister to recognize themselves in the negative descriptions borrowed from the prophets."³ So either way, we have to deal with what James is saying here.

Listen again to James' hard words: "*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.*" (James 5:1) James sees into the future and sees a severe judgment on the unrepentant rich. "Weep" means to cry and "wail" is always used in the Old Testament as the response to judgment. The "misery" is that judgment of God that is to come. Jesus said in Luke 6:24-25, "*But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.*" Here in verse 3 James writes that your lifestyle "*will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.*" In verse 5 he says, "*You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.*" James pulls no punches; his language is discomfiting. He says that people who live like this should expect harsh judgment from God.

I read those words and I'm so glad that I'm not one of those "rich people." To most of us the "rich" are those who make more than we make or have more than we have. But James doesn't define "rich" as those earning over a certain amount or those having assets over a certain amount. We will see here that James defines the rich as those who have more than enough and more importantly he defines the rich as those who live selfishly especially in light of those without enough. The truth is I'm reminded of my "wealth" every time I put out the trash. "What must we be spending to produce that much garbage?"

James says that people who live like this should expect harsh judgment from God.

You might be tempted to turn me off, thinking that I'm just going to rail against American affluence and in particular attempt to make everyone feel guilty for having a house, a car, and other nice things when there are people starving in the world. But I think in light of God's material blessing on many people in the Bible, we can safely say God is not opposed to His children being rich. He is, however, opposed to their misuse of those riches. So I beg you to hear me out. James wants us to think about how we get our wealth and how we use it.

Now I grant you that James goes at the issue very negatively. He indicts with strong words:

- You have hoarded.
- You have defrauded.
- And you have indulged.

Hear him on the issue of hoarding: *"Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last*

days." (James 5:2-3) Look more closely at the description of their wealth. It has rotted, the clothes are moth-eaten and the gold and silver are corroded. Rotted, moth-eaten, and corroded—what do these words indicate: that the wealth had been stored and not used. You don't need it; you just have it. Does not the increasing number of storage units in our country testify against us? How about investments far beyond what we need or ever will need?

Years ago one man wrote, "There is not a vice which more effectually contracts and deadens the feelings, which more completely makes a man's affections center in himself and excludes all others from partaking in them, than the desire of accumulating possessions."⁴ When is it prudent saving and when is it sinful hoarding? William Bates, a Puritan preacher, has written timeless advice on the use of wealth: "When riches and power are employed for the glory of God and the good of others, they are a happy advantage to

The Bible says we will give an account for how we have used the money and possessions entrusted to us.

those that possess them. All (our riches) are virtual obligations; and the greater our receipts are, the greater our (accountability) will be. God has a sovereign right in all things we have, and they are not to be employed merely for our pleasure and profit, but according to his will, and for his honor."⁵

More recently another man wrote, "There is a difference between prudent saving for the future, which the Bible admonishes us to do, and a greedy, self-centered hoarding for the present. (The first), looks at wealth as a means to sustain the believer in service to God. The (latter) looks at wealth as everything, as security in life. Finding joy in

giving to others, investing our resources in the work of God's kingdom, and maintaining moderation in what we possess help us to use our wealth wisely. When our security abides in our wealth then it has ceased to be a tool and has become a lord over our lives."⁶

That is what we talked about earlier from the end of James 4. John Calvin wrote, "God has not appointed gold for rust, nor garments for moth; but, on the contrary, he has designed them as aids and helps to human life."⁷ A more contemporary author, Randy Alcorn, wrote, "God prospers me not to raise my standard of living but to raise my standard of giving. God gives us more money than we need so that we can give generously."⁸

James says that hoarding is not only contrary to how God would have us use our money but also what we have hoarded will testify against us in the judgment. The story is told of a godless American farmer who wrote to his local newspaper explaining, "I have been conducting an experiment in one of my fields. I have plowed it on Sundays, sowed the seed on Sundays, watered and weeded it on Sundays, and gathered the harvest on Sundays-and I want to tell you that this October I have the finest crop of Indian corn in the whole neighborhood." The local editor replied by adding a footnote, "God does not settle all his accounts in October!"⁹

I believe the Bible says we will give an account for how we have used the money and possessions entrusted to us. I don't think it is a stretch to say that James says how we use our money is a key indicator of the genuineness of our faith. James says not only have you hoarded but you have defrauded. James 5:4 says, "*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. This is standard Old Testament teaching: 'Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. 'Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.'" (Leviticus 19:13) *And, "Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it."* (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

I read, "The message of James is at least this: Christians are to be a people whose sympathies and influence are to be for economic and social justice for the working poor, for the uneducated, for the disenfranchised of the societies where they live. Christians ought to favor public policy that allows people who labor to have some reasonable share in the goods and services their labor produces. James is on the side of the poor. He is more concerned that the laborers in the field receive their wage than in defending an abstract principle of free enterprise economics..."¹⁰

That same author, I think rightly indicates that Christians in particular and even our country as a whole do a fairly good job providing for the indigent poor, the destitute. We have food banks, clothing supplies, even homeless shelters. Where we fail too often is with the working poor. We go into our grocery stores expecting to find any produce we desire and usually complain about the price being unfair. To whom is it unfair? 85 percent of the fruits and vegetables produced in this country were hand harvested and/or cultivated. Without these workers we wouldn't have the produce we rely on. "In return for their labor, the majority of farm-workers earn annual wages of less than \$7,500. Although wage rates for farm-workers have gone up over the last decade, when they are adjusted for inflation we find that farm-workers' real wages have decreased 5% in that time." According to the U.S.

Department of Agriculture's own data, agriculture is one of the most accident-prone industries in the United States.

A few years ago the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) found field sanitation violations in 69 percent of its field inspections. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 300,000 farm workers suffer acute pesticide poisoning each year. Migrant workers don't generally earn enough to pay for health care, and they almost never have health insurance. "They may also lack transportation to the clinic or, since they don't receive sick leave, they may be afraid of losing wages or even

*Where we fail too often is
with the working poor.*

losing their jobs if they take time off to seek health care." The U.S. Public Health Service funds some migrant health centers to help provide care to farm-workers, but not nearly enough to meet the need. "The circumstances of farm-worker children are particularly poignant. Poverty and migration make it difficult for farm-worker children to create a different future for themselves."

The Fair Labor Standards Act sets age 12 as the legal limit for farm work, with exemptions available for children as young as 10 or 11. Studies have shown that many children under age 12 continue to do farm work. And hard data says these children are even more subject to work-related accidents than adults.¹¹

I use the illustrations of migrant workers only because it is so close to us here in Denver. James says the cries of the unpaid wages and the unjustly treated workers cry out against us. It is said, "You can't take it with you. But the truth is that what we have, if ill-gained or misused, will be

represented at the judgment—it will testify against us.”¹²

James says not only have you hoarded and defrauded but you have also indulged. *“You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.”* (James 5:5) “You have fattened yourselves” means you have more than cared for yourselves in contrast to caring for any others. This life of luxury is lived at the expense others and with an unseeing eye and unfeeling heart toward the plight of others. We tend to compare ourselves to those who have more. But James’ perspective is from the eyes of the poor who see these “rich” as living in luxury. One man called it “indulgence in the face of suffering!”¹³

*“For where your treasure is, there
your heart will be also.”*

Dr. Blomberg wrote, “It is not capitalism with its goal of profit that James condemns; it is the selfishness that accompanies any economic philosophy.”¹⁴ God says it this way in Ezekiel 16:49: *“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”* In 2005, contributions to 700 Protestant mission agencies, including denominational, interdenominational and independent agencies, were \$5.2 billion. Americans spent over \$13 billion on Valentine's Day 2006. And, we spent \$14 billion on perfumes and related products. The size of American homes has been rising for the last 35 years even though the family size has been declining. In 1980 the average home size was 2000 square feet; in 2006, it was nearly 2500 square feet. Americans spend \$22 billion a year on toys. While we have less than 4% of the world's kids we buy 40% of the toys. We spent \$705 billion in

entertainment in 2004. U.S. consumers spend an estimated \$50 billion a year on footwear. In 1933, at the depth of the Great Depression, Protestants were giving 3.2% of their income to their churches. By 2005, when Americans were over 554% richer, after taxes and inflation, than in the Great Depression, Protestants were giving 2.6% of their incomes to their churches.¹⁵

Listen to Jesus: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Matthew 6:19-21) And, again in Luke 12:33: *"Sell your possessions and give to the poor."* 4,325,556 is the number of children under 5 who have died since the beginning of 2008. Most die from preventable poverty conditions and many are in areas where they have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ I read, "There is no sin in merely being rich; where sin exists among the rich, it arises from the manner in which wealth is acquired, the spirit which it tends to engender in the heart (which we looked at earlier), and the way it is used."¹⁷

So what do I do with these strong words from James? There may be some who need to recognize that they are not Christians after all. James has laid out several "tests" of genuine Christianity in this book. This last one is the use of our money. If the cumulative witness against you from the book of James is that you are not, in fact, a Christian then I beg you to hear James' call to repentance and faith: *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail.*

Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." (James 4:7-10) Trust Him today to forgive your sins, to give you new life and begin to change the very way you live.

Others of us may know we are truly Christians but we see how far we have to go in being transformed to be like Christ. So what do we do? One, create margin in your life to be able to give money away. Buy fewer toys, eat out less, change entertainment habits (do we really need larger TVs, the latest Play Station, more movies, or more expensive cell phones and the like?). One experiment is to see how much we can save each week to give away. Bring the children into the experiment. Rotate who gets to decide who gets the money, consciously thinking of both the destitute and the working poor.

Two, weigh in on the side of creating a more level playing field for the working poor. It is easy to sound like a "bleeding-heart liberal" when you start thinking about minimum wage, health care, education, child care, etc. Maybe National health care is a lousy plan that will reduce the quality of health care but what do we do about those who don't have it? Maybe there's a better solution, but we've been talking for years about the free-market system solving the problem while in fact many still go without. No, I don't like the promiscuous culture and easy divorce that has led to a significant increase in single moms and disadvantaged kids, but lamenting those conditions doesn't change the fact that many of those moms need child care, many of those kids need better education. Who's going to provide quality child-care for the have-to-work moms? Who's going to tutor their kids?

I'm not an economist but I think free-market economies, with proper restraints, are the best for everyone. But no economic system is perfect because people aren't perfect. And so who picks up the pieces, who provides for those who are left out and yes, even for those who fail? I don't like being on the "scrooge" side of so many discussions about providing for the impoverished and working poor. My liberal friends often sound more "Christian" than I do. I know that the solutions to these problems aren't simple. I don't have the answers, but I can't pretend they don't exist; I can't do nothing; my Lord won't allow it and, if my heart were right, neither can I.

*We know we are truly Christians but
we see how far we have to go in being
transformed to be like Christ.*

What else can we do? We can invest time in helping even one person or one family not just with a hand-out but a helping hand. And certainly we can seek from God a change of heart—a heart of compassion. Jesus said, "*Be merciful (compassionate), just as your Father is merciful (compassionate).*" (Luke 6:36) Jesus claimed to be God, the bearer of good news about the kingdom of God. What was the first indication of His credibility? His actions! When asked if He was the one to come, Jesus pointed to His actions, "*the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear...*" His actions were the source of his credibility.¹⁸

In James we have seen that the true test of discipleship, of belonging to God, is in our actions. The word "compassion" is from the Latin "pati" and "cum" which mean "to suffer with." Compassion is more than tenderheartedness. We are often temporarily impressed with some sad story and we

feel a certain sadness. But compassion is to truly suffer with someone and that is contrary to our natural selves. Suffering with someone means “we share in the other’s vulnerability, enter with him or her into the experience of weakness and powerlessness, become part of uncertainty, and give up control and self-determination.”¹⁹

One man said, “Compassion is not a snob gone slumming. Anybody can salve his conscience by (occasionally giving a buck to a bum on the street). (But) did you ever take a real trip down inside the broken heart of a friend? To feel the sob of the soul—the raw, red crucible of emotional agony? To have this become almost as much yours as that of your soul-crushed neighbor? Then, to sit down with him—and silently weep? This is the beginning of compassion.”²⁰ Luke 6:36 says, “*Be compassionate, just as your Father is (merciful) compassionate.*” I’m asking you to truly pray about it and talk about it in your family or among other friends. Honestly ask the question, “How would God have me change—I can’t solve the world’s crises, but I can do something—what is it?”

I urge you to read one or more of the following books:
Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life by McNeill, Morrison and Nouwen
Rich Christians in an age of Hunger by Ron Sider
Neither Poverty nor Riches by Craig Blomberg
Article - “Rich and Poor in James...” by Duane Warden
<http://findarticles.com/p/articles>

See appendix G for further study

End Notes

- ¹ Source The Pueblo Chieftain Publication date: August 13, 2007
<http://www.masonryconstruction.com/industry-news.asp>
article ID=553865§ionID=0
- ² John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, p. 328
- ³ David Nystrom, *James*, p. 268
- ⁴ Thomas Manton in Blanchard, p. 336
- ⁵ *The Complete Works of William Bates*, vol. II, p. 282
- ⁶ Phil Newton sermon on James 5:1-6 http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/james_05.01-06.html
- ⁷ Douglas Moo, *James*, p. 214
- ⁸ Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle*
- ⁹ Blanchard, p. 334
- ¹⁰ Duane Warden "Rich and Poor in James..."
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_200006/ai_n8922100/print
- ¹¹ <http://www.ncfh.org/factsheets.php>
- ¹² Blanchard, p. 337
- ¹³ Peter Davids, *James*, p. 117
- ¹⁴ Craig Blomberg, *unpublished manuscript of James*, p. 289
- ¹⁵ Source: www.emptytomb.org
- ¹⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁷ A. Barnes in Motyer, *The Message of James*, p. 169
- ¹⁸ McNeil, Morrison, Nouwen, *Compassion*, p. 119
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 14
- ²⁰ Jess Moody *Quote-Unquote*, p. 66

Prayer—Proactive Patience

James 5:13-20

Many years ago a woman of our church called and asked if some of the other elders and I would come and pray for her healing. Cancer had racked her body. The treatments were done; nothing but a miracle could change the course of her life. As two other elders and I drove to her home, some questions plagued me:

- What if she isn't healed?
- Maybe she will assume her faith, or ours, isn't strong enough?
- Maybe she or her family members will now question God?
- Is it worth the risk?

The closer I got to that home the more skeptical I became about what could happen as a result of our prayers. Oh, I wanted God to heal her, I believed that God could heal her but I realized that I didn't expect that God would heal her.

In James 5, it is probably this issue of healing that is of most interest to people. Soon we will read again the following words from James 5: *"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. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up..."* Oh, how we'd love to believe that, when a loved one or we are very sick and death threatens. When our computer doesn't work, we pull up the help menu to find the formula to follow to fix the problem. We push the right buttons in the right order and it works. When we get sick we go to the doctor to get the medicine to correct the problem. We take the prescribed number of pills for the correct number of days and we get well.

When we think of this verse, we'd love to call the elders, anoint with oil and say the right words and voila, healing occurs. As good as that would be, most of us have been around long enough to know it doesn't work that way. In fact most of us have been around long enough to conclude it simply doesn't work at all. And the result is that we just dismiss these verses as maybe nothing more than quaint relics of another era. But instead of dismissing them, I'd like us to see these ideas as James presents them. I'd like to show you that the primary issue here is not healing but an active daily dependence on God as manifested in prayer.

James calls them to genuine Christianity evidenced by changed speech, changed conduct, changed hearts, compassion for those who have even less, consideration for each other, and mercy toward all.

Look at James 5:13-17: *"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 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. 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. 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. 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."*

These words were not written in a vacuum. James has written to Christians who were living under severe circumstances. Today, Christian minorities in Hindu India

and Muslim Pakistan, as elsewhere around the world, know about severe circumstances. Likewise, these Christian minorities in that pagan Roman world lived with discrimination, exploitation and other forms of oppression. James began his letter calling his readers to perseverance, to patient endurance of hardship: *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."* (James 1:2-3)

In Chapter 5 we saw that he returned to that theme near the end of his letter by giving them reason to be patient in the midst of suffering and trials: *"Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming... You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near... As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered..."* (5:7-11) Perseverance, patience, endurance—James doesn't want them to give up or to abandon the faith. Throughout the letter James calls them to genuine Christianity evidenced by changed speech, changed conduct, changed hearts, compassion for those who have even less, consideration for each other, and mercy toward all. And all of that even while they are being mistreated.

Is that all they can do; are they just to be patient, waiting for Jesus to return? No, James says, you can be proactively patient; you can pray! You can pray for yourselves (verse 13), you can ask the elders to pray for you (verses 14-15) and you can pray for each other (verse 16). Why, because as summarized at the end of verse 16, God acts in response to the prayers of His people. And this is illustrated by Elijah's experience in verses 17-18.

Let's start where James does in verse 13 *"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing*

songs of praise." Life is constantly changing. Are you sad; wait a while. Are you happy; wait a while! The verse covers both ends of the circumstantial and emotional spectrum and all that is between—whether troubled or contented—the bad and the good.

"Is any of you in trouble?" The word "trouble" (from two Greek words meaning "to suffer evil") is a term that probably includes all kinds of difficulties. This includes the natural, physical, emotional, spiritual and in James, even the hostility of the world against Christians. What are we to do? Pray, talk to God.

"Is anyone happy?" The word "happy" means cheerful, peace of mind, or contented. It speaks of those times in life when all seems well. What are we to do? Sing to God. Praise Him. The point is that in every circumstance of life, bad or good, our first reaction is to appeal to God. The Psalmist is a great example of that kind of prayer life. He praised, he complained, he grieved, he reveled, he asked, he pleaded, he rejoiced—it was the full range of emotions depending on the situation. Most of all, he knew God was part of all that was happening and he intentionally went to God with it all. The Apostle Paul said it this way in Philippians 4:6-7: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

I know people whose first response to every situation of life is to think of God and to go to Him. Things are going badly for them or someone else and their first response is to pray. Something special happens in their day and their first response is "praise God" and say "thank you Jesus." Oh, to live that way! At times it seems kind of maddenly simplistic;

they're praying when we'd be calling for an ambulance. But I have to respect the priority that is being expressed—they understand that God is more central and important in the everyday affairs of life than anyone or anything else. The best response is to pray while you call for the ambulance. In every circumstance of life, we are to pray. We are called on to pray for ourselves.

The Psalmist knew God was part of all that was happening and he intentionally went to God with it all.

Now that is a great overview of how we should handle life, but in the next verses James will be even more specific. *"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."* (James 5:14) What about medicals doctors and medicine? The Bible doesn't often mention physicians but it does assume them.

- Matthew 9:12: *"Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.'"*
- The author of the Acts of the Apostles, the gospel writer Luke was himself a physician, who attended the Apostle Paul.
- In 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul urged Timothy to use a little wine, medicinally, for his stomach and frequent illnesses.

In the Bible it isn't prayer or physicians, prayer or medicine but it is God working through it all. Every era seems to have people who run to one extreme or the other. Even today we have people who refuse to go to doctors, believing it is a contradiction of their faith. But most Evangelicals don't go to that extreme, we go to the other. We don't really expect God to do much when we are sick—our faith is in medicine and physicians, not in God.

We rightly dismiss the miracle healers that appear from time to time because some of them have been shown to be charlatans and the others have no higher success rate of healing than when people are unattended. These “healers” present themselves as following the practice of Jesus and the Apostles but their “healings” are seldom instantaneous and almost always unverifiable. The result is that we end up dismissing it all; dismissing any real expectation of God intervening in any way. Remember the woman, I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, who asked the other elders and me to come and pray for her? I had more confidence that a spontaneous remission might take place, or that some new medicine might yet be discovered than expectation that God might heal her. Our theology says God can heal miraculously, but our skepticism says He probably won’t.

God is actively involved in our everyday lives in every detail—“sustaining all things.”

What has brought us to such a sorry state of skepticism? In 2 Chronicles 16:12 there is a description of a man who sounds like some of us. It says, *“In the 39th year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians... and he died.”* I’m not going to argue that if Asa had sought the Lord he necessarily would have been healed—the text doesn’t tell us that. My point in showing you that text is that Asa, like us, apparently had more confidence in the doctors than he did in the Lord.

In the last couple of centuries there has been much more information about our world and our bodies than ever before. As the amount of information grew we became less

dependent upon God. The more we understood about the “natural” process of healing the less we saw God involved. People formerly had to pray that God would cure infections—now they just take penicillin. We have seen new medical discoveries such as vaccines, antibiotics, and medical procedures, and have a growing understanding of the cause and effect of clean water, sterilization of surgical instruments, and vitamins. Instead of praising God for any and all of the means that He uses to heal us, many of us believe that God is not really necessary for these things. God may have been important in healing in a pre-scientific time but not now. And He may still be necessary for the spiritual but not the physical.

But that is unbiblical thinking. My Bible says in Hebrews 1:3 that the Lord Jesus is *“sustaining all things by His powerful word.”* It also says the same in Colossians 1:17 *“in Him all things hold together.”* God is involved in the “normal” or “regular” affairs of life. He is actively involved in our everyday lives in every detail—“sustaining all things.” Penicillin, antibiotics, and sanitation, etc. are all part of God’s involvement in our world. He is as much involved in the things that we would call normal as He is in the miraculous.

So what does James say? *“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.”* (James 5:14) Notice the sick person calls for the elders. Maybe the sick person was too sick to go to the elders and needed the elders to come to him or her. Praying “over him” suggests that the sick person is incapacitated and even lying down. These words suggest that the situation is serious and not merely temporary. We don’t call for the elders when we have a cold or the flu. That doesn’t mean we don’t pray for ourselves, and each other, when we have lesser illnesses

but calling for the elders seems to be for particularly serious situations.

James says to “anoint him with oil.” Was the oil a form of medicine? It appears that the ancient world considered oil to have curative powers. But I don’t think the oil was medicine; I think it was a visual aid. It was a physical symbol. In the Old Testament, anointing with oil was used that way. It meant the special setting-someone-apart for God. Here the anointing symbolizes in a physical way, the special prayer being offered for this person. The oil is not magic; like the water of baptism and the bread of the Lord’s Supper, it simply aids both the elder and the sick person in understanding the special nature of this prayer.

The text says you are to call for the elders, they are to pray and they are to anoint the sick person with oil “in the name of the Lord” Now, it doesn’t say the elders must say those exact words. This is not Christian “abracadabra.” In John 14:13 Jesus said, *“I will do whatever you ask in my name.”* We turned that into a perfunctory conclusion to every prayer; “In Jesus’ name, amen.” But the point is not formula; it is recognition that the power and authority behind any answer to prayer is our God—we are dependent on Him alone.

Then James gives the conclusion of such prayers: *“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.”* (James 5:15) This raises several questions from us:

- What does a prayer “offered in faith” mean?
- Will this prayer always result in healing?
- What does sin have to do with this?

James seems to have added a qualification to the kind of prayer that will make a sick person well. It is a prayer

“offered in faith.”

I have told you before about this startling experience that I had several years ago. A middle-aged man of our church died at work and a co-worker of his called me to tell me. I rushed to the hospital where the body was taken so I could be with his wife and family. After spending time praying with her, we waited until the man’s mother and siblings arrived from Fort Collins. The mother saw me first and asked in a demanding voice, “Where is he?” Not where is the body, but where is he? For the next hour she and her other adult children gathered around the body of the dead man and demanded that Satan release him and demanded that God raise him up. At one point a sister asked what

The point is a recognition that the power and authority behind any answer to prayer is our God—we are dependent on Him alone.

Scripture she should read and the mother said, “Read anything!” The worst moment came when after an hour of no results, the mother turned to the dead man’s wife, the woman I had gone to console, and said to her, “He’s still dead because you don’t have enough faith.” At that point I called a halt to the whole thing and got the nurses to eject them from the room.

James is not saying the elders had to have a certain amount of faith as if they had to conjure up greater faith or greater passion. He’s not saying you can’t have any doubts or that your faith must be perfect. He’s simply saying their faith must be in God. These are people who have made up their minds about God. They recognize and believe in the providence of God—they know He is in control and they are looking to Him to provide. The issue isn’t the amount of faith but the object of their faith—God. Some teach that the

“prayer offered in faith” is a special kind of faith that God provides in some situations. Their idea is that sometimes God gives special insight to His servants in some situations; the insight is that in this particular situation, God does in fact plan to heal the person. Knowing the mind of the Lord, the ones who pray must believe that God will do it.

The pastor I served under in Minneapolis believed this. I remember one occasion when the infant daughter of my good friend was near death. The pastor told me that he was convinced by the Spirit that God would heal the little girl and when we gathered to pray, he prayed that way. The little girl survives to this day. I offer that as one possible explanation for what “in faith” means. But I am

We pray with an expectancy that God will do the very best for us in His way.

troubled when others whom I know have had equal certainty about God’s will and have prayed that way only to have the sick person die. British evangelist, David Watson, believed wholeheartedly that God said he would heal him and David prayed “in faith.” But David Watson died. I find it hard to believe that we know with certainty the mind of God in such matters.

So what are we to think when this verse makes it sound as if the result we desire is guaranteed? “The Lord will raise him up.” Will God heal every time if we pray correctly? To argue that God always heals, whether in this life or by taking us to heaven, seems to be an attempt to avoid the plain words of the verse. I will readily acknowledge that I don’t fully understand what James means here. This much I do know from James and the rest of the Bible—we must pray and pray with faith. The elders pray, we pray and we pray with an expectancy that God will do the very best for

us in His way. But our faith is not in faith, it is not in a particular answer, and it is not in our fervency; our faith is in God to do His perfect benevolent will.

James adds something quite surprising to his statement about prayer and healing: "If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." Is there a connection between sin and sickness? Both the Old Testament and the New Testament make this connection; some sickness is caused by sin. And I'm not just talking about living in a fallen world, though it is true that much sickness is a result of a sin-ridden world. I think James is talking about the sin of the individual who is sick. That shouldn't really surprise us. I have read that fear, sorrow, envy, anxiety, resentment and hatred are responsible for a large percentage of the illnesses people suffer. For example, an unwillingness to forgive can create many emotional and physical ailments. I have also read that confession and release of anger have caused the healing of many infirmities.

Having said that, the Bible also makes it clear that sickness isn't always connected directly to our sin. Even here James says, "If"—it is by no means a given, but "if" it is true, then confession is called for. It is reasonable for a believer to ask himself or herself if their sickness is the result of unconfessed sin. That said, James moves to the conclusion of the matter: *"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."* Notice that James has moved from praying for yourself, to having the elders pray and now to the subject of praying for each other. Here we have two commands and a proverb.

The first command is to confess your sins to each other. Some have made of this "confess your sins to each other" a kind of group experience of public confession of specific

sins. Roman Catholics have used these verses to support confession to a priest. Anglicans and others have used these verses to support the kind of corporate confession at the beginning of their services of worship. I don't think the text demands that confession be either public or specific. Instead as one man wrote, "The confession of sin entails humble honesty about the fact of having committed sin, not a public retelling of the details of the act."¹ But James has made it clear that some sickness is the result of unconfessed sin, and therefore, it is good practice, if sick, to confess to God the sins that may be causing the sickness. And if we have sinned against others, we confess to them.

The second command is to pray for each other. James says it is good preventative medicine to confess our sins and to pray for each other. The last sentence of verse 16 is a fitting conclusion to the conclusion: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." The NASB translates it this way: "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." The KJV translates it this way: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." But the word "fervent" is simply not in the Greek text and is an addition that is uncalled for. This verse does not call for a special amount of passion to be persuasive with God or effective in results. Even the NASB's "effective" prayer seems to suggest another qualification of the prayer that works. But James has already made it clear that the only qualification is faith in God—a dependence on God.

Another qualification that some want to place on this prayer is that it must be offered by a certain kind of person—a righteous person. Then they define righteous as particularly holy. We joke that someone's prayers didn't get answered because they weren't righteous enough. But the "righteous" person here is not one who is holier than all the others but

one who is in right relationship with God. This is not a super saint but simply a person who lives in dependence on God. To prove his point that this promise is not only for exceptional Christians, James uses Elijah. And in particular he points out that Elijah was a man like us. As one man said it, "Elijah does not stride across the stage of history ten feet tall but as an ordinary man with an extraordinary God."² Again, I think most translations mislead us when they say Elijah prayed "earnestly." The Greek text says he "prayed with prayer." It is not that Elijah prayed with greater intensity "but that praying was precisely what he did."³

James says it is good preventative medicine to confess our sins and to pray for each other.

So James' point is that every Christian has access to the same powerful, gracious God and that praying makes a difference—it is powerful and effective. Do we believe that? Let me return to the story with which I began the message—the woman who was dying of cancer and called us elders to pray for her. No, she was not healed. When that is the case more often than not, why do we elders continue to go and pray for others? Why do we all pray for ourselves and for each other? I could tell stories of others who were healed. But empirical evidence doesn't usually convince anyone. We can explain away almost anything. Ultimately it comes down to whether we take God at his word or not. Will I believe Him when He says that our prayers make a difference? Will I believe Him that He chooses to use our prayers as one of the means whereby he directs the course of our lives and the world around us?

The Rev. Dr. James Montgomery Boice was, until May of 2000 the pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia. At 62 years of age he died of liver cancer. Just a few weeks before his death, he asked to speak briefly to the congregation. Obviously weakened by the cancer, he stood and said, "A relevant question, I guess, when you pray is, pray for what? Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you're free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to do miracles—and he certainly can—is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place. So although miracles do happen, they're rare by definition. A miracle has to be an unusual thing. (He then spoke of the need for them to pray for the physicians, the medicines, the therapy – by all means pray)

"Above all, I would say pray for the glory of God. If you think of God glorifying himself in history and you say, where in all of history has God most glorified himself? He did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and it wasn't by delivering Jesus from the cross, though he could have. Jesus said, 'Don't you think I could call down from my Father ten legions of angels for my defense?' But he didn't do that. And yet that's where God is most glorified."⁴

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 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. 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. 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." (James 5:13-16)

See Appendix H for further study.

End Notes

¹ Kurt Richardson, *James*, p. 236

² Peter Davids, *James*, p. 125

³ James Adamson, *James, NICNT*, p. 201

⁴ <http://www.tenth.org>

Notes Corresponding to Chapter Two:
The Source of Temptation
James 1:13-18

Books on the subject of sin:

1. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Eerdmans, 1995
2. Joseph Pieper *The Concept of Sin*, St Augustine Press, Translation 2001
3. John Owen, *Sin and Temptation*, 1665 reprinted 1985

I. Douglas Moo, PNTC Romans

The English words "trial" and "temptation" are taken from the same Greek word.

A "trial" can become a "temptation" when verse 14 applies. Financial hardship can make us question God's providence. The death of a loved one can make us question God's love. The suffering of the innocent can make us question God's justice. (p. 72)

The same experience may result in perseverance and increased maturity or it may result in sin and death.

"evil desire" = "*any human longing for what God has prohibited*" (p. 74)

1 Peter 2:11 "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."

The "dragged away and enticed" is probably a way of talking about the seductive power of our desires. We are enticed like bait on a hook and then when we swallow it,

we are hooked and led down the path.

The “dragged away and enticed” is explained further here in 15.

Desire (the temptation) is not sin but when it has conceived, it gives birth to sin.

"One can almost envision three generations here: desire as a "parent," sin as a "child," and death as a "grandchild." Centuries ago the Venerable Bede suggested that there were "three stages in temptation. The first is suggestion, the second is experiment, and the third is consent." Once we reach the consent stage, we have been carried away by sin, we have willingly left the path of righteousness and we deserve to be separated from God. (p. 74)

Notice the complete absence of “the devil made me do it?” in this text. Satan cannot make a believer do anything. James places the blame for our sinful actions squarely and only on our own shoulders. Demons are sometimes displayed in the New Testament as giving people unnatural power or unnatural speech but never are they depicted as responsible for the usual human sins of greed, lust, hatred, etc.

Repentance and changed behavior form the appropriate Christian response to sin—not blaming God, seeking exorcism or (esp. in our therapeutic society) blaming one's upbringing or one's friends or the government, and so forth! (p. 83)

"How, in an age when people sue the restaurant for serving fattening food and the teacher for their poor grades, but excuse themselves for not choosing salads over French fries or for not studying for the test, can we help but not finally blame God for any and every circumstance not of our liking? And if we do, how shall we understand true evil and

develop the endurance to handle real temptation?"
(Brosend, James and Jude, 47. In Blomberg p. 83)

Corresponding to Chapter Three:
Walking the Talk
James 1:19-27

“Slow to Anger”

“Slow to anger” is a characteristic commonly used to describe God.

Other anger works against the very holy living that reflects a true relationship with God. This does not rule out true righteous anger but it does rule out our petty, self-centered hostility toward someone who has gotten in our way.

“Quick to listen”

“Listen to the conversations of the world, between nations as well as between couples. They are, for the most part, dialogues of the deaf.” (Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other*)

“Holiness is the visible part of salvation.” (In Blanchard, *Live the Life*, p. 72)

James *“knows that mere intellectual assent is often accompanied by an anemic will in matters of morality.”* (Nystrom, p. 89)

The relationship of law and grace:

“Let me quickly say that without a faith relationship with Jesus, the moral law of God is a curse. We have broken God’s law, and once we have broken it, it can only condemn us. It has no power to save. I like to compare the law of God to that little mirror on a stick which the dentist uses to examine a person’s teeth. That mirror can reveal

cavities, but it can do nothing to remove them. The law can reveal our sins, but it can do nothing to forgive them, nothing to remove these spiritual cavities of the soul. Only Jesus through His perfect saving work can forgive our sin:—Romans 8:3: "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin...Once Jesus forgives our sin, the law no longer condemns us."

—Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus..."

Once Jesus forgives our sin, the law is no longer a curse to us. Galatians 3:13: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us..." Once Jesus forgives our sins, the moral law ceases to be a curse to us and becomes for us the perfect law of liberty. The moral law, the revealed will of God, becomes for us a perfect revelation of the sort of life that is pleasing unto God. And living a life pleasing to God because we truly want to is true liberty. Living a sinful life is not liberty but rather slavery to corruption and perversion. The moral law of God becomes a Christian's joy and delight. Psalm 1:1-3: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper." Romans 7:22 22: "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man."

(From Grover Gunn, James 1:22-25 sermon at

<http://www.grovergunn.net/andrew/anscr.htm#59jam>

*"A wise old owl sat upon an oak,
The more he saw, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he heard.
Why aren't we like that wise old bird?"*

(cited in Ellsworth and Baker, *Preaching James*, p. 41)

British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli said of a contemporary, "He was intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity." (in John Blanchard, p. 75)

Proverbs 26:20: *"Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down."*

Proverbs 17:28: *"Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."* (My father's variation on that theme was "Keep your mouth shut and others won't know how ignorant you truly are.")

Proverbs 10:19: *"When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."*

Proverbs 29:20: *"Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him."*

Matthew 22:36: *"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."*

Widows and orphans:

Exodus 22:22: *"Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless."*

Deuteronomy 14:28-29: *"At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."*

Psalm 68:5: *"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling"*

Micah 6:8: *"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

Corresponding to Chapter Five
James 2: 14-26

Outline of James 2:14-26:

Questions: 2:14

Hypothetical Illustration: 2:15-16

Conclusion 2:17

Objection: 2:18a

Response: 2:18b-26

1st response 2:18b-19

2nd response 2:20-26

Historical illustrations: Abraham 2:21-24, Rahab
2:25

An analogy 2:26

Conclusion 2:27 reiterates 2:17

Other Notes

James 2:14

The KJV translation left out an article that is very helpful in understanding this passage—"the," "this," "that" before "faith" in "Can (the, that) faith save him? In the second question, James is referring to the kind of faith he has already mentioned in the first question. So the NIV and other translations are right when they translate it, "Can SUCH faith save him? (The kind of faith a man claims to have when there are no deeds consistent with it.) This "faith" is no faith at all.

"James is not seeking to downgrade the importance of 'faith' in 2.14-26. On the contrary, faith retains its role as the primary distinguishing feature of the community. But as the prophets of old had denied the efficacy of sacrifice

without obedience, so faith without works is dead." (Martin, James, 80. Donald J. Verseput ("Reworking the Puzzle of Faith and Deeds in James 2:14-26," *NTS* 43 [1997]: 115) In Blomberg, 155 footnote)

"Save" in James, unless otherwise specified, refers to the whole concept of salvation from initial induction into God's family (regeneration/justification), through sanctification, to glory (glorification) itself.

2:15-17

Here James expands on the first question he asked in 14—"What good is a deedless faith?"

James asks, "What good is it?" implying it is worthless.

Matthew 25:42-43 *"For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."*

Verse 17 draws the conclusion: Just as a blessing accomplishes nothing for the naked and hungry so faith without works accomplishes nothing—v14 it doesn't save.

2:18a

James quotes someone else—a person who wishes to consider justification and sanctification as divisible.

2:18b-19

James responds in 18a-19.

"Show me your faith without deeds" Either James is challenging him to demonstrate his faith without works, something which the man can't do OR James is simply setting the stage for proving that it is only by works that real faith is demonstrated. In either case, James does say that real faith is demonstrated by action. I think James

wholly disagrees with the following statement: "When one becomes a Christian, he consciously believes in Christ. He does not need, nor is he required, to will a commitment to obedience, though he may do so." (Frank B Minerty, Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society, Autumn 1993—Volume 6:11)

2:20

"foolish"=hard-hearted ignorance—willful lack of understanding. As in Romans 1:21 "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

2:21

Here is the shift from hypothetical examples earlier in this text to historical ones here.

The word "righteousness" is used differently by Paul and James: Paul uses "righteousness" as a legal standing—justified, declared not guilty. James uses "righteousness" as the description of an approved life lived in obedience.

2:22

James uses this Genesis 15:6 text differently than Paul did. Paul's point was that before Abraham had done anything, specifically before he was circumcised, he was declared righteous by faith. But James indicates that this righteousness was filled up, perfected, by Abraham's obedience. Verse 21 didn't suggest that Abraham was working apart from faith. It wasn't works versus faith. Abraham's faith is presupposed throughout verse 21 and specifically mentioned in verse 23. James here proves that Abraham's faith went further than mental assent that God is one (v19). NASB "Faith was working with his works" in contrast to verse 20 "works that don't work."

"James's great contribution to the Christian life is not on the doctrine of justification, but in helping us to see that true faith is radical obedience." (Townsend in Blomberg, p. 180)

2:23

"Paul is promoting faith apart from the Law, while James argues that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac shows that he really did believe God and the promise of descendants for him." (Blomberg, p. 169)

"It appears certain that James is speaking of the manifestation, not of the imputation of righteousness, as if he had said, Those who are justified by faith prove their justification by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary semblance of faith. In one word, he is not discussing the mode of justification, but requiring that the justification of all believers shall be operative. And as Paul contends that men are justified without the aid of works, so James will not allow any to be regarded as justified who are destitute of good works...Let them twist the words of James as they may, they will never extract out of them more than two propositions: That an empty phantom of faith does not justify, and that the believer, not contented with such an imagination, manifests his justification by good works." (Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2:115)

When did Abraham attain the status of "righteous?"

"Perhaps this is to ask the wrong question of James. It is not the timing, but the fact of God's declaration of Abraham's righteousness that James is concerned with. Abraham's works, especially his offering of Isaac, reveal the character of his faith, a faith that is crediting for righteousness. When that righteousness is conferred is simply not an issue for James here." (Douglas Moo, James, p. 139)

"This choice of the word "righteousness" recalls Pauline language, where it regularly referred to the imputation of right standing before God through faith in Christ. James, however, is closer to the OT use of righteousness as equivalent to hesed or "covenant faithfulness." (Craig Blomberg, Unpublished James Manuscript, p. 169)

2:24

"This verse does stand in stark contrast to Rom 3:28, even without the word "alone" explicitly in Paul's Greek. But again it is essential to remember the distinction between James' and Paul's use of the words "faith," "works" and "justify" in these two contexts, so that no insoluble contradiction emerges. As Joachim Jeremias famously epitomized it, Paul speaks of Christian faith (trust in Jesus) and Jewish works (obeying the Law so as to justify oneself), whereas James refers to Jewish faith (pure monotheism) and Christian works (good deeds that flow from salvation). Or as Frances Gench nicely phrases it, "Paul is dealing with obstetrics, with how new life begins; James, however, is dealing with pediatrics and geriatrics, with how Christian life grows and matures and ages." What James describes as the end result of justification bringing a person to maturity or "completion" (using the verb teleioww), Paul acknowledges in Philippians 1:6 when he expresses his confidence that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to 'completion' (from the related verb ejpotelew) until the day of Christ Jesus." (Blomberg, p. 171)

Other Resources on Faith that Works—Christ as Savior and Lord

Arguments that connect justification and sanctification—
Jesus as Savior and Lord:

MacArthur, John, *The Gospel according to the Apostles—
The Role of Works in the Life of Faith*, 2000 (see especially
"Appendix 3 Voices From the Past"

Horton, Michael, *Christ the Lord –The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, 1992 See especially chapters 3 (Kim Riddlebarger’s essay “What is Faith”) and 7 (Paul Schaefer’s essay “An American Tale” an historical overview of the Lordship question).

Arguments that divide justification and sanctification—against “Lordship Salvation:” I find the following works to be wholly unconvincing in the face of the NT evidence and the overwhelming commentary on this subject by Christian scholars for 2000 years.

Hodges, Zane , *Absolutely Free*.

Hodges, Zane, *The Gospel Under Siege*

Hodges, Zane, *The Epistle of James* (For an assessment of Hodges treatment of the book of James see D.A. Carson in *Exegetical Fallacies*, 137)

Ryrie, Charles, *So Great Salvation*

When we speak of being “declared not guilty,” “justified,” etc. we must realize that those words speak not only of initial justification (Paul in Romans 3 and 4 and Ephesians 2:8-9) but also of eventual “justification” at the final judgment.

I John 4:15-17: *“If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.”*

Hebrews 9:27: *“Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.”*

Matthew 12:36: *“But I tell you that men will have to give*

account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."

"At the resurrection, believers, raised in glory, will be publicly recognized and declared not guilty on the day of judgment..." *Westminster Shorter Catechism*

Revelation 20: The books are opened and those whose names are found in the "lambs book of life" are judged acquitted.

The relationship of justification and sanctification (even faith and works):

"Sanctification...is the inevitable result of that vital union with Christ which true faith gives to a Christian. 'He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.' (John 15:5). The branch which bears no fruit is not living branch of the vine. The union with Christ which produces no effect on heart and life is mere formal union, which is worthless before God. The faith which has not a sanctifying influence on the character is no better than the faith of the devils. It is a dead faith, because it is alone. It is not the gift of God." (J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, p. 17)

"He (Paul in Galatians 5:6) says that what counts with God is the kind of faith that by its nature produces love. But it is faith that gives us our right standing with God. The love that comes from it only shows that it is, in fact, real living, justifying faith." (John Piper, August 8, 1999)

"James is not seeking to downgrade the importance of 'faith' in 2.14-26. On the contrary, faith retains its role as the primary distinguishing feature of the community. But as the prophets of old had denied the efficacy of sacrifice without obedience, so faith without works is dead." (In Blomberg, 155 footnote: Martin, *James*, 80. Donald J.

Verseput ("Reworking the Puzzle of Faith and Deeds" in James 2:14-26," *NTS* 43 [1997]: 115)

"We must underscore the point: James is not rally contrasting faith and works, as if these were two alternative options in one's approach to God. He is, rather, contrasting a faith that, because it is inherently defective, produces not works and a faith, that, because it is genuine does result in action." (Moo, James PNTC, p. 126)

When did Abraham attain the status of "righteous?"

"Perhaps this is to ask the wrong question of James. It is not the timing, but the fact of God's declaration of Abraham's righteousness that James is concerned with. Abraham's works, especially his offering of Isaac, reveal the character of his faith, a faith that is crediting for righteousness. When that righteousness is conferred is simply not an issue for James here." (Moo, p. 139)

"This choice of the word "righteousness" recalls Pauline language, where it regularly referred to the imputation of right standing before God through faith in Christ. James, however, is closer to the OT use of righteousness as equivalent to hesed or "covenant faithfulness." (Blomberg p. 169)

"But if you ask them, "Does justification as an ongoing and final right standing with God depend on the works of love?" Paul is going to say, "No, if by works you mean deeds done to show that you deserve God's ongoing blessing (the point of Romans 4:4)." And James is going to say, "Yes, if by works you mean the fruit and evidence of faith like Abraham's obedience on Mount Moriah." And Paul is going to say, "I agree with the James, based on his definitions." And James is going to say, "I agree with Paul, based on his definitions." "So when Paul renounces "justification by

works" he renounces the view that anything we do along with faith is credited to us as righteousness. Only faith obtains the verdict, not guilty, when we become Christians. Works of any kind are not acceptable in the moment of initial justification. But when James affirms "justification by works" he means that works are absolutely necessary in the ongoing life of a Christian to confirm and prove the reality of the faith which justifies. For Paul, "justification by works" (which he rejects) means "gaining right standing with God by the merit of works." For James, "justification by works" (which he accepts) means "maintaining a right standing with God by faith along with the necessary evidence of faith, namely, the works of love." To put it yet another way: When Paul teaches in Romans 4:5 that we are justified by faith alone, he means that the only thing that unites us to Christ for righteousness is dependence on Christ. When James says in James 2:24 that we are not justified by faith alone he means that the faith which justifies does not remain alone. These two positions are not contradictory. Faith alone unites us to Christ for righteousness, and the faith that unites us to Christ for righteousness does not remain alone. It bears the fruit of love. It must do so or it is dead, demon, useless faith and does not justify. The glory of Christ in the gospel is not merely that we are justified when we depend entirely on Christ, but also that depending entirely on Christ is the power that makes us new, loving people. Depending entirely on Christ is how we are justified and how we are sanctified. Paul struck the one note. James struck the other. Both are true and together they bring Christ the glory due his name. (Piper, August 8, 1999)

"This seems to contradict texts like Rom 4:2-4 and Gal 3:6, until we realize that Paul used Abraham as an example of faith providing initial justification, while James uses this example to refer to final, eschatological justification. Thus

James shows that Abraham was able to prove his faith as real because he was willing to act on it, so that he was brought to salvation at the end. (Blomberg, p. 166)

*"Faith is not repentance, nor obedience, nor does it include them as component parts. This is why Protestants have insisted upon faith alone. And this is why Protestants have been careful in how they have used the classical categories of knowledge, assent and trust. Faith alone justifies, hence sola fide. The faith that saves is a faith that involves the mind, the heart and the will. The whole person turns to Christ through faith. Thus, the type of 'dead' faith that James is talking about is not lacking information, nor lacking orthodoxy, nor lacking obedience, but lacking genuine trust in Christ himself. The threefold distinction is supported by the biblical data... Faith links us to Christ. It is through faith that we are united to him. And thereby, we receive his saving benefits by grace through faith. The Reformed, then, have historically linked faith, repentance and obedience together, not calling the latter two elements within saving faith itself, but understanding them as corollaries within the ordo salutis. That is, one who has exercised faith in Christ, and is united to Christ by that faith, will repent and will struggle to obey and yield. But these things are not conditions for, nor component parts of, faith itself. They are 'effects'—signs that there has been an exercise of saving faith." (Kim Riddlebarger in Michael Horton, Chapter 3 of *Christ the Lord*, p. 103-104)*

When we become Christians do we merely believe or do we embrace Jesus as saving-Lord? See the following suggested prayers for salvation:

**Prayer in Billy Graham's Steps to Peace with God
2008**

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer in Navigators' Bridge Illustration 2008

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite you to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as the Lord and Savior of my life. In Your name. Amen.

SGC bulletin:

Lord Jesus Christ, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before dared to admit, but through you I am more loved and accepted than I ever before dared to hope. I thank you for paying my debt on the cross, taking what I deserved in order to offer me complete forgiveness. Knowing that you have been raised from the dead, I turn from my sins and trust you as my Saving-Lord. Amen.

Now see the call to conversion from those who believe there must be no call to Lordship in the salvation message:

Grace Evangelical Society

Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the whole world (John 1:29). He has removed the sin barrier, which separated us from God. However, we still lack spiritual life, eternal life. To get that life, we must simply believe in Jesus for it. There are no strings attached. Our eternal salvation is "not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:9). Simply believe in Jesus and He guarantees you will never die spiritually. You will go to heaven when you die, and spend eternity in God's kingdom. It really is that simple.

Fellowship Bible Church Colorado Springs (a Grace Evangelical Society church)

You become a Christian by: 1. Realizing that you (along with all people) have sinned and fallen short of God's standards. 2. Personally believing that Jesus Christ, who was God in human flesh, died for your sins on the cross and rose again.

R.B. Thieme Bible Ministries

"Eternal life is available to you, right now. In the privacy and freedom of your soul, you can tell God the Father that you are believing in Jesus Christ, and that is the moment of eternal life."

Frank Minirth, formerly of Minirth-Meyer Clinics

"When one becomes a Christian, he consciously believes in Christ. He does not need, nor is he required, to will a commitment to obedience, though he may do so." (Frank B Minerty, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn 1993—Volume 6:11)

What others say on the subject of receiving Jesus as saving-Lord:

Is it enough to know and understand and assent to the facts of the gospel – even holding the 'inward conviction' that these truths apply to me personally—and yet never shun sin or submit to the Lord Jesus?" (MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, p. 141)

"So, too, while not claiming to know everything that Christ will require of a believer throughout life, James would most assuredly insist that it counts for nothing to claim to accept a free gift of salvation without transferring one's allegiance to Jesus as the Ultimate Master of one's life and possessions. It is precisely those people who do make this claim who incur the scorn of devotees of other religions

that recognize the need to do good in the world, thereby making it harder for such people to discern and accept authentic Christianity!" (Blomberg, James, p. 178)

Dr. Darrell Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary) debate with Dr. Bob Wilkin (Grace Evangelical Society) at Dallas in mid 1990s at www.faithalone.org/resources

Bock: *"Paul does not think of the gospel merely as a ticket of escape from wrath. It is so wonderful because it is entry into a new, freshly enabled life. That life is not a condition of salvation; it is part of the gift that is the gospel...."*

"To seek forgiveness is to ask for clean relationship with God, which is why baptism pictures the moment of faith. With one comes the other. I can distinguish them, but I cannot divide them. Both are part of the gospel which comes to me by the gift of His grace. To want forgiveness but not relationship with God is not a response to the gospel. This is what I seek and receive by faith: forgiveness and entry into life that lasts into eternity..."

"I am comfortable with the term "Lord" as a term of saving confession because it appears in contexts where the gospel offer and response is described in the New Testament... The title "Lord" in the gospel is not merely a way to say God. It is a title acknowledging God's authority over the salvation process. In the ancient world, to confess someone as the divine lord was to recognize his authority and rights. "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." To call Him our Lord and to call upon the Lord who delivers says much about the nature of my relationship to Him as I come to Him for life..."

"Four, I'm also comfortable using the term "repentance" as another way to talk about a faith response. God's word

treats it as an adequate summary term for our message, or at least our response to it... Repentance, then, is more than changing your mind about Jesus. For to change your mind about who He is and what He had to do to gain my forgiveness on the cross, is to understand my need and the heinous nature and price of sin in a new way. Thus, the language of turning is also an adequate rendering for what this response of faith entails.

(Acts 26:19-20; 1 Thessalonians 1:9)

"So we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in God's unique Son (John 3:16). I trust this Christ, calling upon Him as Lord, because He has authority, which I acknowledge in my calling out to Him, to forgive my sins, bring me into incorporated relationship with Him through His Spirit, and give me eternal life. He died that I might live. My faith response represents a change of direction -- a turning to Him because I now appreciate that sin costs and separates. I trust Him because I understand sin. I trust Him because I need Him. Thank God that He gives those coming to know Him the grace to appreciate this offer and cry out for it in faith. Thank God He seals the deal with His Spirit, providing enablement that I formerly lacked. Don't sell God's grace short. The gospel is rich in its benefits."

Dr. Bob Wilkin in same debate:

"How do we get the gift of eternal life? What is the condition? In terms of the condition, the gospel is by faith alone. Stated simply, Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him for it. Without any reference... as you noticed the verses I mentioned...no reference to turning from sins, no reference to commitment of life, no reference of promising to serve God, no reference to entering into a life-transforming relationship, no reference to persevering in faith and in godly practice...simply believing in Him. The gospel is that simple: Jesus

guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him..."

Dr. Bock: *"My fundamental argument is that justification and sanctification are distinguishable, but they are not divisible."*

Bill Webster "Lordship Salvation—Biblical or Heretical"

Webster is pastor of Grace Bible Church (Reformed Baptist) of Battle Ground, Washington.

<http://www.christiantruth.com/lordshipsalvation.html>

"What will be the result in the life of a person who truly repents and believes? The result will be a totally changed life. The overall bent or direction of the life, from the heart attitudes and motivations to the outward behavior, completely changes. Where the life used to be centered around self and the pursuit of selfish interests, it is now centered around Christ and His interests. No Christian will live a perfect life, but the desire of the heart—the practice or habit of the new creature in Christ—is to know and do the will of God. The issue is not perfection, but a changed life. If a person's life has not been fundamentally changed from one of self centeredness to one of living for the will of God, then that person has never come to know Jesus Christ. The evidence of true conversion is a changed life."

Corresponding to Chapter Six
Faith and Words
James 3:1-12

I. PNTC, Douglas Moo

In James 3:8 he writes "no one can tame the tongue." The Greek is a little more involved than that. It is literally, "no one (of or among) people" can tame the tongue. Augustine thought James said it this way to point out that no human can train the tongue, but that God in his grace can. Even Moo and others who cite Augustine admit this interpretation is a bit dubious. (In Moo, p. 161)

II. Proverbs re. the Tongue

10:8 "The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin."

10:11 "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked."

10:19 "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

10:21 "The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment."

11:9 "With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape."

12:18 "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

12:25 "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up."

13:3 "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin."

16:27-28 "A scoundrel plots evil, and his speech is like a

scorching fire. A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends."

17:28 "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."

My (Jerry's) father's variation on that theme was "Keep your mouth shut and others won't know how ignorant you truly are."

18:7 "A fool's mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul."

18:21 "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

26:20 "Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down."

29:20 "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

Jesus said in Matthew 15:11, *"What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"*

*Warren Wiersbe says he heard of a professing Christian who got angry on the job and let loose with a string of curse words. Embarrassed, he turned to his partner and said, "I don't know why I said that, it really isn't me." His partner replied, "It had to be you, or it couldn't have come out of you." (Wiersbe, *Be Mature*, p. 99)*

The Effects of Gossip

A woman convicted of her sin of gossip asked her minister what to do. He said she should take a bag of feathers and go through the neighborhood putting one feather on the doorstep of each person she has maligned through the years. She returned saying she had obeyed but felt no better. He then said it was because she was only half done. She was to now return to each house and retrieve the feather. She returned shortly saying she could not find one of the feathers. The minister said that is precisely the

nature of gossip, once you have scattered the words, they are impossible to retrieve. I hope the minister also told her about forgiveness but his point was that words destroy.

III. The relationship of justification by faith and our responsibility for our words:

"Now I want to talk about this for just a moment so you understand clearly some theological distinctions. True believers...mark this, here's the word...true believers will have a sanctified tongue. Did you get that? True believers, true Christians, totally transformed people, those who have been made new in Christ, will have a sanctified tongue. Let me add something to it. True believers must have a sanctified tongue. Did you get that? True believers will have a sanctified tongue. True believers must have a sanctified tongue."

"You say, "Well, wait a minute. If we will have, then why do you tell us we must have?" Because one is a sovereign reality in the new birth and the other is a human responsibility that's really ours to fulfill. And that's the amazing tension and paradox of our Christian experience. If we're truly new in Christ, we will have a pure speech. And if we're truly new in Christ, we will take the responsibility to be sure we have a pure speech. That is a constant biblical paradox. If you understand that, and we hit that a lot of times in our Bible study, but if you understand that, you really are on the way to understanding a mystery."

"You can't fully understand it but let me give it to you this way. We are saved by sovereign grace, right? Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, yet we must believe. We are kept by the security of God in His sovereign decree, yet we must persevere. We live by sovereign power, not I but Christ living in me, yet we must obey. And

as James would put it, because we are new creatures, we will endure trials and we must endure them. We will receive the Word and obey it and we must receive the Word and obey it. We will be gracious to the needy without partiality, and we must be gracious to the needy without partiality. We will produce good works and we must produce good works.

"In other words, you'll never really be able to resolve the fact that what God says will be true of you, must be true of you. Just because God said it doesn't mean we can lie down flat on our back and hope it happens. And that's really the mystery of the apparent paradoxes of the Christian experience. Where there is genuine living faith and true regeneration and transformation, these things will be the result and they must be the result. God will produce them in us but He produces them in us through our commitment to them. You understand that? That's the best we can get at it." John MacArthur at <http://www.biblebb.com/files/mac/59-18.htm>

IV. The Power of Words

<http://powertochange.com/changed/ccolvin/>
by Claire Colvin.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can wound forever. Pictures of me as a little kid are really cute—curly blond hair, a quick smile and eyes always looking for the next adventure. I had the confidence that comes from knowing you are truly loved. If we painted pictures at school, I painted three. I was the product of an almost perfect childhood, but I didn't stay that way. Around grade six I became the kid everyone picked on. Maybe I didn't wear the right clothes, maybe kids are just mean sometimes, for whatever reason it started and it kept going. By high school there was a group of four or five

guys who told me I was stupid and ugly every single day. I believed them.

It is amazing what you accept as truth when you hear it enough times. As my confidence faltered and my self esteem withered away I stopped talking in class, in groups, or in the hallways. I dreaded lunch hour, never stepped foot inside the cafeteria and the thought of class presentations literally made me sick. I stopped smiling. They tell me I went a whole year and never smiled once. Convinced I was worthless I would stress over every test and paper even though my grades were consistently excellent. My whole life revolved around being as invisible as possible. I thought that I couldn't get hurt if everyone forgot I was there. I had so little respect for myself and I was so afraid that I considered suicide. I got as far as choosing a method but decided that I couldn't go through with it. Suicide is something you can't take back. I was still thinking clearly enough to be able to consider what it would have done to my family. I don't think that suicide is always a conscious choice, but for me I had not yet arrived at a place where it was beyond my control. I know that's not always the case and I am grateful that I got a second chance.

Things did not improve so halfway through grade eleven I transferred to a different high school in a desperate attempt to get away. It worked, but it did not solve my problems. The insults stopped but I still had to face myself, running wasn't going to fix that. That summer I attended a conference with the youth group from my church and found answers in the last place I would have expected. At the conference I came to realize that God loves me very, very much. I matter to God, what an incredible truth! Suddenly I had value, I had something to build on and the healing began. The world is a scary place when you stop

liking yourself. Now I had hope. I had learned about God as a child, but just trying to survive had consumed me and I had long since forgotten about Him. God had not forgotten about me.

During my second year of university, I came across the verse in the Bible that is one of my favorites, "I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:9&10)

Words are powerful things and God's words of love are the most powerful of all. I smile a lot now — I guess I'm still making up for that one silent year — and while I doubt I'll ever be a public speaker, I no longer walk around with my eyes on the floor. I am still learning, but my Mom tells me that I remind her of this little girl she used to know with curly blond hair, a quick smile and a glint of adventure in her eyes.

*Though much is taken, much abides;
And though we are not now that strength
Which in old days moved earth and heaven
That which we are, we are:
One equal temper of heroic hearts
Made weak by time and fate but strong in will:
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
~Tennyson, from "Ulysses"*

Take a look at your life. How would you describe it? Contented? Rushed? Exciting? Stressful? Moving forward? Holding back? For many of us it's all of the above at times. There are things we dream of doing one day, there are things we wish we could forget. In the Bible, it says that Jesus came to make all things new. What would your life

look like if you could start over with a clean slate?

Living with hope.

If you are looking for peace, there is a way to balance your life. No one can be perfect, or have a perfect life. But every one of us has the opportunity to experience perfect grace through a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

You can receive Christ right now by faith through prayer. Praying is simply talking to God. God knows your heart and is not so concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. Here's a suggested prayer:

Lord Jesus, I want to know you personally. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life to you and ask you to come in as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life. Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Make me the kind of person you want me to be.

Does this prayer express the desire of your heart? You can pray it right now, and Jesus Christ will come into your life, just as He promised. Is this the life for you? If you invited Christ into your life, thank God often that He is in your life, that He will never leave you and that you have eternal life. As you learn more about your relationship with God, and how much He loves you, you'll experience life to the fullest.

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Corresponding to Chapter Nine
Words that Destroy
James 4:11-12

I. See the following sermons by Dr. Jerry Nelson at www.Soundliving.org:

"Sticks and Stones..."
Exodus 20:16

"The Theology of Planks and Specks"
Matthew 7:1-5

II. *"The verb "speak against" (katalalevw) can sound overtones of unjustified speech against someone (hence NIV "slander"), and it can parallel the more negative meanings of "judge" (krivnw--such as "condemn;" cf. NJB). But it may also refer to broader oral mistreatment, including "destructive verbal attacks, gossip behind another person's back and false accusations."* (from Blomberg's unpublished commentary on James)

III. *Satan is called the accuser of believers. When we pass along hurtful, demeaning information, we are doing the devil's work.* (Blanchard, p. 304)

IV. James has repeatedly touched on this subject of our sinful propensity to destroy each other in our pursuit of self:

- James 1:14-15: "but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

- James 1:19-20: "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."
- James 3:6-9: "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body...no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness."
- James 3:16: "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."
- James 4:1: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"
- James 4:12: "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?"

"Defamation begins and lives on in the mind. It is something we say to ourselves long before we pass it on. But if our minds were drilled in biblical attitudes, then love for our brothers would begin to root out censoriousness. Consideration for our neighbors would begin to replace the hurtful and arrogant word by helpful and caring pastoral concern."(Alec Motyer, *James*, p. 158)

V. *"Judgmental words eventually will flow out of a judgmental heart, but the sin begins in the heart. It is a manifestation of pride; we think that we're better than others are.*

1. *You judge someone wrongly when you criticize him out of jealousy, bitterness, selfish ambition, or some other sin, rather than seeking to build him in Christ.*

2. *You judge someone wrongly when you assume that you know all of the pertinent facts and motives behind the person's words or actions.*
3. *You judge someone wrongly when you set up human standards, rather than holding to God's word as the standard.*
4. *You judge someone wrongly when you do not first judge your own sin before trying to help him with his sin.*
5. *You judge someone wrongly when you share confidential or personal information with the wrong intent.*
6. *You judge someone wrongly when out of a self-righteous spirit, you criticize or malign him over a minor or indifferent matter.*
7. *You judge someone wrongly when you make an authoritative pronouncement about his eternal destiny.*

(Steven Cole http://www.fcfonline.org/search_methods)

VI. Stulac suggests three ways in which Christians are often too quick to criticize: *"judging the motives behind others' words or actions in church business, judging how others spend money and judging how others are rearing their children."* (George Stulac, *James*, p. 155)

Corresponding to Chapter Ten
Satisfying Dependence
James 4:13-17

These verses are likely a whole new section of the book, breaking from what he has been talking about to go back to a theme he only introduced early in the book. James 1:9-11: "The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. 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."

Verse 15 would suggest this instruction is directed to Christians for it doesn't seem likely James would say this to non-believers.

4:13-17: *"really is not about wealth or poverty but about the temptations of autonomous planning more generally, and thus a failure to take God's will into account."*(Blomberg, unpublished commentary, p. 262)

Main point: *"Christians should not plan for the future as if they were in complete control of their own lives but should consistently make a healthy allowance for God's sovereignty."*(Blomberg, p. 263)

Augustine wrote, *"Love God and do as you please. We changed it to "Do as you please and **say** you love God."*(Hughes, p. 203)

"As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Again the problem is not with money-making and planning but with the assumptions underlying our actions. It is the arrogant self-sufficiency, the disregard of God's prerogatives, that is the evil."

NASB: "You boast in your arrogance." "boast" is "to put confidence in" which is not necessarily negative until we add the word "brag." "Brag" is negative—arrogances.

Phillips translation: "You get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence."

Amplified Bible: "But as it is, you boast [falsely] in your presumption *and your self-conceit*."

We begin to think we control the direction and duration of our lives.

James 4:17: "*Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*"

Is this James' conclusion? You now know what is the right thing relative to how you view your life and your daily actions—now do it. To know it and not do it is sin.

Luke 12:47: "*And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act as he would wish him to act shall be beaten with many [lashes].*"

Corresponding to Chapter Eleven
Compassion in a World of Haves and Have-nots
James 5:1-6

"People who hoard wealth are not only demonstrating utterly false priorities; they are also depriving others of their very life." (Moo, 214)

Jeremiah 22:13 *"Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor."*

Malachi 3:5 *"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty."*

I. James 5:3 "last days"

"Last days" – James knows they are in the last days—Jesus ushered in the last days—it is certainly coming—there is no excuse for not knowing. But instead the "rich" continue to gain and hoard as if nothing had changed—like partying on the Titanic after it had struck the iceberg.

"Here is where it becomes essential to understand the eschatological world-view of the NT. We live in the last days and have done so since Pentecost (cf. Ac 2:17). Christ could return at any point. Where is our treasure? Are we laying it up on earth so that we might live in comfort,

planning for a long life here (see cf. Lk 12:13-21), or do we focus more on amassing treasure in heaven with God, and merely grateful for the blessings he has given us here and now? The condemnation is not for owning wealth per se, but for hoarding rather than using it for kingdom purposes. As Johnson observes, "the last days'...are not the anticipated retirement years of the rich, but the time of God's judgment." (Blomberg, 288)

II. Rich and Poor in James

James 5:5 *"You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter."*

"The NAB translates, "you lived in wanton luxury;" the NLT, "satisfying your every whim;" and Moffatt, "you have reveled on earth and plunged into dissipation." Weymouth speaks of "profligate lives;" Goodspeed, of living "luxuriously and voluptuously;" and Rotherham, of having "luxuriated upon the land and run riot." (Blomberg, 290)

"Luxury" extravagant comfort—the softness of luxury. (Motyer, 167)

A life without self-denial, not necessarily corrupt in every way, but certainly offering no resistance to sin where there is promise of comfort and enjoyment." (Motyer, 167)

James 5:6 *"You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you."*

"It is easy to find examples today of the non-Christian rich who exploit the poor, and who sometimes go extra hard on believers. Many individual Christians have poignant stories to tell about just such behavior by their employers. But the

problem goes far beyond the individual level. Governments around the world almost by definition claim to make decisions based on "national interest," which usually translates into a disproportionate interest in the richest classes of that nation. Multinational corporations may look for the cheapest overseas labor so they can make the greatest profit, whether or not they pay a fair and decent wage and irrespective of the impact on the job market in the communities in which their headquarters or major Western plants are based. In many parts of the Two-Thirds world, they (or wealthy indigenous private owners, the local equivalent of the Mafia, or the government itself) own vast tracts of land that are cultivated by "guest workers" for substandard wages. Migrant workers in the U.S. often face similar injustices, made all the more complicated by the fact that some—but only some—of them are also illegal aliens. Even among full-fledged American citizens, the buying power of workers (i.e., wages evaluated based on cost of living in any given location) varies greatly from one part of the country to the next, with inequities based on race, country of origin, gender and marital status still alarmingly sizable. Wall's words are worth pondering: "If James's brand of piety is taken seriously and at face value...a substantial portion of the North American church would become quite uncomfortable with the ease by which it has accommodated the upward economic mobility of liberal democracy while trying to follow after its downwardly mobile Lord.

"But there are even more uncomfortable applications that should be made. How many upper- or middle-class Western Christians have so many extra, largely unused clothes, so that, were it not for mothballs or their equivalent, they would have become moth-eaten? How many have other needless possessions, even investments, that are not being used for much of anything, and certainly not for the Lord's

work, that would be better off given to the needy? How many, if they were to be ruthlessly honest, live a lifestyle perilously close to that of v. 5—of luxury and self-indulgence? Then there is the enormous waste of food left uneaten and thrown away in restaurants, of the quantities of garbage thrown out that could be recycled, of planned obsolescence of products so that entirely new ones must be bought rather than old ones repaired (or the prohibitive cost of repairs making it cheaper just to buy a new item). A generation ago it was almost unheard of to raze an entire building just to put another one on the same site, or to level a whole shopping center to replace it with a new one, or to tear down an entire athletic stadium just to build a larger, fancier one, but today all of these are common occurrences. How many churches think that the only realistic option when they outgrow one facility is to build a bigger, more up-scale one, with thousands and even millions of dollars diverted from truly helping the world's destitute, physically and spiritually? One shudders to think of the potential judgment of God being stored up by so many examples of profligate waste.

"Of course, one dare not minimize the differences between a largely capitalist world today and the ancient Mediterranean economy of "limited good" (the belief that there was a fixed amount of wealth in the world such that, if one person had more, someone else necessarily had less). Many investments today are highly beneficial when their earnings continue to increase and are regularly used for God's kingdom work at home and abroad. A little bit of research can enable investors to determine companies that make reasonable efforts not to defraud workers, exploit the poor, or rape the environment. Similar research can enable consumers to make godlier, wiser choices when deciding which of several brands of some product to purchase. In 5:1-6 James hardly condemns savings or investing but

rather hoarding. But he comes down hard on that selfishness and then even harder on lavish expenditures for self-indulgence.”(Blomberg, 303-6)

III. A Case for helping the Working-poor

Duane Warden “Rich and Poor in James...”

<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/>

“Commendable as giving alms to the destitute is, the Law of Moses has considerably more to say about God’s insistence that justice be extended to the working poor. Those with the resources were to open wide their hand to lend to the poor who worked the land (Deut 15:7-11). Israel’s judges were to refuse the bribes rich men could pay. Poor people, ignorant as they might be of the law, were to receive impartial justice (Deut 16:19-20). No one was to take his tools from a poor working man (Deut 24:6). Further, if one exacted security, he had no right to invade the privacy of the poor man’s home or to keep what he had over night (Deut 24:10-14). Moses, like James, insisted that the poor man be paid his fair wages (Deut 24:14-15; James 5:4; cf. Lev 19:13). Never was an Israelite to defraud his poor neighbor by taking advantage of his ignorance. Just weights and measures offered protection for the working poor (Lev 19:36; Prov 11:1; Amos 8:5)...

“Because most political issues have economic implications, the message of James concerning the rich and the poor can be helpful for Christians who want their political choices to be Biblically informed. The message of James is at least this: Christians are to be a people whose sympathies and influence are to be for economic and social justice for the working poor, for the uneducated, for the disenfranchised of the societies where they live. Christians ought to favor public policy that allows people who labor to have some

reasonable share in the goods and services their labor produces. James is on the side of the poor. He is more concerned that the laborers in the field receive their wage than in defending an abstract principle of free enterprise economics...

"There is a tendency to confuse Christian responsibility toward the indigent poor and responsibility toward working poor. The indigent poor benefit from individual charitable acts. They need the necessities of life to be given to them. The working poor have other needs. Rather than charity, they need empowerment. Christians can feed the hungry, but improvement in the lot of the working poor often requires changes at the structural level of society. Let us grant that, at the personal level, and at the level of congregational priorities, evangelical Christians have a fairly good record for supplying necessities for the indigent poor. They have manned food and clothing banks, contributed laborers for soup kitchens, and offered martyrs in violent neighborhoods.

"Where evangelical Christians have shown less courage is in supporting the working poor at the structural level. Evangelicals have contributed to the poor with one hand, and with the other they have raised their economic and political voice in favor of systems that often lock the poor into subsistence wages. What is worse, they have excused their lack of interest in institutionalized injustice by reasoning that the working poor are somehow responsible for their poverty.

"There are large numbers in our society who scrape by, working in fast food stores, picking fruits and vegetables, and cleaning the filth of other people. They work hard, but they enjoy disproportionately few benefits from their labor. When these people, millions strong, stand on one side of a

political or economic question and those who control large blocks of capital stand on the other side, it is to be said to the chagrin of evangelical Christians that more often than not they have stood on the side of those who possess the capital. The religious conservative has become the bedfellow of the political right. Evangelicals in large numbers have bought into a broad-based political agenda authored by those who benefit from cheap labor, an agenda for which Biblical support is dubious at best. On the whole, evangelicals' sense of institutionalized social injustice has been somewhere between mediocre and non-existent.

"When Christians stand against the exercise of political power by government, by default they leave power in the hands of those who control wealth. Rather than imposing a sense of guilt on Christians by appealing for charity or calling for a self denying life style, a better approach is to teach believers that a Biblically informed political stance favors policy which gives the working poor resources to claim a more equitable share of the products and services a society produces. Rather than bringing used clothing or a Christmas dinner to the poor family who trim the grass at the golf course, rather than degrading the family further by reminding them of their dependence on charitable handouts, a better course is to favor a higher minimum wage so that no golf course will be at a competitive disadvantage when it pays its employees more fairly. Patrons will pay more for golf and the poor family will have earned its bread. Charity is not the answer any more than are governmental handouts. The answer is to revise the structure of the economy so that the poor share more equitably in its resources."

IV. On "Compassion:"

An excellent short book: McNeil, Morrison, Nouwen, *Compassion*, 1982

Luke 6:36 *"Be merciful (compassionate), just as your Father is merciful (compassionate)."*

Compassion is from the Latin pati and cum which mean to suffer with. Compassion is more than tenderheartedness. We are often temporarily impressed with some sad story and feel a sadness. But compassion is to truly suffer with someone and that is contrary to our natural selves. Suffering with someone means "we share in the other's vulnerability, enter with him or her into the experience of weakness and powerlessness, become part of uncertainty, and give up control and self-determination." (Compassion, 14)

God is compassionate—he came to be with us.

Competition, not compassion is our main motivation in life. We define ourselves by our differences from others. We are more or less intelligent, good looking, creative, wealthy, strong, etc. What we have achieved are the trophies that distinguish us. We imagine we can "forge our own identities; that we are the collective impressions of our surroundings; that we are the trophies and distinctions we have won." (Compassion, 20)

Jesus gives us a new identity that enables us to say, "I am not the esteem I can collect through competition, but the love I have freely received from God." (Compassion, 21)

Then we are free to enter into the lives of others—to have real compassion.

Our lives are lived upwardly—we pull ourselves up, we climb the ladder, more and more, better and better. Jesus stooped and he calls us to stoop

"Here we see what compassion means. It is not bending toward the underprivileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there." (Compassion 26)

"Compassion is not a snob gone slumming. Anybody can save his conscience by an occasional foray into knitting for an (old folks home). Did you ever take a real trip down inside the broken heart of a friend? To feel the sob of the soul – the raw, red crucible of emotional agony? To have this become almost as much yours as that of your soul-crushed neighbor? Then, to sit down with him—and silently weep? This is the beginning of compassion." (Jess Moody Quote-Unquote, p. 66)

Compassion is not just what we do but who we are in Christ.

When Jesus came he said the kingdom of God has come. The kingdom that is to be when Jesus returns has already invaded the present. Through God's people we now see in part what will be true in full when Jesus returns. *"The future has already begun and is revealed each time strangers are welcomed, the naked are clothed, the sick and prisoners are visited, and oppression is overcome. Through these grateful actions the first glimpses of a new heaven and a new earth can be seen."* (McNeil, Morrison, Nouwen, *Compassion*, 134)

Jesus claimed to be God, the bearer of good news about the kingdom of God. What was the first indication of his credibility? His actions! When asked if he was the one to come, Jesus pointed to his actions, "the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear..." His actions were the source of his credibility. (McNeil, et al, 119)

In James we have seen that the true test of discipleship, of belonging to God, is in our actions.

Luke 6:36 *"Be merciful (compassionate), just as your Father is merciful (compassionate)."*

Corresponding to Chapter Twelve
Prayer—Proactive Patience
James 5:3-20

I. PRAYER

Prayer is rebellion against the status quo!

Jerry Nelson

HEALING AND PRAYER

For more see "Expectant and Accepting" under "Special Topics" at www.soundliving.org

II. *"We should view prayer as another **revolutionary tactic**, not a passive resignation to a situation. In prayer, we enlist the aid and ear of the Lord of Hosts (recall 5:4), our God who is more than capable of righting our wrongs and helping us in our pain."* (Blomberg, p. 315)

ON CONFESSION OF SIN

"More difficult to apply is James' command to confess our sins to one another. Catholicism elevated this procedure to a sacrament but limited it to a private encounter between church members and clergy. The Lutheran and Anglican/Episcopalian liturgies include a public confession of sins at the start of each service, followed by the pastor's pronouncement of absolution. But still neither of these practices is quite the same thing as going to the person against whom one has sinned to acknowledge one's failure and seek forgiveness. Matthew 18:15-18 lies in the background. When sin has estranged two parties, one of them needs to take the initiative to restore the relationship. If that fails, then other Christian helpers must be brought into the process. If at all possible, the confession should not be made any more or less public than the original sin. And "any confession should be offered in the presence of

those who have been harmed by the sin or in the presence of the leaders of that community rather than a wider context, so that wise counsel may be offered.” Community life can be powerfully strengthened by sensitive application of appropriate confession, whereas cavalier and irresponsible application can do great damage. If a person does not know that one has sinned in one’s thoughts against them, it can probably only harm them for one to confess the sin. But when people are aware of offenses, even when two parties are each partly to blame, it is almost always healthy to take the initiative in apologizing.” (Blomberg, p. 330,331)

III. Resource: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (especially chapter 5).

IV. AN OUTLINE OF 5:12-20:

5:12 Be people of integrity

5:13-18 Be people of prayer

5:19-20 Be people who lovingly correct each other.

AN OUTLINE OF 5:13-20

While waiting patiently for Jesus’ return, do two things:

5:13-18 Intercede for one another.

5:19-20 Intervene for one another

ON INTERPRETATION OF 5:16

The translation of this verse (5:16) depends somewhat on the verb form of the word “energoumene;” is it passive or middle. A good discussion of this is in Excursus I of James Adamson’s *The Epistle of James, NICNT*, 205ff

V. On ELDERS

The words “Elders”—Presbuteros (James); Overseer—episkopos- (1 Timothy 3:1); Pastor/shepherd—poimane (Acts 20:28) are always used in the plural meaning, not

one but several men in any one church. All refer to the same office in the church. They are to be spiritually mature men who are responsible under God to guide the church (I Timothy and Titus 2). It is at least interesting that James does not tell the sick to call for those with the gift of healing but to call for those who are spiritually mature. It is the spiritually mature who should be expected to be able to pray with discernment and a proper perspective.

Notice that the welfare of the members of the congregation is a primary concern of the elders. They are not only servants of an institution but more importantly they are servants of the people. It is not that the elders have some magical power but that the elders represent the congregation. They go to the sick person who has called them.

ELDERS PRAYING FOR THE SICK

Upon request, the elders assemble at the home of the sick person. The sick person is asked about the nature of his/her illness; care should be taken to not encourage too much detail, but enough to pray specifically.

James 3:13-16 is read.

The sick person is gently questioned about their understanding of the passage: has confession of sin been made where appropriate; do they understand faith as faith in God, not faith in faith or faith in prayer; are they ready to accept God's will in the matter, etc.

The sick person is anointed with oil in the name of the Lord (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Laying hands gently on the sick person, several of the elders pray for him/her.

Together we sing the "Doxology" as indication of trust in God's providential care.

(Ideas guided by R. Kent Hughes, in *James, Faith that Works*, p. 256-7)

