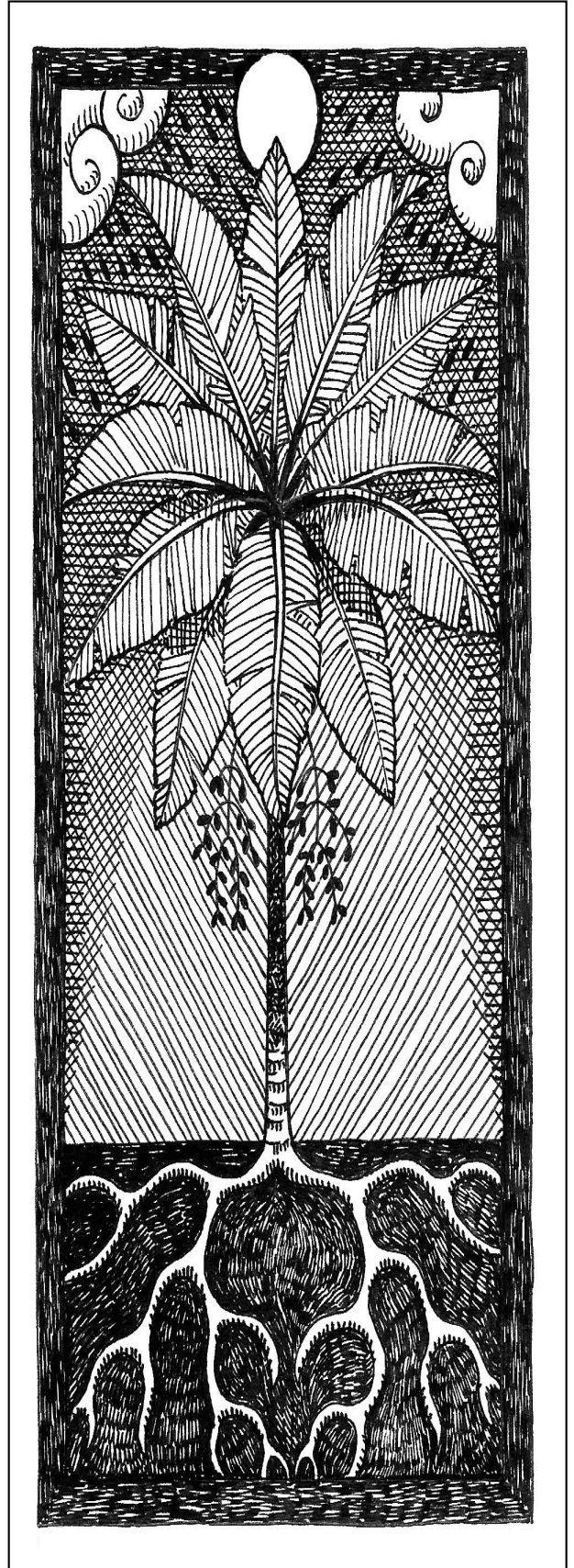


# *A FAITH THAT BEHAVES*

*FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS  
USELESS. . .*

*STUDIES IN JAMES*

*SANTA BARBARA  
COMMUNITY CHURCH*



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## Fall Calendar

Teaching Date	Study	Text	Title
9/24			Introduction to James
10/1	1	1:1-8	Oxymoronic Joy
10/8	2	1:9-18	Boasting and Blessing
10/15	3	1:19-27	Word-Centered Religion
10/22	4	2:1-13	Faith and Partiality
10/29	5	2:14-26	Faith and Works
11/5	6	3:1-12	The Untamed Tongue
11/12	7	3:13—4:12	The Meekness of Wisdom
11/19	8	4:13-5:6	The Dangers of Wealth
11/26	Thanksgiving Sunday—No James Study		
12/3	9	5:7-12	Suffering and Patience
12/10	10	5:13-20	The Prayer of the Righteous

The text of this study is a re-write and expansion of our James study from 1998. The “old” study was written by Steve Jolley and the re-write is by Reed Jolley. Thanks to Joan Fredrickson, Susi Lamoutte and Lisa Guest for proof reading the study. And thanks to Micah McWilliams (cover and study 10), Eric Berg (study 1), Kat McLean and Paul Benthin (studies 2-9) for providing the illustrations. All Scripture citations, including the text at the beginning of the studies, are from the English Standard Version. May God bless Santa Barbara Community Church as we study his word!

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## SOURCES/ABBREVIATIONS

Barclay	William Barclay, <u>The Letters of James and Peter</u> , Westminster Press, 1960
Burdick	Donald Burdick, <u>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</u> Vol. 12., Zondervan, 1981
ESV	English Standard Version
Hughes	Kent Hughes, <u>James: Faith That Works</u> , Crossway Books, 1991
Kistemaker	Simon Kistemaker, <u>James and 1-3 John</u> , Baker, 1986
KJV	King James Bible
MacArthur	John MacArthur, <u>James</u> , Moody Press, 1998
Moo	Douglas Moo, <u>James</u> , Eerdmans, 1985
Motyer	J.A. Motyer, <u>The Message of James</u> , IVP, 1985
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
Roper	David Roper, <u>The Law That Sets You Free!</u> , Word Books, 1977
Tasker	R.V. G. Tasker, <u>The General Epistles of James</u> , Tyndale, 1977
Vaughn	Curtis Vaughn, <u>James</u> , Zondervan, 1969



## Introduction

The book of James is one of those rare jewels of the Bible that bears the distinction of being both loved and hated by those who have read it through the centuries. Indeed, many believers today refer to these five chapters as their *favorite book* of the New Testament, while Martin Luther, the towering figure of the Protestant reformation, referred to James as a *right strawy epistle* which had *no gospel character to it*.<sup>1</sup> He barely accepted James as a part of the Bible!

Readers who are at all familiar with the New Testament will open the letter from James and find themselves thinking, *This is really different from the rest!*

First of all, James is anything but a theologian in his 108-verse letter. James gives the reader little to nothing about the life of Jesus, the deity of Christ, the cross of Christ, or the ministry of the Holy Spirit. James does not teach us about the significance or importance of the church, nor does he show how the grand themes of the Old Testament were fulfilled in Christ.

Instead, in these five chapters of Holy Scripture, we find what is probably a sermon committed to writing and then distributed to the church of Jerusalem that had been scattered due to persecution. As was the case with both Paul's and Peter's letters, this letter was meant to be read in the church for corporate instruction and edification.<sup>2</sup>

James' focus is the practical outworking of the Christian faith. He is concerned that faith is more than head knowledge or mere intellectual assent. Indeed, faith without works is not faith at all; it is dead (2:14ff.). As the title of one commentary on James puts it, faith is *A Belief That Behaves*.

## The Style

Again, James is probably a sermon committed to writing.<sup>3</sup> New Testament scholars point out that the style of this letter bears numerous parallels to sermons given in synagogues during the early centuries of the Christian era. Notice the following:

- The letter is addressed *to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion* (1:1). James uses familiar language normally employed to refer to the nation of Israel, but here it is applied to the new Israel, the church.
- James uses the word *synagogue* in 2:2 to describe the meeting place of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in James H. Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James*, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> See Colossians 4:16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:27.

<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps two sermons. Simon Kistemaker finds two sermons of almost equal length in James. The first consists of chapters 1-2 (53 verses) and the second consists of chapters 3-5 (55 verses).

- James carries on a dialogue with his readers/listeners that was typical of a Jewish sermon (see 2:3, 2:16, 2:18 for examples).
- The letter is loaded with commands. There are 54 imperatives in the Greek text of James. This pastor has a definite agenda for his readers!
- James is full of illustrations from the natural world. He speaks of the *waves of the sea*, the *wind*, the *wildflowers*, the *sunrise*, the *scorching heat of the sun*, and the *withered plant*. He uses the bits in the mouths of horses to illustrate a point, and he alludes to a powerful forest fire, the fig tree, and annual rains in autumn and spring. This is exactly the kind of oration one would have expected to hear from a Jewish rabbi in the first century.

### The Author

Who is the James who authored this letter? The New Testament refers to four men who go by the name James:

1. James the son of Zebedee and the brother of John (Matthew 4:21, Mark 1:19). This James is one of the inner circle of Jesus' followers, along with Peter and John.
2. James the son of Alphaeus, sometimes called James the *lesser*, or James the *younger* (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).
3. James the father of Judas, one of the twelve disciples but not Judas Iscariot (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:14 and John 14:22).
4. James *the Lord's brother* (Galatians 1:19).

Of these four men named James only the first and the fourth are prominent in the New Testament. But James the son of Zebedee died as a martyr in 44 AD (see Acts 12:2). His early death makes it unlikely that he authored this letter.

James the half-brother of Jesus became the head of the Jerusalem church and was known as *James the righteous* or *James the just* because of his devotion to the law of the Old Testament and because of his personal holiness. This is the James who presided over the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). Eusebius, a 4<sup>th</sup> century church historian, tells us that James was eventually put to death in 62 AD by the Pharisees and scribes for refusing to renounce his faith in Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Most students of this book think that this is the James who wrote our New Testament letter.

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<sup>1</sup> The story is a grisly tale. James was first sentenced to be stoned for breaking the law of Moses. The priests of the temple took him to the roof and tossed him to what they thought would be his demise. James survived the fall only to be stoned and then beaten to death with a club.

## The Backdrop

Readers of James who are familiar with the whole of Scripture will immediately be reminded of the book of Proverbs and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). With his pithy writing style and frequent changes of subject, James is proverbial. He castigates the rich and warns the indolent. He frequently uses the word *wisdom* (see 1:5, 3:13, 17), and he even quotes Proverbs directly (James 4:6 = Proverbs 3:34).

Consider the following parallels between the two books.

<b>James</b>	<b>Proverbs</b>
<b>1:5</b> <i>If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.</i>	<b>2:6</b> <i>For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;</i>
<b>1:19</b> <i>Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.</i>	<b>29:20</b> <i>Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.</i>
<b>3:18</b> <i>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.</i>	<b>11:30</b> <i>The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise.</i>
<b>4:13-16</b> <i>Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"-- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.</i>	<b>27:1</b> <i>Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.</i>

At the same time, readers of the book of James cannot help but be reminded of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the book of James seems like a commentary on Jesus' most famous sermon. Again, a few examples.

### James

**2:10** *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*

**2:13** *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

**5:2-3** *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.*

### Sermon on the Mount

**5:19** *Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

**5:7** *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

**6:19** *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. . .*

### The Message

Above all else, James is an exceedingly practical sermon that calls believers to live out their faith in the world. One commentator puts it this way:

This epistle sternly insists upon Christian practice consistent with Christian belief, heaps scathing contempt upon all empty profession, and administers a stinging rebuke to the readers' worldliness. Its stress upon the gospel's ethical imperative makes the epistle as relevant today as when it was first written.<sup>1</sup>

James is the un-quick-fix writer of the New Testament. Instead, he sees our discipleship as a long obedience in the same direction. The Christian life is a lifelong discipline, an ongoing struggle against our sin nature. Believers must do battle with their tongue, with their desire for wealth, with their pride, and with their own lusts.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, cited in MacArthur, p. 2.

## The Controversy

Without a doubt, James 2:14-26 is the most controversial portion of the letter. At times James seems to go out of his way to contradict the apostle Paul, and this is one of those times.

Paul was the champion of the New Testament teaching of justification by faith alone. Consider the apparent contradiction between the two writers.

Ephesians 2:8-9 reads,

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

James 2:20-22, 24

*Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works. . . You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

Is James contradicting Paul's doctrine of free grace? Or is he explaining it to those who took Paul's teaching and used it as a license to sin? We will examine this question in study 5.

## The Plan

Read five or six commentaries on James and you are likely to come up with five or six outlines of the book. That's because James' writing style is, to put it mildly, fluid. He moves easily from one topic to another and then returns to the first without warning. Again, he is the antithesis of Paul in the way he writes. Paul seems to have a definite plan of attack in each of his thirteen letters. James, however, wanders with a purpose. Specifically, he probes the answer to the question *What does it mean to live a life of faith?*

As we study James, we'll find the book both *easy* and *difficult*. These 108 verses are fairly easy to understand, but they are quite difficult to live out. James cuts to the heart of the Christian disciple as he calls every one of us to radical repentance and change.

James is a book that will definitely impact our lives. This writer is direct and impolite, yet at the same time we can sense his pastor's heart. Although he is very straightforward, James is also very warm. He deeply desires that his readers submit every area of their lives to the God whom they worship.

The entire book of James can be read in about fifteen or twenty minutes. Make every effort to find a good chair far from the distractions of the telephone, television, and Internet; open James' letter; and soak in its message. Do this often during the next 10 weeks. Ask the following questions as you read:

1. What does it say?
2. What does it mean?
3. What am I going to do about it?

May God help us do exactly that as we study this potent letter.

## Study One

### Oxymoronic Joy

#### James 1:1-8

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

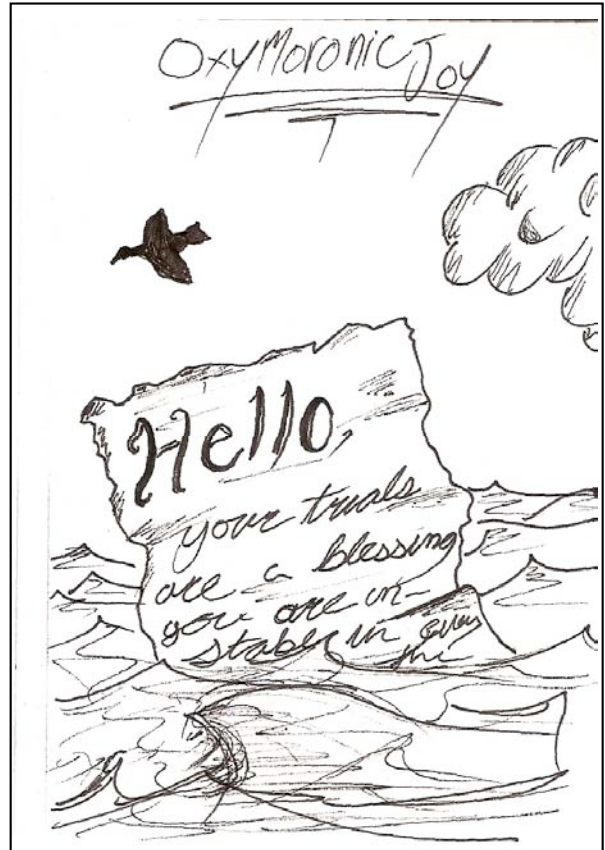
*To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:*

*Greetings.*

*2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

*5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7*

*For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*



Read the above verses from the English Standard Version (ESV). Compare as many translations as you have available.

Before going on in this study, answer the following questions:

- Circle the key words of this passage.
- James begins his letter with a cursory greeting and moves quickly to instruction. Why do you suppose James begins so abruptly?
- What initial questions about this passage do you have?

### Oxymoronic Joy

An *oxymoron* is defined as a combination of contradictory or incongruous words. The couplings of the words *alone together*, *taped live*, or *jumbo shrimp* are oxymorons. (Okay, while we're at it, how about *government organization*, *airline food*, *virtual reality*, *plastic glasses*, *the Dodge Ram*, or a *healthy tan*? Got any others???)

In these first eight verses of his epistle, James presents what is perhaps the ultimate oxymoron: joy found through trials.

What specific reasons for welcoming trials in our lives does James give us? How many can you find in this passage?

Give an example of a *trial* that you have met in your life. Did it produce *steadfastness* in your character? Why or why not? Explain.

Notice that James doesn't put limits on the definition of *trial*. The Greek word (*peirasmois*) refers to a variety of things that would test a person.

In our sin-filled world, every person faces troubles from within as well as from without. The Scriptures testify to this throughout.

- Job 5:7
- Job 14:1
- Psalm 22:11
- Ecclesiastes 2:17, 23
- John 16:33

- 2 Corinthians 4:8
- 2 Timothy 3:12

But here James puts a twist on a believer's approach to the normal trials, afflictions, and persecution that life holds. James says that we are to welcome these trials because of their benefit. His phrase for joy is strong in the Greek text. He says we could count it *pasan charan*, meaning we should have *full and complete joy* in the face of our troubles.

The English Puritan Matthew Henry (1662-1714) wrote this:

Extraordinary afflictions are not always the punishment of extraordinary sins, but sometimes the trial of extraordinary graces. Sanctified afflictions are spiritual promotions.

What has been your experience of *sanctified afflictions*?

Give an example of a time in your life when you found joy in tribulation.

Respond to the following:

We say that we believe that God is our Father, but as long as we remain untested on the point our belief falls short of steady conviction. But suppose the day comes—as it does and will—when circumstances seem to mock our creed, when the cruelty of life denies his fatherliness, his silence calls into question his almightiness and the sheer, haphazard, meaningless jumble of events challenges the possibility of a Creator's ordering hand. It is in this way that life's trials test our faith for genuineness. (Motyer, p. 31)

In verses 3-4 we find that trials produce *steadfastness* (*perseverance* in the NIV, *patience* in the KJV). The word is a strong one and speaks of active tenacity or stick-to-it-iveness. As William Barclay explains, *steadfastness* is

not the patience which can sit down and bow its head and let things descend upon it and passively endure until the storm is past. . .It is the virtue which can transmute the hardest trial into glory because beyond the pain it sees the goal.

In what ways has your spiritual stamina increased through the trials that God has placed in your life? Be specific.

**1:4** is an imperative in the Greek text. James is not simply telling us what happens when we experience trials. Trials and tribulations are as likely to produce bitterness and disappointment as they are to produce maturity. James is telling the reader what to do: *Let steadfastness have its full effect*. The choice is ours when we suffer: We can either gain the God-intended benefits from that suffering, or we can miss what God has in store for our faith.

Give an example of when you have responded to a trial with bitterness and disappointment. Why did you choose this path?

What leads us to decide to *let* trials have their *full effect*?

What trial are you facing today that you need to endure in faith and with patience? Will you commit this trial to the Lord? Write to God a prayer of commitment in the space below.

## Wisdom and Trials

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7), and biblical wisdom is the seeing and living of life from God's perspective. So when James refers to wisdom, he is not speaking of speculative philosophy or theoretical thinking. Biblical wisdom is practical and earthy—and it takes a lifetime to acquire!

Read and discuss Proverbs 2:1-15 as a group. What do you learn about wisdom from this passage?

Proverbs 2:6 is very similar to James 1:5. God is the Giver of wisdom, and that is a profound truth about God. In the ESV we read that God *gives generously to all*. . . The Greek text says, literally, *let him ask from the giving God* (see Motyer, p. 38). It is the nature of God to give us good things!

**1:4-5** Notice the connecting words *lacking* in verse 4 and *lacks* in verse 5. James is not introducing a new topic in verse 5; he is still speaking of the value of trials. What is he saying?

- In verse 4 we learn that the *steadfastness* that results from trials will enable us to become mature believers.
- In verse 5 *wisdom* is a synonym for *steadfastness*.

In light of this verbal connection, why might a believer be afraid to ask God for more wisdom? Put differently, what are we really asking for when we ask for wisdom? Consider all of James 1:2-8.

What are the conditions required for receiving wisdom?

**1:6** Why does James emphasize that the prayer for wisdom must be prayed *with no doubting*?

The paraphrase offered by J. B. Phillips of this passage is priceless, and it serves as a fitting conclusion to our look at oxymoronic joy.

*When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!*

Share about a trial that produced a good result in your life and became a friend.

May God send to us the trials that we need in order to become the kind of people he wants us to be.

Spend time praying for one another using James 1:1-8.

- Pray for the proper response to the difficult trials of life.
- Pray together for the wisdom only God can give to us.

## Study Two

### Boasting and Blessing

#### James 1:9-18



*9 Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, 10 and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 11 For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.*

*12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. 13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by*

*God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

*16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

James wastes no time in his letter. His sermon moves from one exhortation to the next in rapid-fire succession. As chapter 1 is developed, James ponders the themes of steadfastness and maturity in the Christian life.

Read James 1:1-18. Notice how this week's passage flows from and continues the themes that James began in 1:1-8. What connections between the two passages do you find?

We can divide our text into four sections.

1. 1:9-11 Boasting
2. 1:12 Blessing
3. 1:13-15 Tempting
4. 1:16-18 Gifting

### 1:9-11 Boasting

This paragraph contrasts the poor *brother* with the rich. James doesn't tell us if the *rich* person is a brother or not. Whom do you think James has in mind? Is he contrasting the poor Christian and the rich Christian? Or is James comparing the poor believer and the rich unbeliever? Use the passage and its context to support your answer.

What difference does your answer make with regard to the meaning of this passage?

- If James is contrasting poor Christians and rich Christians, what is the point of the passage?
- If James is contrasting poor Christians with rich unbelievers, what is the point of the passage?

Regardless of the James' original intent, verse 11 contains a warning about wealth and riches. What is that warning?

As an American living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you are among the richest people who have ever lived. So what does James' warning say to you?

Respond to the following:

The magnetism of riches is powerful and insistent, and we constantly need the wisdom of God to see through the façade. We do not have to be wealthy to desire money, and the desire is as threatening as the actuality (1 Tim. 6:9); we do not have to possess much in order to be snared by the delights of possession. (Motyer, p. 45)

James' metaphor for the life of the rich (withering grass under the scorching heat of the sun) is a familiar one in the Scriptures. Isaiah likens *all flesh*, that is, all people, to grass that is here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow (Isaiah 40:6-7). Peter does the same thing in 1 Peter 1:24.

James, however, specifically addresses rich people with this metaphor. Why might the rich need to be reminded of this truth more than the poor?

Respond to the following:

The loss of material things is meant to drive the rich person to the Lord and to greater spiritual maturity, blessings and satisfaction. And at that point the rich and poor are exactly alike. Neither material possessions nor lack of them is of any ultimate consequence. What *is* of significance is a trusting relationship to the Lord, who showers all of His children with spiritual wealth that will never diminish or fail to satisfy....

Trials are the great equalizer, bringing all of God's children to dependence on Him. Wealth does not bring God closer, nor does poverty keep Him further away. (MacArthur, p. 41)

### 1:12 Blessing

Here James says that we are *blessed* when we endure trials. What does James have in mind? Sometimes the Greek word translated *blessed* is equivalent to *happy* (Acts 26:2). But *makarios*—used here—has a far more profound meaning. It speaks of a deep fulfillment and the satisfaction of a fulfilled life.

Read 1:12 carefully.

- What is the carrot at the end of the stick with regard to trials and steadfastness?
- What motive for being steadfast does James give in this verse? Compare Matthew 25:21.

### 1:13-15 Tempting

Notice the words used by James in verses 12 and 13. The word for *trial* (*peirasmos*) and the word for *temptation* (*peirazo*) are related. James is telling us that the same event in the life of a believer can be either a *trial* or a *temptation* depending on our response to that event.

With the above in mind, look again at verses 12-15.

- Do *trials* automatically produce *steadfastness* in the life of a believer? Why or why not?
- If a *trial* becomes a *temptation*, who or what is at fault? Who or what is not at fault?

Notice the parallels that James presents in chapter 1.

1. In 1:2-4 we find **trials** leading to **testing** leading to **steadfastness** leading to **maturity**.
2. In 1:12 we find a similar chain of events—**testing, steadfastness, endurance**—that leads to *life*.

Keeping these parallels in mind, analyze verses 14-15. What is the inverse to the above parallels?

The word picture of temptation James paints here is graphic and whimsical. Here James paints a graphic and whimsical picture of temptation: We are *lured* and *enticed* by our own desire. A. T. Robertson titled this verse *Snared by One's Own Bait*.

Give an example of a time when you were snared by your own bait. Also give an example of a time when you witnessed this kind of entrapment in the life of another.

### **1:16-18 Gifting**

What do we learn about God from these verses? List four or five truths about God.

What does verse 18 teach us about our salvation? Consider the following verses as well:

- John 15:16
- John 6:44
- Ephesians 1:4-5
- 1 Peter 1:23

In his substantial commentary on James, J. A. Motyer says that 1:18 is the key verse of James. The whole book, he says, spells out the implications of this new birth in the life of a believer.<sup>1</sup>

*Of his own will he brought us forth.* The decision was his. . . Our conscious experience of conversion, of committing our lives to Christ, of receiving him into our hearts—all of this was consequent upon his decision and action, and derivative from it, just as the love we give to our human parents is a reflex of their parental love and care for us and is, indeed, part and parcel of the life which they gave us. (Motyer, p. 58)

In 1:18 James carries forward a *birth* metaphor.

*Desire* gives birth to sin and death (1:14-15), while God's *will* gives us spiritual birth. And, as we will see in our next study, James still isn't done with this metaphor.

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<sup>1</sup> See Motyer, p. 78.

## Study Three

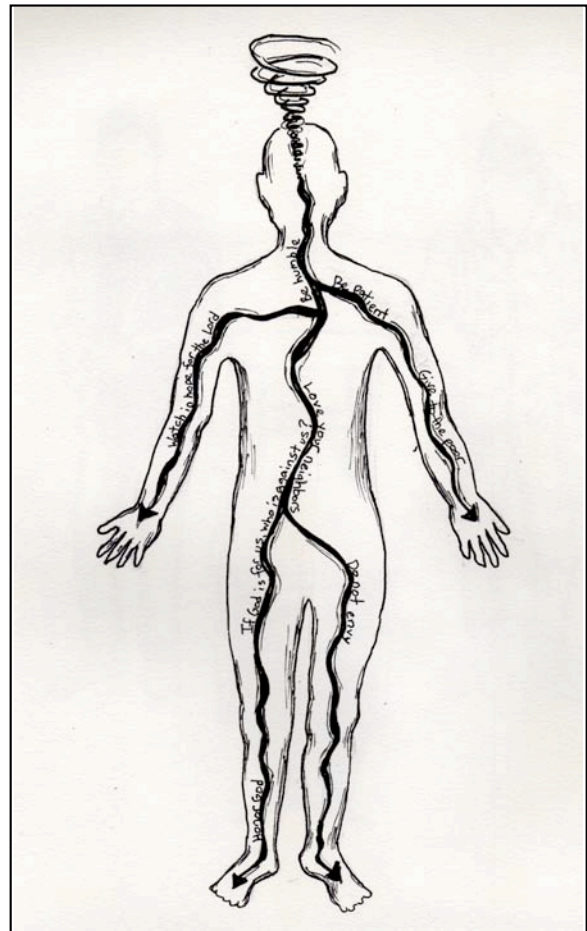
### Word-Centered Religion

#### James 1:19-27

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.



As we noted in the introduction, James is not nearly the linear writer that Paul or Peter is. James flits here and there, from idea to idea, staying only somewhat connected to a theme.

In 1:1-18 the main theme was *trials* and *temptations*. In 1:19—2:26 the central theme is *doing* the word of God. James wants readers to grapple with the meaning of faith. *As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead* (2:26). All of this section builds to that summary statement.

It is not an overstatement to say that the religion of the Bible is a religion of the Word. God spoke the universe into existence with his words (Genesis 1). Israel was given the *word* of God on tablets of stone. The people received this code of

law to guide them as a nation. But this law, given to Moses, was also a *word* that reflected the character of God. In the fullness of time, God's Word became flesh. Jesus, his Son, is called the Word of God (John 1). While Jesus was on earth, he taught his disciples to be devoted to his word (John 8:31).

Before going on in this study, read James 1 again. Note every reference to the *word* of God. Include references to the *law* of God.

We can broadly divide James 1:19-27 into two sections.

1. Receiving the Word Properly (1:19-21)
2. Responding to the Word Religiously (1:22-27)

### **Receiving the Word Properly (1:19-21)**

Notice the flow of thought from verse 18 to verse 19. We have been born *by the word of truth*. Now we are called to be *quick to hear--and* not only to *hear*, but to *receive*. This three-verse section concludes with the punch line *receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls*.

Describe for your homegroup your habits of *hearing* and *receiving* God's Word into your life.

Make a list of the commands found in verses 19-21. How many can you find?

What does each command mean to you personally?

**Command**

**Personal Application**

Read and respond to the following quotation by J. A. Motyer.

By hearing the life-giving word, the energies of the new nature are stimulated into action. Therefore, we must be *quick to hear*. We might wonder why the ever-practical James does not proceed to outline schemes of daily Bible reading or the like, for surely these are the ways in which we offer a willing ear to the voice of God. But he does not help us in this way. Rather he goes deeper, for there is little point in schemes and times if we have not got an attentive spirit. It is possible to be unfailingly regular in Bible reading, but to achieve no more than to have moved the book-mark forward: this is reading unrelated to an attentive spirit. The word is read but not heard. On the other hand, if we can develop an attentive spirit, this will spur us to create those conditions—a proper method in Bible-reading, a discipline of time, and so on—by which the spirit will find itself satisfied in hearing the word of God. (Motyer, pp. 64-65)

Describe a time when reading the Bible was simply moving the *book-mark forward*. What did you do to change this pattern?

What helps you develop an *attentive spirit* as you receive the Word?

Notice how the above quotation helps make sense of the other commands James gives us in this paragraph. His concern is that we receive the Word of God. Accordingly, we need to avoid anger, gossip, filthiness, and wickedness.

Give an example of a time when one or more of these things kept you from *hearing* the Word of God.

What does it mean to you to *receive with meekness* God's Word?

### **Responding to the Word Religiously (1:22-27)**

In these paragraphs James calls us to respond to God's word appropriately, that is, with true religion that is acceptable to God. In other words he calls us to be doers of the Word.

But what exactly does James have in mind? After his call for the reader to be a *doer* and not a *hearer* of the Word, James give an illustration of two men who look into the mirror. One is a hearer only, and the other is a doer.

Before going on in this study, wrestle a bit with the parallel between the two men. Try to see the parallels between the two people:

<b>The Hearer</b>	<b>The Doer</b>
1. Looks at his natural face	1.
2. In a mirror	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

Now let's ponder the point James is making with this illustration.

What does the hearer look at in the mirror? Is he looking at himself, or is he looking into the Word of God? Is the mirror the equivalent of the *perfect law* (v. 25)? Is James contrasting a fleeting look into a mirror with a careful pondering of the Law of God?

Seeing the parallel on paper will help us make sense of James' point.

**The Man with the Mirror**

observes (22-23)  
goes away (24)  
forgets (24)

**The Believer who Has the Word**

(25) looks into  
(25) perseveres  
(25) acts

It would seem that both men are looking, so to speak, into the Law/Word of God.

This way of setting out the words shows that the comparison is not (as some commentators hold) between a hasty glance (the man with the mirror) and a sustained gaze (the believer with the word). Both are, as a matter of fact, equally intent on what they see. . . Each is equally serious in his gaze. It's what happens next which makes the difference. (Motyer, p. 69)

And what happens next to the two men?

The man who ends up with God's blessings on his life is the doer of the Word. What insight do the following verses add to James' teaching?

- John 14:24
- John 15:14
- 1 John 2:3-4
- 1 John 3:10
- 2 Peter 1:10

In light of these verses, what would you say to friend who claims to be a Christian, but whose life shows no obedience to God's Word?

What blessings have you experienced from obeying God's Word?

What is your response to the following quotation?

In the long run, how we behave is proof of our salvation or our lostness. In light of that truth, there is good reason to believe that there are countless men, women and children who come to church regularly and

make a strong profession of being a Christian, but whose lives testify that they are not. They regularly listen to the preaching of the Word, claim to believe it, and discuss it favorably with fellow church members. But their lives are devoid of the saving, transforming grace of God. (MacArthur, p. 81)

Am I a *doer* or a *hearer* of the Word? Verses :26-27 guide the answer to this question. James wants his readers to respond to the Word with *pure religion*.<sup>1</sup>

Read verses 26-27 again. According to this paragraph, what are the marks of genuine religion? You should be able to find at least four.

In what areas of your life have you developed obedience? Give two or three examples.

Read Isaiah 1:11-17. In light of these verses, are you *religious*?

Of course James is not describing all that religion is. To worship God certainly means more than holding our tongue, caring for the indigent, and being unstained by the world. . . but *pure religion* cannot mean less than these things. Otherwise, James points out, we are merely hearers of the Word!

Spend time praying for one another in your homegroups. Pray that God will make each member a doer of the Word and not a hearer only.

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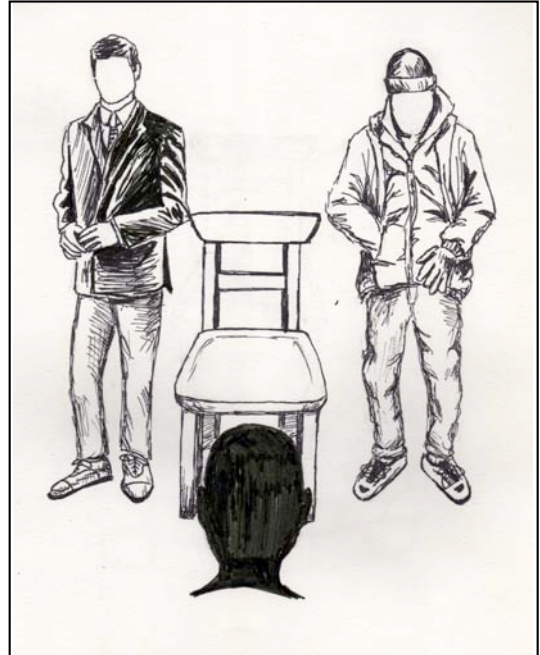
<sup>1</sup> American evangelicals usually use the word *religion* or *religious* in a negative way. We hear preachers say, for example, *Christianity is not about religion; it's about a relationship*. James, however, uses the word *religion* in a positive way. *Religion* here is a goal we should aspire to. In fact, the Greek words James uses (*thréskeia*, religion, and *thréskos*, religious) are very rare in the New Testament. The adjective occurs only here, and the noun occurs only four times in the New Testament.

## Study Four

### Partiality and Faith

#### James 2:1-13

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



*But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*

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

William Barclay ponders the social backdrop of James' call for an impartial church. Read the above the following quotation and then read James 2:1-13.

There is no doubt that there must have been social problems in the Early Church. The Church was the only place in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist. There must have been a certain initial awkwardness when a master found himself sitting next to his slave, or, when a master arrived at a service in which the slave was actually the leader and dispenser of the Sacrament. The gap between the slave, who

in the law was nothing more than a living tool, and the master must have been so wide as to cause problems of approach on either side. Further, in its early days the Church was predominantly poor and humble; and therefore if a rich man was converted, and did come to the Christian fellowship, there must have been a very real temptation to make a fuss of him, and to treat him as a special trophy for Christ. (Barclay, p. 76)

What is the theme of James 2? Look over the entire chapter. Notice how the word *faith* connects the various paragraphs.<sup>1</sup>

- **2:1** *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*
- **2:14** *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*
- **2:18** *But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*

First, James tackles the question of faith and the sin of showing partiality in the body of Christ (2:1-13). Then James examines the question of faith and obedience (2:14-26). We can divide our passage as follows:

- **2:1-7** Partiality and the Poor
- **2:8-13** Partiality and the Law

### **2:1-7 Partiality and the Poor**

Look over these verses. Notice that James issues a command, gives an illustration, and then asks a series of questions. Describe each.

The command:

The illustration:

Three questions:

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<sup>1</sup> The word *faith* is used thirteen times in James 2.

**2:1** The key word in this passage--*partiality* in the ESV--is robust. The KJV translates the word with the awkward but insightful *respect of persons*. The NIV uses the English word *favoritism*. The Greek word is plural, suggesting that partiality can be shown in various ways. The NEB renders the word *snobbery* while Goodspeed translates it *acts of partiality*.

The Greek text of this verse shows that James is forbidding a practice already taking place within the church. *Show no partiality*. . . could be translated *Stop showing partiality*. James' readers have already *dishonored the poor* (vs. 6). To show partiality or favoritism is inconsistent with faith in *the Lord of Glory*.

Why is showing partiality incompatible with faith in Jesus?

Consider and discuss Deuteronomy 10:17-19. This passage is the Old Testament basis for all that James is concerned about in James 2. How should the character of God inform our view of partiality?

Think about the issue of showing partiality in your own life and in the life of our church. Do you find this sin in either? Where? Give a practical example of where partiality has crept into your thinking and/or your actions.

What light do the following verses shed on the subject of partiality?

- Galatians 2:6
- Galatians 3:26-29
- Romans 2:11 (see context)
- Ephesians 6:9
- 1 Timothy 5:21

**2:2-4** James gives a hypothetical (?) example of how favoritism might have been shown in the churches to which he was writing. Do the same for SBCC. Have some fun—but be gentle. Write your own illustration of how partiality might show its ugly face in our church.

**2:6** James' succinct comment is, perhaps, stronger than meets the eye. God has *chosen* the poor for special blessing (v. 5), but the church has *dishonored* them. The Greek word used is a strong one that could be translated *exploit*. It is a *strong term describing the brutal and tyrannical deprivation of one's rights* (Burdick, p. 179). This is the word the Septuagint uses in passages that speak of oppressing those who are powerless, that is, the orphan, the widow, and the immigrant.<sup>1</sup> Showing partiality in the church is no trifling matter!

**2:6-7** As we have seen, James asks three questions of his readers regarding the rich. What does the fact that he asks these questions tell us about the majority of James' original readers?

### **2:8-13 Partiality and the Law**

James quotes Leviticus 19:18, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Why would this be called *the royal law according to Scripture*? Compare the following verses to Leviticus 19:18. How does this one command summarize all of the other laws in Scripture?

- Matthew 22:36-40
- Galatians 5:14-15

Write your own paraphrase of this *royal law*. Be prepared to read this to your homegroup.

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<sup>1</sup> The Septuagint is the Greek version of the Old Testament. See Ezekiel 22:9 and Zechariah 7:10 for examples.

What does it mean to *love* our neighbor? Consider the following quotation as you formulate your answer.

Everything conspires today to define "love" primarily in emotional terms. Scripturally, love is to be defined in caring terms, for the love that is owed to our neighbor is the love that we expend on ourselves. (Motyer, p. 97)

Think practically about partiality and love. Why can love of your neighbor—in the scriptural sense—help you overcome the distinctions of wealth, poverty, personality, race, or political persuasion?

What is one thing you can do to overcome partiality in your attitudes and actions toward others? Would such a change be easy or difficult? Why?

**2:9-10** is hard-hitting. James refuses to soft-pedal his words. To show partiality is to commit sin, and to commit one sin is to break the entire law!

This does not mean that one sin is as bad as another sin, or that it is just as bad to break only one of God's laws as it is to break all of them. James is not dealing with the extent and degree of guilt, but with its reality. Some sins obviously are more heinous in the sight of God than others. The fact remains, however, that violation of one commandment makes a person a lawbreaker. (Vaughn, p. 53)

**2:12** In what way is the law of God the *law of liberty* or, as the NIV puts it, *the law that gives freedom*? Compare Galatians 5:14.

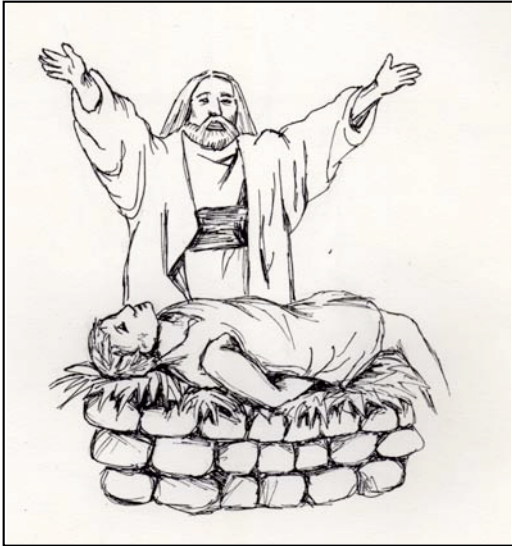
Our section ends with a strong command to *speak* and *act* with a view to the coming judgment of God (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Spend time praying for one another, asking the Lord to help those in your group act and speak in such a way that he will say, *Well done, good and faithful servant* (Matthew 25:21).

## Study Five

### Faith and Works

#### James 2:14-26



*14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

*18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my*

*works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"-- and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

Before reading on in this study, read the verses above.

- What is the key verse? Which verse governs the interpretation of all the rest?
- What is James' main point?
- What, if anything, do you find confusing?

*Leadership Journal*, a quarterly for pastors and Christian leaders, ran a cartoon some time ago that is pertinent to this section of James. In the background was a traditional New England church building. In the foreground was a billboard with the following:

The Lite Church  
24% FEWER COMMITMENTS,  
HOME OF THE 7.5% TITHE  
15-MINUTE SERMONS  
45-MINUTE WORSHIP SERVICES  
WE HAVE ONLY 8 COMMANDMENTS—YOUR CHOICE  
WE USE JUST 3 SPIRITUAL LAWS  
EVERYTHING YOU'VE WANTED IN A CHURCH. . . AND LESS!<sup>1</sup>

Church-lite, or more accurately, faith-lite is what James addresses in 2:14-26.

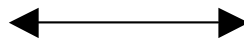
People familiar with the New Testament, particularly with Paul's letters to the Roman, Ephesian, and Galatian churches, are shocked by this section of James. He appears to be contradicting the apostle Paul!

### Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

### James 2:24

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.



What are we to make of James' startling statement?

*Impish*. Do you know the word? It's an adjective that means *wicked in a playful way, without causing serious harm*. J. A. Motyer thinks that James is being *impish* in this section.<sup>2</sup> He notes that James began this chapter by addressing those who have *faith* in Jesus. Now James deliberately provokes and startles the readers with statements like these:

- *Can that faith save him? 2:14*
- *Faith by itself. . . is dead. 2:17*
- *A person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 2:24*

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<sup>1</sup> Volume 4, Number 3, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Motyer is British and from an American perspective we might say he himself is being a bit *impish* for using such a high-brow adjective in a commentary intended for us commoners.

So how exactly does James see *faith*? Indeed, like Paul, James sees faith as the heart of the Christian experience.

At the outset we learn that trials are a test to our *faith* (1:12-3). The whole of chapter 2 is about *faith*. As Motyer explains,

Faith is the dominant partner with works as its colleague. . . . It is undeniably true that if we snatch some phrases from their context in the present passage we can make James fall out with Paul—but then the error is ours in forcing a meaning which the context disallows. But if we ask what place James accords to faith, then he and Paul are at one. Faith is God's foundational gift (Jas. 2:5; Eph. 2:8). It is the common mark of all Christians (Jas. 2:1; Gal. 3:26). It is the continuing reality, running like a story-line through all the length and all the experiences of Christian life (Jas. 2:22; 1 Tim. 6:12). It is the root from which good works (Jas. 2:22; Tit. 3:8) grow. (Motyer, p. 106)

Look up the verses referred to in the above quotation and listed below. Do you agree that Paul and James are on the same page?

- Galatians 3:26 = James 2:1
- 1 Timothy 6:12 = James 2:22
- Titus 3:8 = James 2:22

By now, James' main point should be clear: faith without works is dead. In fact, faith without works is not faith at all.

Look at our passage. James illustrates this principle in several ways. He describes a hypothetical believer and then uses two persons from the Old Testament. Describe each illustration.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

With these examples in mind, what would you say to someone who claimed to have faith in Christ but didn't seem to show that faith in any area of life? Also consider the following verses as you formulate your answer.

- Matthew 12:33-36
- Matthew 15:7-9
- Matthew 23:1-4
- Titus 1:16
- Titus 3:1, 14
- 1 John 1:6

**2:19** This verse verifies that James has a predominantly Jewish audience in mind as he writes. Proud of their doctrinal orthodoxy, Jews recited Deuteronomy 6:4 daily—*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one*. What is James' point in this verse?<sup>1</sup>

Rewrite verse 19 and address an American, non-Jewish *believer* who has faith but not works.

**2:21-25** Here James points to Abraham and Rachel to make his point that faith that is genuine will always be accompanied by works. The example of Abraham is no surprise insofar as he is the father of the Jews and would have been revered by James' readers. But the example of the Gentile prostitute Rahab would have shocked first-century Jewish readers. Compare the stories of these two examples of genuine faith. In what ways are the faith of Abraham and the faith of Rachel similar? In what ways does their faith differ? In each case, how did their faith translate into action? Which of the two do you think took the greater risk in faith?

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<sup>1</sup> The word *shudder* could be translated *tremble* or *bristle*.

Reflect on Roper's comment on Rahab. What encouragement do you find in this comment?

To any self-respecting Jew, such a woman would be a very dubious candidate for inclusion into the family of God. By using Rahab as an example of the kind of faith that is able to save us James is taking a swipe at any remaining tendency among the Jewish Christians toward elitism. Heritage, ancestry, background, family connection—none of these mean anything to God. His eye is on the one—anyone—who trusts him. Abraham was counted righteous because of his faith, and not because of his status. Rahab was also counted righteous, because she believed. She was no second-class citizen either; she ranks with Abraham (Roper, p. 59)

**2:26** At the conclusion of this section James gives us the punch line that makes sense of all that comes before. Note the tight parallel between a body without a spirit and faith without works.

How does this verse answer one who would say *Paul and James disagree with one another*?

Come up with your own analogy to make the same point that James makes in 2:26. Have some fun sharing these with your homegroup.

If you were speaking with an unbeliever about Christ, what would you say to explain the relationship between faith and works?

How does this section of James challenge you personally?

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*Sermon Notes. . .*

## Study Six

### The Untamed Tongue

#### James 3:1-12

*1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*

*How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.*



*Tongue.* Webster describes the *tongue* as

a fleshy movable muscular process of the floor of the mouths of most vertebrates that bears sensory end organs and small glands and functions especially in taking and swallowing food and in humans as a speech organ.

The tongue is a movable muscle. It forms the floor of our mouth, but it is also a window into our soul. With our tongue we can work miracles. With it we can lift the countenance of the downhearted. With the tongue we cut deals, prompt romance, and bolster the self-image of a child. But the tongue is also the part of the body that gets us into the most trouble.

The tongue is *you* in a unique way. It is a tattletale that tells on the heart and discloses the real person. Not only that, but misuse of the tongue is perhaps the easiest way to sin. There are some sins that an individual may not be able to commit simply because he does not have the opportunity. But there are no limits to what one can say, no built-in restraints or boundaries. (MacArthur, p. 144)

The first sin after the fall of Adam and Eve was committed with the tongue (Genesis 3:12). The holiness of God terrified Isaiah because of his impure speech (Isaiah 6:5). When Paul is painting a portrait of the wickedness of all humankind, he points to the way in which we use our tongue.

*Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*  
(Romans 3:13-14)

Read James 3. List what James says about the *tongue*.

The tongue is . . .

What has been your experience of the tongue with others? Share with your homegroup an example of a time when someone's tongue blessed your life. Describe a time when you were wounded by a tongue.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the tongue in the Christian's life. Indeed, a controlled tongue leads to holiness of life.

### **3:1-5a The Tongue as the Key to Holy Living<sup>1</sup>**

James begins with a warning to teachers: they will be subject to stricter judgment. While this is true for teachers in the church, the principle holds true for all believers. Hear what Jesus taught:

*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matthew 12:36-37)*

James and Jesus should have our attention now. Both of them are very clear about the fact that, in the end, we will be measured by our words.

**3:1-5** What two analogies does James use in these verses to show the power of the tongue? How do they make James' point?

After an initial warning about the stricter judgment teachers will endure, James gets to his main point.

**3:2** is an important and profound verse. If we can control our tongue, we are able also to control our body. This verse teaches us that controlling our tongue is both the *evidence* and the *means* to spiritual maturity. Read, ponder, and react to the following quotation.

The tongue is so much more than what we actually say out loud. In fact actual speech is probably only a small percentage of the use of the tongue. We cannot think without formulating thoughts in words; we cannot plan without describing to ourselves step by step what we intend to do; we cannot imagine without painting a word-picture before our inward eyes; we cannot write a letter or a book without "talking it through" our minds on to the paper; we cannot resent without fuelling the fires of resentment in words addressed to ourselves; we cannot feel sorry for ourselves without

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<sup>1</sup> The subheadings in this study are based on, but not identical to, Motyer's commentary on James 3.

listening to the self-pitying voice which tells us how hard done by we are. But if our tongue were so well under control that it refused to formulate the words of self-pity, the images of lustfulness, the thoughts of anger and resentment, then these things are cut down before they have a chance to live: the master-switch has deprived them of any power to "switch on" that side of our lives. It is in this way that *if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man* (2). The control of the tongue is more than an evidence of spiritual maturity; it is the means to it. (Motyer, p. 121)

What does 3:2 along with the insights above teach us with regard to the language we use when we think?

Do you agree that the use of the tongue is both evidence of spiritual maturity and a means to spiritual maturity? Why or why not?

### **3:5b-6 The Tongue as a World of Unrighteousness**

James begins this section with another analogy. What is it? What message does this analogy convey?

**3:6** List the statements about the tongue James makes in this verse. There are six.

James is speaking of the tongue, but examine your list above. What does this list tell us about the human heart?

### **3:7-8a The Untamable Tongue**

**3:7-8** James speaks of the *untamable tongue*. What does he mean? Should we simply give up and let our tongues go wild? What does James want to convey with image of tamed animals versus the untamable tongue?

Obviously, James' statement in 3:8b is quite alarming. How effective have your efforts to tame your tongue been? What lessons have you learned regarding this tiny *member* of your body? What advice can you give to others in your homegroup concerning their use of the tongue?

### **3:8b-10 The Fickle Tongue**

**3:8b** Here James makes two more statements about the tongue. What are they?

**3:9** This verse gives a bit of balance to the dire warnings James has sounded with regard to the tongue. At least it is possible to employ the tongue for noble purposes, that is, to *bless our Lord and Father*.

Consider two other New Testament passages about the believer's speech patterns. Notice both the negative and positive uses of the tongue. Discuss these passages as a homegroup.

- Ephesians 4:25-31
  
- Colossians 3:7-9

### **3:11-12 The Polluted Tongue**

What are the implied answers to James' questions in these verses?

What does this passage teach about our natural speech patterns?

With which of James' analogies do you resonate most?

The book of Proverbs has much to say about the positive and negative use of the tongue. Read the following proverbs. Which is your favorite? Enjoy these as a homegroup.

- 10:20     The tongue of the righteous is choice silver;  
              the heart of the wicked is of little worth.
- 12: 18     There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,  
              but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
- 13:3        Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;  
              he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin
- 15:4        A gentle tongue is a tree of life,  
              but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.
- 15: 23     To make an apt answer is a joy to a man,  
              and a word in season, how good it is!

- 16:23     The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious  
            and adds persuasiveness to his lips.
- 16: 28     A dishonest man spreads strife,  
            and a whisperer separates close friends.
- 17:27     Whoever restrains his words has knowledge,  
            and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.
- 18: 21     Death and life are in the power of the tongue,  
            and those who love it will eat its fruits.
- 21: 23     Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue  
            keeps himself out of trouble.
- 24: 26     Whoever gives an honest answer  
            kisses the lips.

Some time ago the following message appeared in a full-page ad in the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By United Technologies Corporation, Hartford, Connecticut.

**The Snake That Poisons Everybody**

It  
topples  
governments,  
wrecks marriages,  
ruins careers,  
busts  
reputations,  
causes  
heartaches,  
nightmares,  
indigestion,  
spawns suspicion,  
generates  
grief,  
dispatches  
innocent  
people  
to cry in their  
pillows.  
Even its name  
hisses.  
It's called  
gossip.  
Office gossip,  
Shop gossip,  
Party gossip.  
It makes  
headlines  
and headaches.  
Before  
you repeat  
a story,  
ask yourself:  
Is it true?  
Is it fair?  
Is it necessary?  
If not,  
shut up.

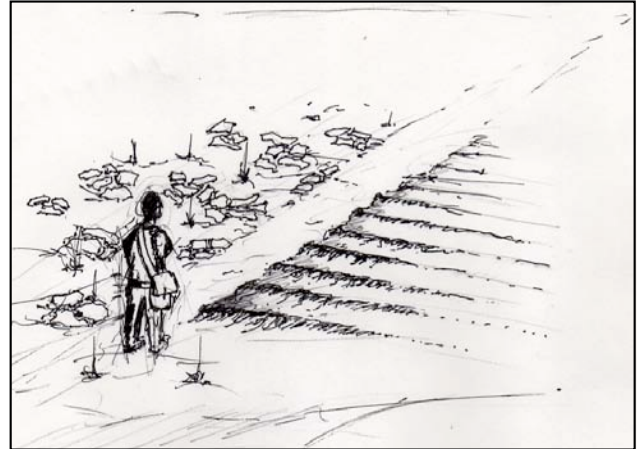
Spend time praying with and for one another with regard to the use of the tongue. Pray that the Lord will tame what we find untamable. Ask God to protect Santa Barbara Community Church from the sins of the tongue.

## Study Seven

### The Meekness of Wisdom

#### James 3:13—4:12

13 *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.*



17 *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

4:1 *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

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

Before going on in this study read the above passage. If possible, read it aloud. In these verses, along with the next section of James, our author is at his most



We can divide this section into two parts.

**3:13-18 Two Kinds of Wisdom**

**4:1-12 A Warning Against Worldliness**

**3:13-18 Two Kinds of Wisdom**

J. A. Motyer, often quoted in this study, makes a profound observation about this section.

James does not yet tell us anything we must actually do, any course of conduct to follow. He offers us an ethic not of verbs (do this), nor of nouns (naming this or that item of good conduct), but of adverbs (about the sort of people we are to be whatever we do). (Motyer, p. 131)

The key phrase about the kind of people we are to be is found in verse 13: all of the believer's conduct is to be governed by what James calls *the meekness of wisdom*.

Commentators point out that *meekness* was a despised quality in the Greco-Roman world, as was *humility*. *Meekness* was mentioned alongside ignoble debasement and servitude.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, the rest of this passage will probe the meaning of *the meekness of wisdom*.

What are the two kinds of wisdom James presents in these verses?

Fill in the following chart:

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<sup>1</sup> See Moo, p. 132. The Greek philosopher Epictetus even named meekness in a list of moral faults.

**Two Kinds of Wisdom**

**Verses 15-16**

**Verses 17-18**

**Origin**

**Characteristics**

**Results**

Compare your idea of a *wise* person with what you have learned in these verses. On what points do the two match up? How do they differ?

Kent Hughes is responding to this passage when he writes,

No one can be considered wise who is not at the same time meek.  
Meekness is the *moral characteristic* of wisdom. (Hughes, p. 148)

Do you agree or disagree? Is it possible to be wise without meekness? Why or why not?

Think broadly about what you've learned from the book of James. What should we do if we feel a need for more wisdom?

#### 4:1-12 A Warning Against Worldliness

In 4:1 we see James assuming that his readers do, in fact, lack wisdom. The *bitter jealousy and selfish ambition* spoken of in 3:14 is, indeed, a problem in the lives of his readers.

**4:1** What is the source of quarrels and fights among people? James' answer is intriguing. According to the ESV, we argue and disagree with one another because our *passions are at war within* us. The word *passions* occurs again in 4:3.

The Greek word is *hedonon*, and it is the source of our English word *hedonism*. The NIV translates this word as *desires* in verse 1 and *pleasures* in verse 3. The ESV stays with the more literal *passions*. In any event, James' emphasis is that there is a part of every human being that is self-centered and pleasure-driven.

James pictures these pleasures as residing within his readers, there carrying on a bitter campaign to gain satisfaction. Pleasure is the overriding desire of their lives. Nothing will be allowed to stand in the way of its realization. (Burdick, p. 192)

With the above in mind, re-read 4:1-12. What are the consequences of a *passion-driven* life?

- What are the personal/spiritual consequences of a *passion-driven* life??
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are the consequences for the church of a *passion-driven* life??

What aspects of your life, if any, are driven by these *passions*? Be specific—and honest with yourself.

**4:4** points to a horrible irony in the Christian's life. The believer can commit spiritual adultery and actually become, according to James, God's enemy. Again, Burdick is helpful.

The people of God in the Old Testament are considered the wife of the Lord (Jer. 31:32), and in the New Testament, the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23-32). It is reasonable, therefore to understand “adulteress” as a figure of speech for spiritual unfaithfulness. It is a blunt and shocking word, intended to jar the reader and to awaken him to his true spiritual condition. The concept of spiritual adultery was no doubt taken from the Old Testament (cf. Hos. 2:2-5, 3:1-5, 9:1). (Burdick, p. 193)

In what ways have you played the role of the *adulterous wife* in your Christian life?

**4:4** Respond to the second sentence in this verse. What have you done to cultivate a friendship with the world? Spend time praying for one another about our friendships with the world.

**4:5** is difficult to translate. See the NIV alternative translation, for example.

It is not clear whether James thinks of *the spirit which he has made to dwell in us* as the Holy Spirit given to believers (cf. NASB) or as God’s creative spirit by which he has invigorated mankind (Gn. 2:7). In either case, the phrase reminds us that God has a claim on us by virtue of his work in our lives. (Moo, p. 146)<sup>1</sup>

**4:6** Here James quotes Proverbs 3:4. From the context, why would James quote this verse? What insight does this use of Proverbs 3:4 give you about choosing to become a friend of the world?

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<sup>1</sup> In verse 5 James quotes the Old Testament, but we’re not sure what verse he is quoting. Perhaps he is simply referring to the jealousy of God for his people (see Exodus 20:5; 34:14, etc.).

**4:7-10** Listen for James' prophetic voice.

This paragraph consists of a series of brief exhortations uttered with the staccato of military commands. Each command, expressed by a tense [aorist imperative] which gives it a note of urgency, is a call for self-seeking and worldly minded Christians to return to God. (Vaughn, p. 89)

List the ten commands found in these verses. Comment on what each means. Be prepared to share a few of these commands that speak into your life.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

**4:11-12** One last form of worldliness that James speaks against is, again, the sin of gossip and backbiting. What truth about the tongue, heretofore unmentioned by James, do you learn from these verses?

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*Sermon Notes. . .*

## Study Eight

### The Dangers of Wealth

#### 4:13—5:6

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



5:1 *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. 4 Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*

Before going on to any questions in this study, read the above two paragraphs. Notice how James signals the reader of his slight shift in topic: *Come now, you who say. . .* (4:13) and *Come now, you rich* (5:1).

Read these paragraphs and then note James' primary concern in both.

- 4:13-17
  
- 5:1-6

### 4:13-17 Dangerous Presumption

Commentators have given this section of James some colorful headings. Burdick titles the section *Arrogant Self-Sufficiency*; Barclay, *The Mistaken Confidence*; Tasker, *Presumptuous Confidence*; and Vaughn, *Arrogant Disregard of God*.

Look again at these five verses and come up with your own heading. Vote as a homegroup on the best title. Extra dessert for the winner!

No matter what we call this passage, James opens with a pertinent paragraph for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Americans. He offers a critique of those who are overly confident in their ability to produce wealth, of those who are presumptuous with God.

Notice this point, however:

James is not forbidding planning or profit-making. What he is condemning is the attitude that often underlies those activities: "Who needs God? I can do it all by myself." That's the heart of the matter. Again we are planning apart from God. Once more we are playing God. We act as though we alone can control our destiny. And as James points out, that simply isn't true. We do not know what our life will be like tomorrow. (Roper, p. 97)

J. B. Phillips's paraphrase of this verse is colorful and instructive:

As it is, you get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence.

Let's see what James says to people committing the sin of presumptuousness.

- What specific warnings does James give his readers in these verses?
- What specific recommendation does he offer his readers?
- How do these warnings speak to your life?

- Generally speaking, who needs these warnings most? Young people at the beginning of their working life? The middle-aged? Those approaching retirement? Explain your choice.

**4:15** Respond to this verse. What does it mean to say, *If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that?*

Are you in the habit of speaking/thinking in this way that James recommends? If so, what difference does this perspective make in your life? If not, what would be different about your approach to life if you spoke and thought this way?

**4:15** This comment by the Protestant Reformer John Calvin is significant:

[W]e read everywhere in the Scriptures that the holy servants of God spoke unconditionally of future things, when yet they had it as a fixed principle in their minds that they could do nothing without the permission of God.<sup>1</sup>

What elements in your life either remind you or cultivate the conviction that you can do nothing or make nothing without God's *divine permission*?

**4:16** speaks of *boasting* about our ability and our wealth. Sometimes this word is used positively in the New Testament. We are, for instance, to *boast* in the Lord.<sup>2</sup> But here boasting arises from our arrogance. The word is only found here and in 1 John 2:16. Motyer explains the significance of James' challenge To us:

In other words, when even in little, secret, almost unrecognized ways we forget how frail we are, and stop short of conscious dependence on our God, it is an element of the proud, boastful, vaunting human spirit, flaunting its supposed independence and self-sufficiency. As such it is *evil*

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Motyer, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> In Romans 5:2, for example, we are to *rejoice* or *boast* (same Greek word) in *the hope of the glory of God*.

(16)—and James offers no qualification of the word: he merely says *evil*, the word which others scriptures use of the devil, the ‘evil one’. (Motyer, p. 162)

To ask the question at 4:15 in slightly different words, what helps you maintain a *conscious dependence on our God*?

*The sin of presumption is evil.* What evidence of the stark truth of this verse do you see around you or within you?

### 5:1-6 Dangerous Wealth

In this paragraph James becomes even more *prophetic* with his readers, yet there is a question as to who the *rich* are that he addresses.

Is James thinking of believers who have swerved so far off course that there is little hope for their lives? Have some believers in James’ audience become so addicted to wealth that they oppress other Christian workers (2:6-7)?

Or is James referring to the *rich* as opposed to those who believe? Are these *rich* like the man in 1: 9-11 who *fades away* in the *midst of his pursuits*?

Read these verses carefully. Before going any further, whom do you think James has in mind? Rich, oppressive believers who are in danger of facing God’s judgment? Or rich, oppressive people who are outside the church of Christ? Support your answer.

J. A. Motyer has his opinion on this issue, but he offers a comment that is helpful no matter how we understand the *rich* in this section.

By facing a clear-cut case of those who have wealth at their disposal, James teaches all of us in respect of whatever resources, however small, God has entrusted to us. By exposing such glaring abuses, he teaches us how we ought to use our wealth as an adjunct to a humble walk with God. He shows us the pits, so that we may not fall into them. (Motyer, p. 165)

James lists four specific areas of concern.

**5:2-3 Hoarding**

**5:2** Much like today, wealth in the first century consisted of both money and commodities such as grain, corn, and oil. Garments were also saved as commodities.

Thus it was the commodities that had rotted and the stored garments that had been invaded by moths. There is no reason to take these happenings as figurative or predictive of the future. The tragic fact was that the rich had hoarded so much food and clothing that it was going to waste. Their crime was uncontrolled greed that resulted in oppression of the poor (vs. 4). (Burdick, p. 199)

What is the difference between *hoarding* and *saving*? How are you challenged by 5:2?

Read verses 2-3 carefully. What, specifically, is the consequence of hoarding?

Compare Matthew 6:19-34.

- What does Jesus say about hoarding?
- According to Jesus, what does hoarding reveal about our hearts?
- Look especially at Matthew 6:20. What kind of hoarding does Jesus endorse?

What guidelines for your practice of the spiritual discipline of giving do you find in this passage? Discuss giving as a homegroup.

### 5:4 Injustice

James condemns the rich oppressor for failing to pay adequate wages to the worker who harvested his crops. The Old Testament specifically prohibited this type of tyranny (Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Leviticus 19:13).

- Give one or two contemporary illustrations of how the rich commit the same injustice today.
  
- What responsibility do we as consumers have in this regard? Do we, for instance, have the responsibility to buy only from corporations that treat their workers justly?

### 5:5 Indulgence

The word James uses for *luxury* is found only here in the New Testament. It refers to *extravagant comfort, stressing the softness of luxury* (Motyer, p. 167).

Read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

- What are some areas where you are overly indulgent or extravagant in your use of your wealth?
  
- What do James 5:5 and this parable instruct you about how you ought to live?

Work with the image in the second half of James 5:5. What picture is James painting for the reader?

**5:6 Betrayal**

In what ways do wealth and the relentless pursuit of wealth cause us to *condemn* and *murder* the righteous person?

Read and ponder two other passages that speak of the dangers of wealth. What do the following passages add to the teaching of James 5:1-6?

- Psalm 49:6-13
  
- Matthew 19:23-26

Respond to the following quotation and then pray for one another and the dangerous riches we face every day.

Riches are not evil but they are dangerous. . . Riches corrupt everybody who is in the least corruptible. God is merciful and can deliver the rich from the danger of being rich. But many of us do not want to be delivered. We say we trust God. But we act as though our trust is in riches, as indeed it often is. Riches undermine faith.

John White, *The Golden Cow*, p. 61

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*Sermon Notes. . .*

## Study Nine

### Suffering and Patience

#### James 5:7-12

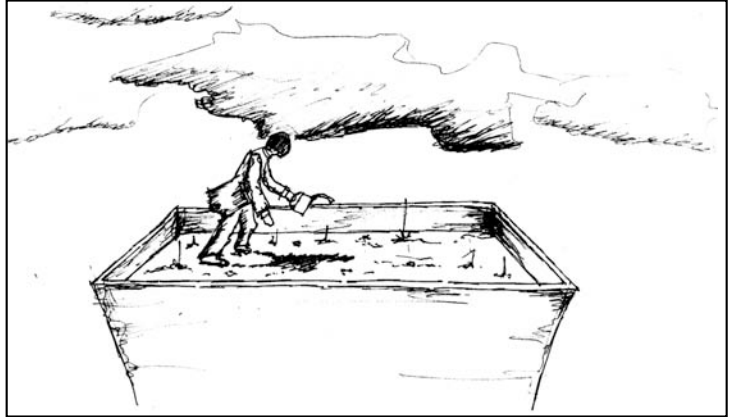
*7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8*

*You also, be patient.*

*Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another,*

*brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*

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



Before answering the questions in this study, read these six verses four times.

Several themes emerge in these two paragraphs. What are they?

How does this section of James form a *bookend* that corresponds to the opening of this book?

One of the first themes we notice in these verses is that of patience.

James' doctrine of the Christian life is a doctrine of process or growth, and patience is its central requirement. . . . Nothing can hurry on the early and late rains and nothing can speed up the imminent coming of the Lord. James thus speaks to assure us that all will be well. (Motyer, p. 181)

Curiously, in these verses patience is closely linked with the proper use of our tongue. Notice how James takes the reader through two cycles.

5:7-8	Be patient	5:9	Don't grumble
5:10-11	Two examples of patience	5:12	Don't lie (speak the truth)

Think about patience in 21<sup>st</sup>-century life. It has been said that contemporary society fosters impatience at every turn. Think for a minute about our culture and give some examples of how our society encourages impatience.

Now look at the examples above. In what ways does our culture affect your Christian calling to cultivate patience?

Notice the central motivation for developing patience: the coming judgment of God. Note the references to Christ's coming judgment you find in these verses.

What should come to mind when we consider the promised appearing of Christ? This question is something about which the New Testament has much to say. Read and discuss the following verses.

The Second Coming of Christ

- is preceded by signs: Matthew 24:3
- is impossible to miss: Matthew 24:27
- is impossible to predict with precision: Matthew 24:36ff.
- will gather God's children to Jesus: Matthew 24:8ff.  
1 Corinthians 15:23  
1 Thessalonians 2:19  
2 Thessalonians 2:1
- will transform Christ's disciples into new creations: 1 Thessalonians 3:13, 5:23
- will bring about a new creation: 2 Peter 3:2-12

Why should the above verses prompt us to a life marked by patience? What can you do to cultivate patience in your life? Be specific.

Now let's look at our passage from the perspective of James' illustrations. He makes his point about patience by referring to a farmer, the prophets, and Job.

**5:7-9 The Farmer**

Farmers in the time of James were highly dependent on the autumn and spring rains.

In Palestine the early rains came in October and November soon after the grain was sown, and the later rains came in April and May as the grain was maturing. Both rainy seasons were necessary for a successful crop. Knowing this the farmer was willing to wait patiently until both rains came and provided the needed moisture. (Burdick, p. 201)

Most of us live lives that are very independent of weather patterns, but try to put yourself in the place of the farmer. What insight about patience does he offer you?

**5:9** speaks of grumbling, the opposite of patience. The word could be translated *to sigh* or *to groan*.

Think of our life together as a church. What or who irritates you? What kinds of people cause you to grumble?

Why would the fact that *the Judge is standing at the door* prompt you toward patience?

### **5:10 The Prophets**

Being a prophet in Old Testament times was a mixed bag. Consider the following:

*And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets--who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated-- of whom the world was not worthy-- wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. Hebrews 11:32-38*

The prophets are an example of *suffering and patience*. Note that they suffered not because they did wrong, but because they did right. Think of a time when you had to learn patience because you did something right. Share this with your group if it is appropriate.

### **5:11 Job**

Describe the *steadfastness* of Job. If you are new to the Bible or a bit rusty on the Old Testament, glance over the first two chapters of the book that bears his

name. After all of his suffering and all of his questioning of God, Job finally chooses to rest in the fact that God is God and Job is not. Job's suffering gives him a deeper understanding of God. In the end, Job is able to make this statement:

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. . .*  
Job 42:5

What has your suffering allowed you to see about God? How has your suffering increased your patience?

What is the Lord's attitude toward us as we struggle to wait?

**5:12** echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:34-37, and their Jewish readers would understand exactly what James and Jesus were talking about. First-century Jews had an elaborate method of making their lies sound like truth. They would take oaths to impress the one to whom they were making a promise. But the Jews distinguished between oaths that were binding and oaths that were breakable. Thus they could lie with impunity. James and Jesus say, simply, "TELL THE TRUTH." As one more recent writer put it, when a Christian says *Let's do lunch. . .* he or she should *do lunch*.

Why is telling the truth important for the believer?

In what specific situations should you apply 5:12 to your life? For instance, what *white* lies should you stop telling?

After looking closely at James' teaching on patience, what do you glean from these verses will cause you to change your behavior?

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*Sermon Notes. . .*

## Study Ten

### The Prayer of the Righteous

#### James 5:13-20



13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of

a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

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

When all is said and done, James says, pray. Pray and keep praying.

Notice that both paragraphs in this passage begin with the words *anyone among you*. The first paragraph concentrates on praying and the second on restoring a straying believer.

Read James 5:13-20 with the following outline in mind. What initial thoughts and questions do these paragraphs prompt?

#### 5:13-18 The Priority of Prayer

5:13 The Praying Individual

5:14-15 The Praying Elders

5:16a The Praying Friend

5:16b-18 The Praying Prophet

### **5:19-20 The Priority of Restoration**

### **5:13 The Praying Individual**

Notice that James begins and ends his book with the twin themes of prayer and suffering (1:2-5, 5:13ff.). Actually, 5:13 is the more comprehensive call to prayer. Whether we are suffering or cheerful, we are called to prayer.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of verse 13 is helpful: *Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing.*

James informs us that when we sing songs of praise we are, in fact, praying. Do you think of singing as a form of prayer? Is singing prayer any different from nonsinging prayer? Explain.

Think about your own prayer life. When are you least likely to pray--when you are happy or when you are suffering? Why?

Respond to the following statement:

[James wants us] to be certain that we are finding [God] to be sufficient, that we are, in practical terms, making use of him as our resource. Therefore, he writes to us by way of command to pray and to sing. The Christian life is to be an exercise in practiced consecration, to "hallow every pleasure, sanctify each pain." Our whole life, we might say, should be so angled towards God that whatever strikes upon us, whether sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into his presence. In particular, his is an exercise in glad acceptance of the will of God. (Motyer, p. 188)

### 5:14-15 The Praying Elders<sup>1</sup>

James links the prayer of the elders with a healing ministry in the local church. Read these verses carefully. What exactly does James teach here about praying for the sick?

Notice that prayer for healing is not the sole responsibility of the elders. In verse 16 the whole church is to pray for *one another, that you may be healed*.

Again, notice how the elders are to pray for the sick. The main verb of verse 14 is *pray*. *Anointing* is a participle and tells us how we are to pray.<sup>2</sup>

How are we to understand James' instruction to anoint with oil? Is oil a symbol of the Holy Spirit? In Psalm 133, for example, *oil* is used symbolically. Or is the oil thought to have curative power in itself? Clearly this is possible. In the ancient world oil was widely used for medicinal purposes, especially for skin diseases (see Luke 10:34; Isaiah 1:6). If this is what James has in mind, he is saying, *Pray and use the best medicine available*.

What has been your experience of prayer and healing? Do you practice this kind of prayer? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> Who are the elders of the church? If we compare Bible passages, we see that the writers use the terms *elder*, *bishop*, and *pastor* interchangeably. Compare Titus 1:5, 7 with Acts 20:17, 28. See also 1 Peter 5:1-4. These three terms appear to refer to the same office in the early church.

<sup>2</sup> This is obscured in the NIV that translates both words as verbs.

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Catholic Church declared the anointing of oil to be the sacrament of extreme unction based on this verse. This sacrament was to be administered to a person facing imminent death. The Council of Trent (1545) pronounced an anathema (a curse) on anyone who denies that extreme unction is "*properly a sacrament, instituted by Christ. . . promulgated by the blessed apostle James, or who denies that the "sacred unction" confers grace and remits sin, or who thinks that the ceremony is "repugnant to the sentiment of the blessed apostle James", or that the elders to whom James refers "are not priests who have been ordained by a bishop"*. (Motyer, p. 191) Motyer goes on to say, *With all the love in the world, what can we say but that this has nothing to do with James 5:14-15?*

**5:15** suggests that the sickness may be a result of sin. Burdick points out that *The conditional clause “if he has sinned” makes it clear that not all sickness is the result of sin.*

Vaughan clarifies further:

We must not conclude from this that all physical suffering is due to sin. Jesus emphatically taught that this is not so (Luke 13:1-5; John 9:3). However, the Bible does teach that sin sometimes is the cause of physical disabilities (cf. Mark 2:5-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30). (Vaughn, p. 119)

### **5:16a The Praying Friend**

James encourages his readers to pray with their friends while confessing their sins to one another.<sup>1</sup>

What role does confession of sin play in your Christian life? Do you confess your sins to your friends? What happens when you do this? What keeps you from confessing your sins to a friend?

Why do you think James links confession to healing?

In 18<sup>th</sup>-century England John Wesley’s Methodist movement was founded on preaching and small groups (homegroups!). Wesley outlined the purpose and method of these meetings:

In order to “confess our faults one to another,” and to pray one for another that we may be healed, we intend: (1) To meet once a week, at the least; (2) To come punctually at the hour appointed; (3) To begin with singing or prayer; (4) To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our soul, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting; (5) To desire some person among us (thence called a Leader) to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

How would SBCC be affected if we followed Wesley’s instructions in our homegroups?

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<sup>1</sup> Again, the Roman Catholic Church has used 5:16 to support the sacrament of confession to a priest. Sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther scoffed at the notion saying, *A strange confessor! His name is “One Another.”*

### 5:16b-18 The Praying Prophet

The background for these verses is found in 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:42-45.

James wants us to know that Elijah was a man of prayer. In the Greek text we read not that Elijah *prayed fervently*, but that *in prayer he prayed*. . . James is making a point of the intensity of this prophet's prayer

What do we learn about Elijah from these verses?

What are you learning about prayer from these verses in James? How should or will your prayer life change?

Respond to the following:

Make thou good use of thy God, and especially gain the fullest advantage from him by pleading with him in prayer. In troublous times, our best communion with God will be carried on by supplication. Tell him thy case; search out his promise, and then plead it with holy boldness. This is the best, the surest, the speediest way of relief. -- Charles Spurgeon

### 5:19-20 The Priority of Restoration

James isn't finished yet. He wastes no words at the beginning of his letter, and he wastes none here at the end.

Consider Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of these verses in *The Message*:

My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.

Give an example of a time when you have practiced this verse or have seen the verse put into practice.

Read the following verses. What do they add to the message of James 5:19-20?

- Galatians 6:1
- Hebrews 3:12-13
- Hebrews 10:23-25

What would help us do a better job of incorporating these verses into the life of our church?

Think through the last ten weeks of our study in James. What will you remember a year from today when you think of the book of James? How has this book given better shape to your understanding of the Christian life?