



Scripture Studies in

The Epistle of James

By Scott Sperling



*“Come now, let us reason together,”
says the Lord. . .” – Isaiah 1:18*

SCRIPTURE STUDIES
IN
THE EPISTLE OF
JAMES

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**“Oh, the depth of the riches
of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?’
‘Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?’
For from him and through him
and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.”**

– Romans 11:33-36

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1 - JAMES 1:1-8

The Epistle of James

WITH ALL THE WRITINGS in the New Testament concerning the riches of God's grace, freely given to us, we must be careful not to take advantage of these riches and ignore our duties as followers of Christ. It is indicated in Scripture that those whose lives do not bear fruit to God may not truly be children of God (Matt. 7:17-21; Titus 1:16; I John 3:17-19). Certainly, it is not the fruit itself that makes us children of God; nevertheless, a life that bears good fruit is a necessary result of a new birth into God's family. The lack of such fruit in one's life, however, should not drive one to frantically do good works in order to, in this way, truly become a child of God. Rather, it should drive one to his knees to seek from God a true birth into the kingdom. Then God will work in His child's life and give him the desire and circumstances to bear good fruit.

To the world, it should be obvious by our actions that we are children of God. Christ Himself says: **"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"** (Matt. 5:16). Peter warns us not to be **"ineffective and unproductive"** in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (II Pet. 1:8). Paul warns us not to **"show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience"** (Rom. 2:4). While we certainly should rejoice and praise God for the magnificent free gift of life that we have received, we should by no means allow this comfort to develop into laziness.

Thus, we have the Epistle of James. This epistle is full of exhortations concerning the proper actions and attitude of a true child of God. It does not, as some would have it, contradict the doctrines of the free grace of God; rather, it complements this teaching and exhorts us to live lives worthy of those who truly understand the magnificence of the gift we have received.

Salutation

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

— James 1:1

“JAMES”, the human author of this book, is most certainly the brother of Jesus (or, technically, His step-brother). James was a well-respected man by both Jews and Christians, acquiring the nickname of James the Just. He was, apparently, a leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. He is noted in the book of Acts as the author (no doubt inspired by the Holy Spirit) of the compromise that resolved the dispute at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-33).

“A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”: James begins his letter by emphasizing his spiritual relationship with Christ, rather than his earthly relationship as brother. It is hard for us to imagine the difficulty Christ’s immediate family had in accepting Him as Savior, Lord and Creator of the universe. They grew up with Him. They knew Him as a child, watching Him as He was being apprenticed as a carpenter. Certainly, He was no ordinary child, and from early on, He had a deep

relationship with and knowledge of God (cf. Luke 2:46-50). Yet, it must have been difficult for His family to come to terms with the Lordship of Christ.

Indeed, during His ministry on earth, His family apparently did not believe in Him (see John 7:5). They even considered Him crazy when (typically concerned for their family member) He was neglecting His meals for the work of His ministry (see Mark 3:20-21). Yet, as a great testimony to the truth of Christ's Lordship over all, His family apparently did come to believe in Him and exalt Him as Lord.

In fact, two of Jesus' brothers, James and Jude, wrote epistles in the New Testament. Interestingly, just as James began his letter by emphasizing his spiritual relationship to Christ, so also Jude, in his epistle, opens with **"Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James"** (Jude 1:1). Thus, he also emphasizes his duty as a servant of Jesus over his earthly relationship with Christ.

"To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations": James, as a leader in the Church in Jerusalem, is writing primarily to the Jewish believers throughout the world, though, of course, what he writes applies to us all. It is a comfort that, though **"scattered among the nations"**, the people of God remain the people of God. We are citizens of God's kingdom, ambassadors of Christ, regardless of the earthly flag under which we reside. It is also a comfort that no matter where our journey on earth takes us, we can find God's people, fellow pilgrims living in this foreign world.

Joy Through Suffering

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

— James 1:2-4

JAMES EXHORTS US HERE to have joy through suffering. He says, **“Consider it pure joy”**. That we must **“Consider”** implies that joy is not the natural reaction to suffering. Nevertheless, we are to arm ourselves with this attitude in light of the positive results that the suffering brings:

(1) It brings future rewards, as it did for Moses: **“He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward”** (Heb. 11:26).

(2) It strengthens our character: **“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it”** (Heb. 12:11); **“...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope”** (Rom. 5:4).

(3) It brings future glory: **“Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”** (Rom. 8:17-18).

James says **“pure joy”**, meaning the utmost joy, unsurpassable joy, joy that is unmixed with sorrow. To

maintain this level of joy through hardship, we must have an acute awareness of the riches and blessings of the glory that we will experience. We must have faith that God will carry out His promise and give us a glorious life in heaven.

“Whenever” suggests: first, that we will assuredly face trials; second, that trials will come often.

The trials will be **“of many kinds”**. We live in a desperately, fallen world. Man has entered into sin of many kinds; thus, we face trials of many kinds. Even the holiest men of God are not exempt from the many kinds of trials, as Paul relates: **“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked”** (II Cor. 11:24-28).

The reason for the trials is **“the testing of your faith”**, for what good is untested faith? It is not faith at all. The result of the testing is **“perseverance”**. Note, that it is **“develop”**ed perseverance. God’s purpose in our trials is that we should **“develop”**, grow into the child of God He wants us to be as we are conformed to the likeness of Christ.

The final goal of this process is that we should become **“mature and complete, not lacking anything”**. God does not give up on us, but continues to shape and mold us until we are complete. **“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 1:6). We can only attain completeness from God through Christ.

Those of the world will never be complete. No matter how successful in the eyes of the world, they will always be lacking, just as the man who came to Jesus in Matt. 19 seeking eternal life. From the world's point of view, the man had everything: he was rich, young, upstanding and moral. Yet, he says, **“What do I still lack?”** (Matt. 19:13). Despite his worldly success, he realized that he was lacking fulfillment.

Praying for Wisdom

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

— James 1:5-8

JAMES, in this exhortation, gives us the benefit of the doubt, and presumes, by saying **“if”**, that some of us do not lack wisdom! Certainly, we all **“lack wisdom”** in various degrees. The remedy for our lack of wisdom is to seek it through prayer. We must take care, however, to seek Godly wisdom; for there is a wisdom of the world that is contrary to the wisdom of God. **“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”** (I Cor. 1:20). Even Solomon, who is renowned for his wisdom, allowed worldly wisdom to overshadow Godly wisdom. But, the most uneducated beggar who knows Jesus Christ is wiser than the most respected scholar who does not. **“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’”** (Ps. 14:1).

It is Godly wisdom that He **“gives generously to all”**. And why not? Certainly, God is happy to hear us pray for something that will make us spiritually stronger, rather than praying to satisfy our worldly appetites (as we so often do).

Note that God responds to our requests for wisdom **“without finding fault”**. To pray for wisdom is to come to God in humility, acknowledging our need for His wisdom. The world often looks down on the one who acknowledges his weaknesses. Not so God. God will never find fault in a prayer from a humble heart, for **“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble”** (James 4:6; I Pet. 5:5; cf. Prov. 3:34).

When we ask God for wisdom, we **“must not doubt”**. **“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!”** (Matt. 7:11). Those who doubt have the wrong concept of God’s character, thus reflecting that they do not have a strong faith in the true God. Doubt that God will fulfill this request springs from either (1) doubt that it is God’s will that we be strengthened spiritually (thus doubting God’s goodness) or (2) doubt that God is able to strengthen us spiritually (thus doubting God’s power). How can someone who doubts that God will answer a prayer for wisdom expect to **“receive anything from the Lord”**, given his view of God’s character?

This lack of faith makes one **“double-minded”** and **“unstable”**. How can they be stable? **“Who is the Rock except our God?”** (Ps. 18:31). If they do not trust the Rock and only sure foundation, they certainly will be unstable.

The Humble Rich and Exalted Poor

⁹ The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

— James 1:9-11

IN THIS SEEMINGLY strange passage, James describes the proper attitude that the “rich” and “not-so-rich” Christians should have. I put quotes around these designations because the “rich” in the eyes of the world are not necessarily the same as the rich as viewed by the child of God. That is what this passage is all about. The way Christians view things should be different than the way those of the world view things. For instance, Paul describes the believer as **“genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything”** (II Cor. 6:8-10).

Note that James says the believer is to **“take pride in”** either situation, whether humble or rich. We should be content with our circumstances, whatever they may be, realizing that it is God who has dealt us our lot: **“Lord, you have assigned**

me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure” (Psalm 16:5). We should be as Paul: **“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want”** (Phil. 4:12).

Unfortunately, many times, even as Christians, we complain when we cannot “get ahead” in the world. We desire the riches of the world, we dream of that big lottery win, we even murmur that we are being persecuted because we are short worldly riches. Why do we do this? Have we forgotten the riches of knowing Christ? Like Paul, we should **“consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 3:8). What could be better than being **“a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”** (I Pet. 2:9)? What kind of witness for Christ are we when we complain about not having the riches of the world?

We must have the proper attitude concerning our circumstances in the world. We may be naked now, but we will be clothed in **“fine linen”** (Rev. 19:8); we may be hungry now, but **“the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples”** (Isa. 25:6); we may be thirsty now, but as Christ says, **“whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst”** (John 4:14); we may be **“in humble circumstances”** now, but we will get **“a crown that will last forever”** (I Cor. 9:25). [Manton, 65].

Our desire for worldly riches is all the more surprising in light of the well known, well documented woes of the rich. One cannot read a newspaper without reading of their broken marriages, broken lives, bondage to drugs and alcohol, and bondage to sin. More importantly, Christ Himself said: **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than**

for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). It is difficult for a rich man to humble himself, even before the God of the universe. He feels self-sufficient. **“The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it an unscalable wall”** (Prov. 18:11). But, **“whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf”** (Prov. 11:28). Unfortunately, few of the rich give their lives to Christ. Security in this world often leads to loss in the next. Paul tells Timothy to **“command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”** (I Tim. 6:17). Thus, the rich of the world must beware, for the riches of the world are a trap.

As James says, the **“one who is rich should take pride in his low position”**. In other words, the rich man’s true glory will be found in his humility. He is to see his riches in the world as a danger, even a disadvantage. The riches threaten to puff him up, to lull him into thinking that he doesn’t need God. But, as Christ says, **“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”** (Mark 8:36).

The rich man must realize that **“he will pass away like a wild flower”**. Indeed, he and his riches are fleeting. For instance, the rich man in Jesus’ parable in Luke 12 discovered this. He grew confident in his good crop and dreamt of building bigger and better barns in which he was to store all the grain and the goods he was to accumulate. He pondered: **“And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”** But God said to him, **‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’** Then Christ summed up: **“This**

is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

James likens the unfulfilled existence of the rich man to the beauty of a flower, beautiful for a season but fading. “The fairest things are most fading” [Manton, 70]. This is contrasted to our riches and our inheritance as Christians, for God has **“given us new birth... into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade”** (1 Pet. 1:3-4).

James finally points out that the rich man will **“fade away even while he goes about his business”** (vs. 11). Indeed, the rich, in order to keep their riches, more often than not put more effort in going about their own business, than the business of God. Oh, that they would seek God as persistently!

Trials and Temptings

¹² **Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.**

¹³ **When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.**

— James 1:12-15

JAMES GOES ON to talk about the two types of testings that the child of God experiences. We are tested by trial and by tempting, that is, by stress and by seduction, or one can say, by adversity and by allurements. The first type is approved and

even, at times, ordained by God for the purpose of our edification. The second type is opposed by God and is from Satan for the purpose of destruction.

In verse 12, James teaches that the man who withstands Godly trials is blessed. The trials ordained by God are edifying to us; they strengthen us, causing us to grow as children of God. Our natural reaction to trials, even to those from God, is to grumble. But James is telling us that we should consider that we are **“blessed”** through the Godly trials. In fact, we should consider it a privilege that the God of the universe loves us as children and desires that we grow spiritually. The writer of Hebrews (quoting Proverbs) says: **“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son”** (Heb. 12:5-6 from Prov. 3:11-12). Later, he goes on and says: **“God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it”** (Heb. 12:10-11). So, there are rewards for our endurance and growth through Godly trials. As James says, we will **“receive the crown of life”**; and again, the writer of Hebrews points out that the endurance **“produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.”**

Seeing that the result of these trials is great rewards, we should not grumble, but rejoice. Afflictions and trials should not make the true child of God miserable, because his reward and riches are not in this world (see the discussion above on verses 9-11). On the contrary, at times, the trials will bring about rejoicing and increased happiness when the child of God sees God’s work in bringing him through the trial. Had there been no Egypt, there would have been no parting of the Red

Sea; had there been no Goliath, there would have been no slaying of the giant; had there been no chains, there would have been no breaking of the prison walls; had there been no cross, there would have been no resurrection.

Going on, notice that the **“crown”** that we will receive is a crown **“that God has promised”**. There are two implications of this. First, since **“God has promised”** it, we are assured of receiving it. God always keeps His promises. As Solomon pointed out in his dedication of the temple: **“Not one word has failed of all the promises He gave through His servant Moses”** (I Kings 8:56). And Paul says: **“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ”** (II Cor. 1:20). Second, since **“God has promised”** the crown of life, it does not come by our own merit. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”** (Eph. 2:8-9).

Those who will receive **“the crown of life”** are described as **“those who love him”**. We are identified as those who love Him (rather than those who serve Him or those who obey Him) because **“love is the fulfillment of the law”** (Rom. 13:10). When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus replied: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”** (Matt. 22:37-40).

In verse 13, James begins to speak about the second type of testing, which is the temptation to sin. He points out, in no uncertain terms, that God is not the originator of this type of testing; thus, we should not blame God for the temptations that we face. God is holy. For Him, temptation has no draw, evil has no attraction.

Man blames God in various ways for his own sin. Sometimes he says, “God made me like this”. Some men will say that because they have a proclivity for a certain sin, somehow they are not to blame, and, in fact, should be pitied when they practice it. But this proclivity is not from God; it is from man’s fallen nature. God made man to be holy and in His image, but He also gave man a free will. Man, in his free will, chose to succumb to Satan’s temptations and ignore God’s warnings. Thus, man and his fallen nature are to blame for his proclivity to sin.

Man also blames God for his own sin by saying “He put me in this environment”. They blame their upbringing or socio-economic circumstances or peer group influences, etc. But this is a poor excuse. Every man faces temptations. Satan leaves no one unattended. Rich and poor, white and black, pagan and Christian all face temptations tailored by Satan for their situation. Note James says **“each one”** is tempted. No man is exempt from temptation, only one man was free from sin.

Man often puts the blame for his sin on others. Adam said to God, **“The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree”** (Gen. 3:12). And Pilate said to the Jews: **“I am innocent of this man’s blood. It is your responsibility”** (Matt. 27:24). However, excuses do not hold with God. After making the excuse, your sin is still your sin and, to a righteous God, all sins deserve punishment. Rather than make excuses, it is much better to confess the sin to God and let the blood of Christ make a clean slate of things, for **“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9).

James goes on to state the true cause of sin: our **“own evil desire”**. So, the blame for sin lies upon us. Not even Satan is to blame for our sin. Yes, Satan tempts us, but we are

“dragged away and enticed” because we ourselves harbor evil desires. It is we and we alone who are accountable for our sin.

James uses the words **“his own”** when speaking of a man’s evil desires because each man has weaknesses specific to himself. Some are especially vulnerable to lust, some to pride, some to anger, some to covet, some to idol worship, some to theft, some to adultery, some to murder. Let no man think that he has been dealt a worse lot than others because of his specific weaknesses. On the other hand, let no man condemn another man for his weaknesses, for it is only by God’s grace that the same weakness does not torment himself. Rather, we should say, as Paul did: **“By the grace of God I am what I am”** (I Cor. 15:10). No, we should not condemn the weakness, but strive to help each other overcome our weaknesses through friendship, through discipleship, and, most importantly, through prayer.

Each one is **“dragged away”** and **“enticed”**. Temptation works in many ways: sometimes by force (**“dragged away”**), sometimes more subtly (**“enticed”**). So, we see in our lives, sometimes we plunge violently, recklessly into sin; sometimes we are led subtly by our desires, not consciously realizing it, until we look up and find ourselves entrenched. So, as Peter warns: **“Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away”** (II Pet. 3:17).

The life-cycle of sin consists of more than just the sinful act. James says: **“Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”** (vs. 15). So, sin’s life-cycle consists of first desire then sin then death; first the conception then the act then the result. What begins as a desire, many times is brought forth into meditation. The meditation in the heart and the mind overflows into one’s conversation. And then, what one

meditates on and speaks about results in action, action turns into sinful behavior, and sinful behavior must be punished by death.

Knowing this, we should make every effort to be victorious over the first step in the cycle, the desire, so that we are not led into the much more difficult battles after the **“desire has given birth”**. As Paul exhorts Timothy: **“Flee the evil desires of youth”** (II Tim. 2:22). Those who flee have a better chance to succeed in resisting temptation. Joseph fled and succeeded (Gen. 39); David stayed and failed (II Sam. 11).

God, by His grace, helps us to avoid sin. For instance, God has promised to keep us from any temptation that is more than we are able to resist: **“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it”** (I Cor. 10:13).

Also, many times, though we have the evil desire, God keeps us from the opportunity to sin. Praise God for the lack of opportunity! How many of us would have fallen miserably if given the opportunity? Real temptation comes when real opportunity comes. This is when we are truly tested. Again, some succeed and flee, as Joseph; some fail and stay, as David. Many pray for wealth or good looks or power; yet, they do not know that they are actually praying for more opportunity to be tempted! Praise God for your humble circumstances, for, in them, you are not given the opportunity to depend on your wealth instead of on God. Praise God for your ordinary looks, for, because of them, you are not given the opportunity to consummate the lusts of your flesh. Praise God for your position of service rather than leadership, for because of it, you are not given the opportunity to be puffed up with pride and lord it over people.

Furthermore, God will, at times, hinder us even when we are given the opportunity. He kept Abimelech from adultery: **“I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her”** (Gen. 20:6). He kept David from murder, as David told Abigail: **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands”** (I Sam. 25:32-33). He will keep Israel from idolatry: **“Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them”** (Hos. 2:6-7).

Though God, by His grace, helps us to avoid sin, temptation continually presents itself. Be on guard! The most important prayer in this regard that we can pray is: **“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one”** (Matt. 6:13).

Every Good and Perfect Gift

¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

— James 1:16-18

IN THE PREVIOUS VERSES, James pointed out the error of those who make God the author of sin. Here, James expands

on that, saying that **“every good and perfect gift”** is from God.

He warns us not to **“be deceived”** concerning the nature of God. We should all strive to have the correct understanding concerning the nature of God. Many times, we err because we project on God the fallen nature of man. We attribute to God the same motives for doing things that man’s fallen nature has. But we must not be deceived. God is the author of all that is good. The best way to understand the true nature of God is through the study of the word of God, especially the life of Jesus. Jesus’ life is, in effect, the nature of God put into human terms. Jesus said, **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”** (John 14:9).

James makes a sweeping statement that **“every good and perfect gift”** is from God. In other words, all good is from Him. Thus, if we want a **“good”** life, we should turn to Him for it. The most precious of the **“good and perfect”** gifts that we have received from Him is **“eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Rom. 6:23).

The gifts come from the **“Father of heavenly lights”**, meaning, of course, God. **“Light”** in the Bible is a symbol of purity and righteousness. **“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all”** (I John 1:5). In fact, since God is pure **“light”** (i.e. holy), He **“lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see”** (I Tim. 6:16). The fact that **“God is light”** explains why the ungodly hate Him: **“Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed”** (John 3:19- 20). Since we are his children, our lives should reflect the fact that **“God is light”**: **“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light”** (Eph. 5:8).

Although God is **“the Father of heavenly lights”**, He **“does not change like shifting shadows”** (vs. 17). We may get the incorrect idea that, since the creation is ever-changing, God also changes. This is not true. The Psalmist says, in speaking to God about the heavens and the earth: **“They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end”** (Ps. 102:26-27). The Lord Himself says, in no uncertain terms: **“I the Lord do not change”** (Mal. 3:6).

Some people have the understanding that the God of the Old Testament is different in nature than the God of the New Testament. This is not true, as borne out by the verses cited above. We must be careful not to misinterpret the unveiling of God’s plan as the changing of God’s nature. It was necessary that God deal with Israel through the law so that we would understand and fully appreciate God’s dealing with us through grace. Some would say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment and the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy. However, the Old Testament shows that God was abundantly merciful and longsuffering to Israel and the New Testament shows that God will judge the world with a full measure of His wrath at the end of this age. God’s nature is consistent throughout the Bible.

So, God does not change. We, however, are fickle and inconsistent. Sometimes, we trust in Him, serve Him and are bold for Him; sometimes, we lose heart, follow our own desires and deny Him. The more inconsistent we are, the less like God we are. In your inconsistency, go to Him; make your foundation the solid, unchanging Rock, on whom you can depend.

In verse 18, James describes the best and most perfect of the gifts that we have received: our new birth: **“He chose to**

give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." Note that God **"chose"** to give us new birth. He was not forced to give us new birth; He did not need to give us new birth; we did nothing to merit it such that He was obliged to give us new birth.

Note that it is **"new birth"** that He has given us. He did not mend our old selves, but He created us anew. As Paul says: **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"** (II Cor. 5:17). Note also that a **"new birth"** implies a changed life and a fresh existence.

Our new birth comes **"through the word of truth"**, which is the gospel. We cannot receive the new birth by obeying the law; we can only receive it through faith in Christ, who died for us so that the **"righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us"** (Rom. 8:4). Just as, typologically, Moses brought the Israelites to the border of the promised land but could not bring them in, and then Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land; so also, the law brings us to the place where we realize our need for a new birth, and the new birth comes through Jesus (the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua").

Finally, James states the purpose of our new birth: **"that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created"** (vs. 18). The **"firstfruits"** was an offering of the first grain of the harvest in recognition of God's goodness and provision (see Lev. 23:9ff; Lev. 2; Lev. 6:14-23). Interestingly, the feast of firstfruits was not offered until the Israelites entered the promised land. So, after our new birth, we are to offer ourselves as **"living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God"** (Rom. 12:1), in recognition of His goodness in providing us with a new life.

3 - JAMES 1:19-27

Self-Control

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

— James 1:19-21

JAMES BEGINS this section of his epistle with three exhortations: **“Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”** (vs. 19). Since the next section of this epistle predominantly concerns the Christian's response to the Word of God, it appears that James desired that we apply these exhortations also to the Christian's response to the Word of God (even though the exhortations could apply to many aspects of our lives).

With this in mind, we see that by exhorting us to **“be quick to listen”**, James is urging us to have a teachable spirit, ready to receive instruction from the Word of God. We should be eager to listen to the Word, always with a mind for applying it to our lives. We all need teaching from the Word, continually until the end of our existence on earth. It seems that some Christian's that have known the Lord for a long time think that they have heard it all. They stop going to Bible studies and even stop studying the Word themselves because they think they

“know it all”. Perish the thought! The depth of the Word of God is immense. Diligently study the Word until you meet the Lord and you will be continually blessed.

By exhorting us to **“be slow to speak”**, James is urging us not to rashly blurt out opinions concerning the Word of God without careful study. We must be careful in what we say, especially concerning God’s Word, so as not to misrepresent it. We should be like Moses who, when asked a question concerning the law to which he did not know the answer, said: **“Wait until I find out what the LORD commands concerning you”** (Num. 9:8). When Moses did not know the answer, he waited for the clear Word of the Lord. So also, when asked a question about God’s Word to which we do not know the answer, rather than giving an answer that we are not certain is correct, we should say: “I don’t know, let me seek the Lord on that issue.”

By exhorting us to be **“slow to become angry”**, James is urging us to be patient with those who disagree with us concerning the Word of God. This behavior should characterize discussions concerning the Word of God. Christians should not be involved in heated arguments; rather, they should humbly, respectfully present their opinions, without forgetting to humbly, respectfully listen to the others’ opinions.

These exhortations are tightly related. When one is **“quick to listen”**, one cannot help but be **“slow to speak”**. Also, being **“quick to listen”** aids in being **“slow to become angry”**. Anger is often caused by a misunderstanding of the other person’s viewpoint. Being **“quick to listen”** will decrease the possibility of such a misunderstanding. Moreover, not being **“slow to speak”** often causes anger. When participants in a discussion are not slow to speak, they must speak more loudly in order to make their point. Thus, the

volume grows until the speakers become shouters. How often does a friendly conversation grow into a full-blown argument due to too much talking and not enough listening.

As James says: **“Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires”** (vs. 20). Anger and Christianity are incompatible. Christianity is founded upon the blood of Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. He did not go to the cross in anger but humility and submission. As Peter points out: **“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats”** (I Pet. 2:23). It is difficult for you to preach grace, convey grace, and convince others of God’s grace while you are angry.

Many, for some reason, think that anger will bring about righteousness. There are many problems with this, among them:

1. Anger turns people off. Rather than bringing people to repentance, it often causes a backlash of behavior in rebellion to the anger.
2. Anger blinds one’s own mind to true righteousness. In your anger, you may veer from the course of righteousness and not even realize it.
3. Anger is a foothold of Satan: **“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold”** (Eph. 4:26-27). Satan takes advantage of inflamed passion, often in the name of “righteous anger”.
4. Anger is, in effect, spiritual murder. As Christ says: **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I**

tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:21-22).

Indeed, there is a great contrast between man’s anger and God’s righteousness.

James goes on to say: **“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth...”**. By saying **“therefore”**, he ties this exhortation to the previous one. In effect he is saying that the **“moral filth”** and **“evil”** in our lives cause us not to be **“quick to listen”**, **“slow to speak”**, and **“slow to become angry”**.

The Christian, in order to be teachable and not deaf to the Word, must **“get rid of all moral filth”** in his life. He should not speak filthily; he should not read filthy books or magazines; he should not watch filthy movies or television programs; he should not listen to music with filthy lyrics; etc. For the child of God, these things should be an abomination. The true child of God should not enjoy filthy things. Why are we willing to watch and read things that our ancestors would have been ashamed to watch and read?

To get rid of the filth in one’s life requires the help of the Holy Spirit, especially in today’s society where filth is, indeed, so **“prevalent”**. Be careful, its prevalence can make you numb to its evil. Prevalence does not make filth harmless or allowable. Filth is filth, regardless of the standards of society. Pray that the Holy Spirit would help you to have the right attitude about filth. Pray that filth would be detestable to your spirit. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you the moral strength to cleanse the filth from your life.

Getting rid of filth in one’s life is necessary preparation to **“humbly accept the word”**. Filth and evil in our lives often cause us, in order to rationalize our behavior, to reinterpret God’s Word, rather than to **“accept”** His Word. Filth and evil

in our lives cause us to say things like, “Well, God didn’t really mean that; it was a cultural commandment.”

As James goes on to say, humbly accepting the Word **“can save you”**. For the non-believer, accepting the Word can save their souls from destruction. For the believer, accepting the Word can save their lives from the destruction that filth and sin wreaks. Even in Christians’ lives, we see the destruction that comes from rejecting the Word. We see filth and sin destroying relationships, destroying marriages, destroying ministries, etc. Salvation from these things is available by humbly accepting the Word. Seek salvation! Accept the Word!

Doing What the Word Says

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

— James 1:22-25

TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD is a good thing, but it is not enough; so James says, **“Do not merely listen to the word”**. There is a danger in “social churchgoing”. Many **“hearers”** of the Word think that to hear is enough. They think that they are somehow doing God a favor by attending church for an hour a week. They do not apply what they hear to their lives. In some cases, they do not even accept Jesus as Lord and Savior of their

lives. So, they **“deceive”** themselves: they believe they are saved by the **“hearing”**, but they are not.

Unfortunately, many pulpit ministers aid in this deceit. They do not preach the Gospel of God, but rather the gospel of man. They do not speak of the riches of God's grace, but rather how to gain worldly riches, which, as Peter says, **“perish even though refined by fire”** (I Pet. 1:7). They do not teach the Word of God, but use the pulpit to teach their own philosophy. An indication of this is the fact that, in many churches, the members of the congregation do not even bring Bibles to church. These pulpit ministers are, in effect, putting their own message above the message found in the Bible, putting their own words above the Word of God. They are doing so to the peril of their congregation by aiding the congregation to **“deceive”** themselves. They are also doing so to their own peril. As James says later: **“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly”** (James 3:1).

Rather than just hearing the Word, we are to **“Do what it says”**. Now, what does the Word say that we are to do?:

1. Repent! The main message of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven is to repent from your sins and turn to Christ to be cleansed from your sins. John the Baptist said, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”** (Matt. 3:2). Christ Himself preached, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”** (Matt. 4:17) and **“But unless you repent, you too will perish”** (Luke 13:3). Peter preached, **“Repent and be baptized, P 26 every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven”** (Acts 2:38).

2. Obey! We are to obey the commandments of God.
“Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccles. 12:13).
“This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

It is the fool who hears the Word of God and does not **“do what it says”**. As Christ pointed out: **“But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash”** (Matt. 7:26-27).

Do you believe that the Bible is God’s Word? Then, **“do what it says”**! The extent that you **“do what it says”** reflects the extent to which you truly believe the Bible is God’s word. It is dangerous to be just a hearer because knowledge brings responsibility. If you hear the Word, and thus know what you should do, but do not do it, you sin: **“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins”** (James 4:17).

James goes on to compare the “non-doing hearer” to someone who looks at himself in a mirror and forgets what he looks like. This is all to point out that the Word of God is a mirror to the soul. The Word of God makes us aware of our sin. As Paul pointed out, by way of example: **“For I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet’”** (Rom. 7:7). We think that we are “good” people, that is, in comparison to those around us. Then, we read the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and see how far we fall short in the eyes of God: **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** (Matt. 5:48).

Thus, the Word of God is a mirror to the soul. Looking into this mirror should cause us to change our lives. Just as after looking at your mussed up hair in a mirror would cause you to comb it, so looking at your mussed up soul in the mirror of God's Word should cause you to straighten up your act. Self-examination should bring about change.

In verse 25, James goes on to point out that the one who looks into the mirror of the soul (the mirror being the Word of God), and then acts on what he sees, will be blessed by God. Note that the blessings will come to the one who **"looks intently"**. Looking **"intently"** implies studied meditation and diligent inquiry. It suggests not a glance, but prolonged meditation on the Word. It suggests not being satisfied with a first impression, but diligently gazing into the Word to find the full extent of its application to one's life.

It is the **"perfect law"** into which we are to gaze intently. As David says, **"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul"** (Ps. 19:7). Indeed, God's law is **"perfect"**. It is unchanging; it is invariable; it needs no amending, unlike man's law. Our response to its perfection should be:

1. Value God's law. Value it for its perfection, realizing that it was made for the good of man: **"The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today"** (Deut. 6:24).
2. Do not take from it. Realize that all of God's law is perfect, not just the parts that you agree with! **"See that you do all I command you"** (Deut. 12:32).

3. Do not add to it. To add to the law is to add man's imperfection to God's perfection. **"Every word of God is flawless;... Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar"** (Prov. 30:5,6).

James describes the law as the law that **"gives freedom"**. The law gives us freedom from our own lusts and desires. Satan, along with the desires he fosters, is a prison warden. As Paul says, sinners should repent so **"that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will"** (II Tim. 2:26). For some reason, many think that they are free if they ignore the law. On the contrary, **"the evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast"** (Prov. 5:22). And Christ says, **"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin"** (John 8:34). Moreover, Peter adds that **"a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him"** (II Peter 2:19). Thus, we must strive to be mastered by God's perfect law, rather than sin: **"Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?"** (Rom. 6:16).

The man who will be **"blessed in what he does"** is the one who, not only **"looks intently into the perfect law"**, but also does not **"forget what he has heard"**. In order to keep from forgetting, do the following [adapted from Manton, 167-168]:

1. Pay attention to the teaching of the Word.
Attention brings retention.

2. Love the Word. “Men remember what they care for: an old man will not forget where he laid his bag of gold” [Manton, 167].
3. Apply what you hear to your own life. We remember what concerns us.
4. Meditate on the Word, so as to store it in your heart.
5. Put it into practice. Direct experience will foster remembrance.
6. Reflect on how application of the Word has worked in past. Lessons learned will foster remembrance.
7. Most importantly, commit the hearing of the Word to the Spirit for your remembrance. Pray that the Holy Spirit would aid you in applying it to your life.

In summary, many over the years have heard the Word of God, pondered the Word of God, and discussed the Word of God. However, the Word was not primarily given to us for philosophical meditation, but for action. **“Do what it says!”**

True Religion

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

— James 1:26-27

HERE, JAMES describes true religion. The word for **“religion”** that James uses here “signifies religion in its external aspect, religious worship, especially the ceremonial service of religion” [*Vine’s*]. In other words, James is speaking of the outward manifestation of true Christianity. So James, in effect, is describing the actions through which a Christian’s religion is displayed to the world.

Here James is addressing the one who **“considers himself”** religious. We are much in our own eyes. We must cultivate the ability to examine ourselves and our actions objectively in order to gain a correct estimation of ourselves. **“If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself”** (Gal. 6:3,4). **“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you”** (Rom. 12:3).

The first test of true religion that James gives is keeping a **“tight rein on the tongue”**. This is the first of many exhortations in the Epistle of James concerning controlling one’s speech (2:12; 3:2; 3:5-12; 4:11; 4:13; 5:9; 5:12). There are also many Proverbs that deal with incorrect speech: **“When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his**

tongue is wise” (Prov. 10:19); “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint,...Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue” (Prov. 17:27,28); etc. [see also Prov. 11:13; 13:3; P 30 14:23; 15:1; 21:23; 25:23; et. al.]. Christ warned about careless speaking: “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36,37). Why does the Bible put such emphasis on controlling the tongue? [adapted from Manton, 170-171]:

1. It is the chief way we interact with others. The primary means that people determine “who we are” is from what we say to them.
2. It is so easy to stumble with the tongue, yet so hard to rectify the stumbling, once done.
3. Stumbling with the tongue seems such a small sin, but, in fact, can be extremely destructive.
4. There are so many ways to stumble with the tongue: derision, mockery, gossip, lying, slander, boasting, obscenity, blasphemy, etc.
5. The tongue is the tool of hypocrites. How many times have you heard of someone: “Oh, he just talks the talk, but doesn’t walk the walk”?
6. The tongue reflects the heart; control the tongue and odds are that your heart is in the right place. Thus, James says later: **“If anyone is never at**

fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check” (James 3:2). And Christ points out: **“For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”** (Matt. 12:34).

As he did in v. 22, James points out an example of someone who **“deceives himself”**. In this case, self-examination concerning what you say will keep you from deceiving yourself. Do you use profanity? Do you gossip? Do you lie? Do you deride others? To the extent that you do, as James says, your **“religion is worthless”**. Ask the Lord to help you to **“keep a tight rein on your tongue”**.

The religion that counts is not what we consider as true religion, but **“religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless”**. As far as religion goes, it does not matter what men think. You can *act* like other Christians, and *speak* like other Christians, but God sees the heart. We must be careful because pretended religion can have eternal consequences: **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 7:21).

James goes on to indicate a second work that tests true religion: **“to look after orphans and widows in their distress”** (vs. 24). So, true religion involves not only restraint (as in matters of the tongue), but action (as in charity towards orphans and widows). True religion manifests itself in good deeds. James covers this theme in detail in chapter 2.

Charity toward **“orphans and widows”** is representative of charity toward those who, in general, are not closely related to us. We are to love all believers as brothers, not just our close acquaintances and family members. Charity toward **“orphans and widows”** is also representative of charity toward those

who are most needy. **“Orphans and widows”**, in general, have no close family members and, thus, need most the help of their extended church family.

The third test of true religion that James points out is **“to keep oneself from being polluted by the world”** (vs. 27). God desires not only good deeds, but holiness as well. This is so that our charity can be seen by others as work for God and by God. However, it is difficult to walk in the world without being tainted by it, filth being so prevalent. Treat the world as refuse. Wash yourself after touching the world. As Paul says: **“Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God”** (II Cor. 7:1).

4 - JAMES 2:1-13

The Sin of Favoritism

¹ My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

— James 2:1-4

HERE, JAMES begins a section where he speaks against the sin of favoritism. It is wrong to show favoritism based on external circumstances, whether it is favoritism to the rich or to the poor: **"Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly"** (Lev. 19:15). James here focusses on the more prevalent case: showing favoritism to someone because of their riches. It is natural for the world to honor the rich and famous, because riches and fame are things for which those of the world strive. As Christians, we should have different values. Therefore, we should esteem individuals for different reasons than the world does. As Paul says, **"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view"** (II Cor. 5:16).

We should examine ourselves concerning favoritism. Do we favor the worldly wealthy? Are our heroes the great athletes, the rich entrepreneurs, the glamorous actors? Are we not surely

guilty of showing favoritism to the worldly wealthy, even at church? Unfortunately, upon examination, I think that most of will indeed find ourselves guilty in this regard. We greet the rich and upstanding, while ignoring the lowly and humble. We admire worldly wealth on the outside, ignoring the presence of God on the inside. We often allow fame to excuse immorality, being more tolerant of the actions of the rich. The excellent of the world should not gain our respect and honor, but rather the excellent in Christ. Our only consideration of outward adornment should be based on if one is clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

Indeed, Christ Himself is our example in this. He never showed special treatment based on external circumstances, but rather dealt with people based on the condition of their hearts. Even the Pharisees recognized this. At one point, they said to Him: **“We know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are”** (Matt. 22:16).

In the passage we are studying, James begins by addressing his readers as **“My brothers”**, in order to underscore his point: All believers, whether rich or poor, are our brothers and sisters. James goes on to categorize those to whom his exhortation is directed as **“believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”**. Love toward all, without favoritism, is an evidence and a fruit of true faith in Jesus Christ. Throughout this epistle, James “grounds Christian practice on Christian faith” [JFB, 586]. Indeed, the main theme of this epistle is that true faith will result in behavior that reflects that faith. So here, James relates that favoritism is not consistent with being a **“believer”**.

Moreover, by telling **“believers”** not to show favoritism, he is reminding us that our standing in relation to God is derived from our faith, not our external circumstances. In the

things of God, all have an equal advantage. Therefore, just as God does not show favoritism, but allows any and all to come to Him, we are not to show favoritism.

To explain what he means by favoritism, James describes a hypothetical situation, where a rich man and a poor man come into a church meeting. The rich man is **“wearing a gold ring and fine clothes”**. Many people don their jewelry and fine clothes at church, almost to invite special attention. There is a defect with churches that have “dress codes” (even though unwritten), in that those with humble means may feel intimidated to attend amongst the finery. A church should have an atmosphere such that all feel welcome, even the poorest, most wretched sinner.

The rich man is told, **“Here’s a good seat for you”**. This was a common practice in the synagogue: to reserve the best seats for the wealthiest. Nowadays, seats in the churches are normally not reserved in such a way; however, are not the elders and deacons of many churches chosen among the parishioners who are the most well-off? Do not the wealthiest receive more dinner invitations from fellow believers? Is not the better dressed newcomer given the better welcome at the church door? Unfortunately, favoritism is alive and well in the modern church.

In the hypothetical case, the poor man was told **“You stand there”** (so as to be ready to serve) or to **“Sit on the floor by my feet”** (so as to be at a lowly position). In both cases, the result is to exalt the hypothetical speaker above the poor man. Thus, James asks rhetorically: **“Have you not discriminated among yourselves?”** Discrimination is a damaging sin to the cause of Christendom because of its poor testimony to the world.

Those who show favoritism have **“become judges with evil thoughts”** (vs. 4). In this, they doubly err: They not only

are serving in a role to which they were not called (by being a judge), but they also are carrying out that role poorly (by showing partiality). To show favoritism is a sin, as cited above: **“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly”** (Lev. 19:15). Thus, it is an **“evil thought”** that shows respect based on worldly riches.

The Behavior of the Rich

⁵ **Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?** ⁶ **But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?** ⁷ **Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?**

— James 2:5-7

JAMES GO ON to point out that, most often, it is the **“poor in the eyes of the world”** that God uses (vs. 3), and it is the rich who are oppressive and who blaspheme the Lord.

James begins by saying, **“Listen, my dear brothers”**. He is calling for his readers to pay special attention because the point that he is making is contrary to many people’s understanding. Human understanding would say that it is the rich who are approved by God, because their lives are the most comfortable. However, wealth cannot, in itself, be used to determine approval by God. “Lest riches should be accounted evil in themselves, God sometimes gives them to the righteous; and lest they should be considered as the chief good, he

frequently bestows them on the wicked” [Secker, in Spurgeon, Vol. I, 41].

To illustrate this point, James asks rhetorically: **“Has not God chosen those who are poor...?”** (vs. 3). It is the poor whom God usually chooses to use in mighty ways. “The lion and the eagle are passed by, and the lamb and the dove chosen for sacrifice” [Manton, 193]. As Paul writes: **“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him”** (I Cor. 1:26-29). As stated, the reason God chooses the poor is so that **“no one may boast before him”**. When the rich and well-educated are chosen to do great work, often God does not get the glory. However, when God uses the poor, we can only give the glory to Him for using someone with no apparent outward advantages.

The poor are certainly freer to serve the Lord, free of worldly possessions, ties and responsibilities. When God says, “Pick up and go”, they can pick up and go. They can serve the Lord wholly and undistracted. Very few realize the advantage of poverty. The poor of the world, yet in Christ, should glory in their riches. As James pointed out in chapter 1: **“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position”** (James 1:9). On the other hand, the rich believer must understand the danger of riches. Our possessions become an obstacle to serving the Lord. The rich of the world should not consider their riches an advantage, but strive all the more to give themselves to the Lord despite their riches.

God's choosing of the poor to serve Him is exemplified by Christ's ministry. Jesus came into the world as a poor man, choosing the poor to be His disciples. God could have chosen Jesus to come into this world as a respected Pharisee, a wealthy merchant, even the emperor of Rome. Instead, God chose Christ to be born in a manger, a humble carpenter, with fishermen as followers. **"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich"** (II Cor. 8:9).

It is the poor **"in the eyes of the world"** that God often chooses. However, they are the poor of this world only, not the next. Though their worldly means be short, their benefits in the kingdom of heaven are three-fold (as described in verse 5): 1. They are chosen by God; 2. They are rich in faith; 3. They are heirs of the kingdom. With this in mind, is it accurate to call them poor?

In verse 6, James points out the root of the sin of favoritism, by telling those who show favoritism: **"But you have insulted the poor"**. To show favoritism to the rich and ignore the poor is to insult the poor and, thus, contrary to the command: **"Love your neighbor as yourself"** (Lev. 19:18). This is the basis for calling favoritism a sin.

James goes on to illustrate the folly of indiscriminately showing favoritism to the rich by reminding them: **"Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?"** (vs. 6). Historically, the rich are usually the persecutors and oppressors, not because they are more wicked than the poor, but because they have more opportunity to be so. Many who are not rich have the desire to oppress, but do not have the occasion to do so. "And usually when a disposition and an occasion meet together, then sin is

drawn forth and discovered. Many have will, but have no power” [Manton, 202].

The rich feel themselves self-made, self-sufficient and secure, so, in the book of Proverbs, Agur prayed: **“Give me neither poverty or riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’”** (Prov. 30:8-9). The pride resulting from riches often leads to self-exaltation and, ultimately, blasphemy and atheism. So James states: **“Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?”** (vs. 7). Those who love Christ will hate blasphemy.

Now, we must be careful. It is not only the rich heathen who blasphemes the Lord. Often, rich Christians blaspheme the Lord by their behavior and by their example. Their love for riches is more evident than their love for Christ. To avoid this, we must not trust in our riches but realize that it is God who has given us everything. Just as He has given, so He can choose to take away, according to His purpose. Thus, we are warned: **“Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them”** (Ps. 62:10). And: **“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”** (I Tim. 6:17).

Lawbreaking

⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

—James 2:8-11

IN THIS SECTION, James states the importance of keeping the whole law, including the “unimportant” commandments. In fact, James in effect says that there are no “unimportant” commandments. This applies to his discussion concerning favoritism because those who were showing favoritism may have thought that it was an “unimportant” sin.

James begins by stating the law that sums up all of the commandments dealing with man’s relationship with man: **“Love your neighbor as yourself”** (citing Lev. 19:18). He calls this the **“royal law”**. It is a **“royal law”** because it requires noble behavior, behavior fit for kings. In addition, it is a **“royal law”** because the benefit for keeping this commandment is a royal place in the kingdom of heaven: **“Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven”** (Matt. 5:19). Most importantly, it is a **“royal law”** because it was given by a king, none other than the King of kings. In fact, Jesus Himself designated it as one of the greatest commandments: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And**

the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37-40). One does not lightly break a king’s law in the presence of the King.

James points out that this law is **“found in Scripture”**; thus, James appeals to the authority of the Word of God. This command is, indeed, found many places in Scripture. Originally, the commandment is found in Lev. 19:18. In addition to being described as one of the greatest commandments, as cited above in Matt. 22, this commandment is described as summing up the law: **“The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery’, ‘Do not murder’, ‘Do not covet’, and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’”** (Rom. 13:9; see also Gal. 5:14).

Jesus teaches in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-36) that our neighbors are not just those whom we like. They are not limited to the ones who live nearby; they are not limited to those of the same race, same financial status, same social standing or even same religion. Our neighbors are all those in need, everywhere.

The love of one’s neighbor is a test of whether one is truly a Christian. As Jesus said: **“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”** (John 13:35). And John teaches: **“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen”** (1 John 4:20).

James goes on to state, in no uncertain terms, that favoritism is a sin: **“But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers”** (vs. 9). Although the Word of God exposes favoritism as a sin; our consciences may rationalize it as an attribute. We may say, “Well, I am

showing love to my brother (albeit to my rich brother, and albeit at the expense of my poor brother).” However, it is pretended obedience to excuse violation of the law by citing obedience to a “lesser” law.

One may try and say that favoritism is a “small” sin, but James rebuts this by essentially saying that there are no small sins: **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it”** (vs. 10). Now, James is not saying that all sins are equally bad or equally damaging. Rather, he is saying that breaking one commandment, no matter how “small”, puts one in the class of people called **“lawbreakers”**. Disobeying one law causes one to be among the disobedient.

The law of God is a unified whole, pure and perfect in its entirety. “The law is one seamless garment, which is rent if you but rend a part; or a musical harmony, spoiled if there be one discordant note (Tirinus); or a golden chain, whose completeness is broken if you break one link (Gataker). . . If any part of a man be leprous, the whole man is judged a leper. God requires perfect, not partial obedience” [JFB, 587]. It is the way of the world to say “I am not as bad as that other guy”. The child of God must strive to keep the law in its entirety and not excuse “small” sins by being obedient only to the “big” commandments. The wage of any sin is death. They all result in separation from God, whether the most horrible murder or the smallest oversight.

The realization that all, from the cruelest murderer to the teller of white lies, are in the same class from God’s point of view (**“lawbreakers”**), should cause one to pray that the grace of God be shed on all sinners. So many desire the immediate wrath of God to fall on those whom they consider unrighteous. This is reminiscent of the disciples of Christ who, when the inhabitants of a Samaritan village did not welcome Him, asked

Jesus: **“Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”** (Luke 9:54). Jesus’ response was to **“turn and rebuke”** the disciples. How quickly we forget our past unrepentant state! We justly deserved (and, indeed, still do!) the full measure of God’s punishment. It is hypocrisy to wish judgment on anyone, even the “worst” sinner.

We should pray for the repentance and salvation of sinners, rather than for their judgment. We must realize that, “but for the grace of God, there go we,” [John Bradford]. We all have our own weaknesses, thus, as **“lawbreakers”**, we are no better than others. Though you don’t steal, you covet; though you don’t kill, you hate; though you don’t commit adultery, you lust. For the most part, I dare say, it is through the lack of opportunity to commit the “greater” sins that we satisfy ourselves by committing the “lesser” sins.

In addition, the realization that all sinners are classed together as **“lawbreakers”** should cause us to be sensitive to all commands. The breaking of any law will equally make us a lawbreaker: whether we commit murder, whether we commit adultery, or take a long lunch at work, or cut corners on our taxes. The smallness of the sin is no excuse. Many times the seemingly smallest of sins have brought the greatest consequences: Adam ate a mere apple and caused the fall of mankind; Moses struck a rock and was unable to enter the promised land (Num. 20:1-13); Uzzah grabbed the Ark of the Covenant so that it would not fall, and was struck down for his irreverence (II Sam. 6:7). “Every sin is an affront to God’s sovereignty, as if his will were not reason enough; and to his wisdom, as if he did not know what were good for men; and to his justice, as if the ways of God were unequal” [Manton].

Moreover, the realization that all sinners are classed together as **“lawbreakers”** should cause us to turn to God in repentance and confession when we stumble in any way. All

sins, no matter how small, need to be dealt with and repented from. We need the cleansing of sin provided by God through confession: **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9).

Finally, these verses negate the concept that one can balance one’s sins with good works. How can one balance through works the weight of the whole law? Satan often tempts us in this regard, sometimes after the fact, sometimes before. After our good works, Satan will say: “Look at the good you have done this week. You deserve to sin a little now”. Before our good works, Satan will say: “If you stumble now, you can make up for it later this week”. One cannot, through one’s own works, make recompense for violating the *whole* law, of which, as pointed out here, the smallest sinner is guilty.

As **“lawbreakers”**, we might well cry out, as did Christ’s own disciples: **“Who then can be saved?”** (Matt. 19:25). The answer: None on their own, yet all through Christ. As Jesus answered: **“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”** (Matt. 19:26). Through the death of Christ, God did the impossible: He reconciled to Himself sinful man, man who is guilty of breaking His whole law.

Judgment and Mercy

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

— James 2:12-13

HERE JAMES DEALS with a danger of being a Christian. We are tempted to sin because we know that our sins are forgiven. To battle this, James exhorts: **“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law”** (vs. 12). Do not treat being forgiven as a license to sin. Satan often uses God’s grace in order to tempt us, by saying: “Don’t worry. Go ahead and sin. God will forgive you anyway.” To withstand this temptation, always have an awareness of the unmitigated judgment that you deserve for your sins.

We who are saved tend to ignore the judgment from which we have been saved, but it is worth reflecting upon. It gives us perspective. It causes us to appreciate the sacrifice of Christ. We need to be in awe of the judgment of God; we should soberly consider God’s judgment. Indeed, the judgment is a necessary part of the gospel. Without the judgment, our salvation would be worthless. Thus, through an awareness of the judgment, we will more greatly appreciate and value our salvation.

James says that we are to **“speak”** and **“act”** as those who will be judged. We are not merely to act Godly, but we are to control our speech as well. On the other hand, we are not merely to speak as Christians, using Christian terms, but we are to support our Christian “talk” with Godly actions that reflect our faith.

James describes the law that judges as **“the law that gives freedom”**. The Christian has a different view of the law than the non-Christian. To the Christian, the law frees us from the chains of sin. However, to the unbeliever, far from bringing freedom, the law brings death.

James goes on to say that **“judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful”** (vs. 13). Mercy is a necessary fruit in the life of the child of God. To fail to show mercy is to misunderstand the mercy that has been shown you. To misunderstand the mercy that God has shown you is to fail to appreciate the importance of Christ’s sacrifice for us. To fail to appreciate the importance of Christ’s sacrifice is to reject the gospel. Thus, mercy is a necessary fruit in the life of the child of God.

God’s mercy through Christ’s sacrifice, when understood by the believer, will result in the believer himself showing mercy. Now, it is not man’s mercy that saves him, but God’s mercy that **“triumphs over judgment”** (vs. 13). God considers His own mercy as a very important attribute. In fact, when God described Himself to Moses, He emphasized His own mercy: **“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”** (Ex. 34:6,7). The LORD then went on to describe His righteous judgment. For God, it is always mercy first, then judgment. This can be seen in the two comings of Christ. The first time Christ came in His body to the earth was to save us. When He comes again, He will judge the world. Likewise, in our lives, God, by His Spirit, strives with us so that He may be merciful to us through Jesus Christ. If we reject His mercy, God, true to His righteous nature, will judge us. However, God truly desires that **“mercy triumph over judgment”**.

True Faith

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

— James 2:14-17

THE END OF THE SECOND CHAPTER of James’ epistle contains a section concerning what true faith is. James begins by asking: **“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?”** (vs. 14). The emphasis of the whole discourse is whether the man’s **“claim”** of faith is true. To determine whether the **“claim”** true, James looks at the man’s **“deeds”**, or, in this case, his lack of **“deeds”**. Jesus speaks of a claimed faith in a similar way: **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 7:21).

James asks of the man who has **“no deeds”**: **“Can such faith save him?”** (vs. 14). In other words, James is asking, “Is it possible to have a true saving faith, if there is no evidence of it in one’s life?” James will go on to argue that such a faith is not a true saving faith. Jesus said essentially the same thing: **“If**

a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit”
(John 15:5).

Pretended faith and pretended religion are useless. In fact, pretended faith is harmful. First, it is harmful to Christianity. The pretenders are seen by the world as representatives of the faith. When there is no fruit in their lives, the world imputes their hypocrisy upon the whole religion. “There is less dishonour brought to God by open opposition, than by profession used as a cover and excuse for profaneness” [Manton, 233]. Second, the pretension can be harmful to the pretender himself. In his attempt to deceive the world, he may succeed in deceiving himself. He may think that the benefits of true faith are his and that he will join with the true believers in the kingdom of God. However, the Lord will say to him, as He did to the false professors in Matthew 7, **“I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers”** (Matt. 7:23). His pretended faith is harmful to him because it will keep him out of the kingdom of God. He will rest in his claimed faith, not seeking a true faith.

True faith will result in true works. Examine yourself in light of this. As Paul encourages: **“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves”** (II Cor. 13:5). Does your life reflect your faith? Does your life faithfully represent Christianity? Could the world determine from the fruit of your life that you are a Christian? Now, if you find yourself falling short in this respect, the remedy is not to scurry around and try to do good works in order to prove your faith, for James is not implying that works without faith saves. The remedy is to turn to God and humbly ask Him to guide you, by His Spirit, into a true saving faith from which the good works will naturally spring.

James, in order to illustrate his point, gives an example where someone’s words and actions clearly contradict each

other. **“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”** (vss. 15-16). In the example, **“a brother or sister”** (i.e., a fellow Christian) is extremely needy, as shown by his lack of even daily food. Interestingly, James personalizes the example by saying **“if one of you says...”** doing this, he is encouraging us to examine our lives to see if such hypocrisy exists.

The speaker in the example says to the needy brother or sister: **“Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed”** (vs. 16) and then does nothing else. This directly applies to James’ position about the uselessness of a merely claimed faith because the speaker acts as if his words, in themselves, will accomplish something. In the example, the absence of action proves the emptiness of the words. If the speaker really wished the brother or sister well, he would have done something to help the needy person.

James sums up his argument: **“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”** (vs. 17). A claimed faith with no works is analogous to the claimed concern in the example. The man in the example speaks well, and to speak well is important, but it is not enough, just as a mere claimed faith is not enough. The man in the example knew of the brother or sister’s need, but did not act upon his knowledge. In the same way, one may claim to have faith by claiming that he knows about Christ and Christ’s teachings, but he is condemned when he does not act upon his knowledge. The absence of works proves the emptiness of his faith.

Examples of Faith

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. ²⁰ You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. ²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

— James 2:14-26

JAMES BEGINS this section by stating that it is much easier to prove that one has true faith if the faith is demonstrated by works: **“Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do”** (vs. 18). Those with proven faith, those who have demonstrated their faith by their works, are great assets to Christianity. Thank God that we have the Mother Therasas, the Corrie Ten Booms, the Billy Grahams, etc., to point to as representatives of the Christian faith. We can point to them because their faith is demonstrated.

James goes on to give three examples of faith. The first example shows a faith that believes that Jesus is the Son of God, and yet is not a saving faith: **“You believe that there is one**

God. Good! Even the demons believe that” (vs. 19). The demons have a faith that many today would consider a saving faith. As James stated, demons believe that there is one God. Demons also believe that Jesus is the Son of God (see Matt. 8:29). Demons also clearly believe that Jesus has the power to save men from hell; otherwise, they would not work so hard to keep men from Jesus.

So, demons not only intellectually acknowledge the existence of God, but also acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world. Now, intellectual acknowledgement is, as James says, **“Good!”** is a necessary first step to true faith. However, true saving faith is more than intellectual acknowledgement. It involves basing one’s life on the fact that Jesus died for our sins and is our Lord and Savior. Furthermore, to truly believe that Christ died for us is to acknowledge one’s debt to Him through obedience. This will naturally result in doing the work of God.

Interestingly, the demons’ faith in God does result in fruit in their lives, albeit, not the right kind of fruit, for they **“shudder”**. True Christians should not **“shudder”** the thought of God. Indeed, we should have a healthy fear of God, a respect for His commandments and a reverence for His name, but to truly know Him is to know His love for us. This love does not cause one to **“shudder”**, unless one is still under the condemnation of God. However, as Paul points out, **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Rom. 8:1).

It should be obvious that true faith results in a life that reflects that faith, so James tactfully says, **“You foolish man”**. He then goes on to offer as examples two people whose actions demonstrated their faith.

The first of these examples is perhaps the greatest demonstration of faith in the Bible: Abraham’s offering of

Isaac. Abraham's offering of Isaac was a great example of obedience, but it was even more a demonstration of his faith. God asked Abraham to do something that, from a human point of view, defied logic, contradicted reason and did not make sense. Abraham, through faith, nevertheless consented. The reason that Abraham could make such a grand offering was because he believed, through faith, the promise of God that stated that he would have descendants through Isaac. The writer of Hebrews sums it up: **"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death"** (Heb. 11:17-19). Abraham did not consider that he was sacrificing Isaac to death, because God had already made promises about Isaac's future that had yet to be fulfilled.

James goes on: **"Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?"** (vs. 21), all who read this episode in Genesis 22 cannot help but **"consider"** righteous for it. We consider him righteous because we see that, as James says, **"his faith and his actions were working together"** (vs. 22). God also **"considered"** righteous for what he did, because God told him afterwards, **"Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son"** (Gen. 22:12). Also, certainly, Abraham himself was strengthened in his faith through this episode. When we pass the tests of God, we ourselves are strengthened in our faith as a result. When our faith **"works together"** with our actions, our faith strengthens our works and our works strengthen our faith. So, indeed, as James states, Abraham's **"faith was made**

complete by what he did" (vs. 22): his faith was proven to us, to God and to himself.

Abraham's actions were actually a fulfillment of the Bible's assertion that Abraham had faith. As James points out: **"And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'"** (vs. 23). The Bible could merely have stated that Abraham had faith, but we would not have known the extent of his faith unless we were shown his deeds. In fact, Abraham is considered a great man of faith, not because the Bible *says* he had faith, but because his faith was *demonstrated* fulfilled through his testing. Untested faith is unproven faith.

Now, God **"credited"** Abraham's faith **"to him as righteousness"** years before Abraham's offering of Isaac. The episode being referred to was when **"Abraham believed"** the Lord, when He said: **"Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them... So shall your offspring be"** (Gen. 15:5). So, the offering of Isaac was not the grounds of Abraham's justification, but the **"fulfillment"** the faith attributed to him. James looks at the effect of his justification, which was the act that fulfilled the statement that Abraham had faith in the promise.

James goes on, saying: **"You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith"** (that is, a claimed faith) **"alone"** (vs. 24). Abraham's test specifically referred to his faith in the earlier promise. If Abraham truly believed that his offspring through Isaac would be as the stars in the sky, he would have no problem with offering Isaac to the Lord, since it was the Lord Himself who made the original promise.

Many see a discrepancy between what James says in this verse with some of Paul's teachings; namely, when Paul states: **"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law"** (Rom. 3:28). This supposed

discrepancy can be resolved by studying the purpose and context of Paul's and James's statements. James is speaking of a *claimed faith* that is not borne out in the actions of the claimant's life. Paul is speaking of a *true faith*, and stating that a *true faith* is sufficient in order to be justified. James' purpose is to describe what true faith is (a faith that results in action); Paul's purpose is to describe what true faith does (that is, justify). James defines faith; Paul defines justification. James, in this passage, is not battling Paul, as some would presume; rather, James is battling those who would abuse the doctrine taught by Paul. The differences between Paul's and James' statements are in large part due to their differing target audiences: Paul speaks to the Pharasaical Christians, who say that you must be circumcised, etc. in order to be justified; James speaks to so-called "carnal Christians", who use their claimed faith to excuse sin.

James' final example is Rahab, whose history is found in Joshua 2. James states: **"In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?"** (vs. 25). Rahab is also mentioned as an example of faith in Hebrews 11: **"By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient"** (Heb. 11:31).

Rahab presents an interesting contrast to Abraham. Abraham represents the high ground of faith, a man to be looked up to and emulated. On the other hand, Rahab was a prostitute and her act of faith itself was accompanied by a lie, a great contrast to Abraham's noble act. However, her behavior when the spies came, when her faith was tested, proved that she had faith in God: we would not have known that she had faith if she had not demonstrated it. One might say, "I could

never be an Abraham”, but certainly we, who are sinners, as Rahab is, could aspire to have a true, proven faith in God.

Rahab’s actions displayed an enormous amount of faith. To hide the spies, she would have had to believe that the ragtag Israelites, wanderers in the desert, could conquer Jericho, a fortified, walled city. Also, her act was not trivial. It was a selfless, courageous act. She jeopardized her own life by harboring the spies. Her faith, like ours, was based on hearing about the Lord’s work in the lives of His people. She spoke her faith, saying: **“I know that the LORD has given this land to you... We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below”** (Josh. 2:9-11).

So, though Rahab was a sinner, yet she was an example of faith. God does not expect the faithful to be sinless. He, by His Spirit, will work to that end in our lives, but the great people of God do not have to be (and certainly are not) sinless. In fact, God often chooses the worst of sinners to represent him: Matthew the tax-collector, Paul the murderer, Rahab the prostitute. In choosing us sinners to serve Him, God turns our old sins into glory for Him, as those around us witness our changed lives. “The scars and marks of old sins remain, not to our dishonour, but God’s glory” [Manton, 268]. Rahab, though a prostitute, went on to marry an Israelite and, in fact, is a human ancestor of Jesus Christ (see Matt. 1:5).

James concludes this section concerning faith and works by summarizing: **“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead”** (vs. 26). This is a picturesque

analogy. A body without a Spirit is a dead carcass: useless and putrid. So, a dead faith is useless, even harmful. A dead faith shows no signs of life; a living faith is active, vibrant, exemplary, and glorifies God. Oh Lord, breathe Your breath of life into our faith!

In summary, the examples that James cited were chosen because they are clear evidences of faith. They were not works of charity, or works done with the purpose to display holiness, “but works the value of which consisted solely in their being proofs of faith: they were *faith expressed in act*, synonymous with *faith*” [JFB, 589]. They were also chosen because they represent a broad spectrum of believers: male and female; man of God and prostitute; Jew and Gentile. Thus, James’ teaching, that works will result from true faith, is a universal principle. Examine yourself. Is there fruit in your life as a result of your faith? Do your actions and your faith work together? If not, seek the Lord for guidance as to how you can make your faith complete.

6 - JAMES 3:1-12

Care in Teaching

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

— James 1:1-3

JAMES' NEXT EXHORTATION concerns our proper service. He points out the danger of someone **“presuming”** to be a teacher when they are not called to serve in that way. In general, to perform service for which one is not truly called is a waste of time at best, destructive at worst. James gives a special warning concerning teaching because, he says, **“we who teach will be judged more strictly”** (vs. 1).

To teach the things of God in any capacity is, as James implies, **“presumption”**. There is a natural tendency for us Christians, who study the revelation of God in the Bible, to try to teach others concerning God. James warns that we must be careful in doing so. Indeed, we should not ourselves **“presume”** all to be teachers, rather, we should allow only God to **“presume”** to make us teachers. Since we who teach will **“be judged more strictly”**, we must subject every lesson and message to guidance by the Holy Spirit through prayer.

The danger in teaching is that, as James goes on to say, **“we all stumble in many ways”** (vs. 2). Those who teach, by taking on that role, become examples, whether they like it or

not. By presuming to teach the things of God, they become representatives of God whose lives come under the scrutiny of those who hear their teaching. Thus, teachers must take great care that their lives reflect what they teach. As Paul says: **“You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourselves?”** (Rom. 2:21). Indeed, teachers should first teach themselves. A teacher’s first student should be his own heart, then he can go on to teach others.

Unfortunately, **“we all stumble in many ways”**. There are no exceptions, for **“all”** stumble. James, by saying **“we”**, even includes himself as one who stumbles. As teachers, we may sincerely try to live an exemplary life, but we will at times **“stumble”**. Teachers, however, are **“judged more strictly”** when they stumble because they often cause others to stumble.

The primary way that we stumble, and cause others to stumble, is by what we say; so James points out: **“If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man”** (vs. 2). It is so easy, when teaching, to offend with the tongue. It is so easy to let one’s words wander from the issue at hand and blurt out some “innocent” jeer or slur or sarcasm which can be taken the wrong way. This is aggravated by the fact that the hearers, when being taught the things of God, are more likely to get offended by careless words because they see the teachers as representing God. Christ Himself held the Pharisees, the teachers of that time, especially accountable for what they said, when He told them: **“For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”** (Matt. 12:37).

The prevalence, indeed universality, of sinning with the tongue is such that James states that whoever can control his speech can achieve sinlessness: **“If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole**

body in check” (vs. 2). James has much more to say about controlling the tongue in the next section.

The Importance of Controlling the Tongue

³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

— James 3:3-6

JAMES CONTINUES with a section addressed to all believers concerning the importance and difficulty of controlling one's speech. Exhortations concerning the tongue are numerous in the Epistle of James; they are in every chapter (see 1:19, 26; 2:12; here; 4:11; 5:12). The great men of God know the danger of the tongue: Job said to the Lord: **“I am unworthy— how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth”** (Job 40:4); Isaiah exclaimed: **“Woe to me!... For I am a man of unclean lips”** (Isaiah 6:5); Solomon wrote many Proverbs warning of the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue (see Prov. 10:28; 13:3; 17:27; etc.); David prayed (as we should also pray each day): **“Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips”** (Psalm 141:3); Paul, in describing the depravity of all men, speaks much about the

corruption of their speech: **“There is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness”** (Rom. 2:12-14). Christ alone was faultless in speech: **“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate”** (I Pet. 2:22-23).

Many, if not most, of our sins come from our tongue: from lying, swearing, slander, loose talk, quarreling, boasting, berating, blasphemy, etc. To keep from these sins, we should fill our mouths with encouragement, edification, exhortation, praise and prayer. As Paul urges: **“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”** (Eph. 4:29).

Speech is one thing that distinguishes the human race from animals. By it, we display our intelligence and our reasoning abilities. We can use our powers of speech to change minds, hearts and even the whole course of a person’s life through rhetoric. It is the privilege of man and a gift of God to speak. Have we lived up to this honor?

James begins this section with an illustration that depicts the importance of controlling the tongue. James had a talent for devising appropriate, insightful illustrations. “He used commonplace things to illustrate divine truth” [Strauss, 129], just as Christ did. Christ through parables and illustrations used birds, wheat, coins, trees, vineyards, houses, etc., to illustrate the things of the kingdom of God. Likewise, James here uses **“bits”** and **“rudders”**.

The point of his illustration is that very large things can be influenced and controlled by very small devices. The small **“bit”** in the mouth of a horse is used to control the wild animal, so that the horse performs useful work. The small **“rudder”** on a

ship is used to control the ship, to keep it from wandering aimlessly, and to guide it away from the danger of the rocks. So, the small **“bit”** and **“rudder”** are used for great good, to control large, reckless bodies and make them useful and productive.

Likewise, our tongue could be used for great good, to (as James stated earlier) **“keep our whole body in check”** (vs. 2). Unfortunately, our tongues, which are small, are used more often than not to cause great harm. A bridled, controlled tongue can accomplish great good, communicating the gospel, turning people toward God; an unbridled tongue, however, is reckless and wild, untamed and trampling, causing much destruction. Like rudders, our tongues steer our lives and the lives of others, sometimes toward the things of God, sometimes away.

James goes on to liken the tongue to a **“small spark”** that sets a great forest on fire. Then, he says correctly that **“the tongue also is a fire”** (vs. 6). Indeed, the tongue can be hot, scorching and dangerous. Just as a spark can destroy a great forest, the tongue **“corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire”** (vs. 6). Just like a fire, the tongue can very quickly do great damage. “Thus has a peace been ruined, thus has a reputation been blackened, thus has a friendship been embittered, thus has a mind been poisoned, thus has a life been blasted” [Guy King, cited in Strauss, 135-136]. The enemy makes much use of our wild tongues, so James points out that the tongue **“is itself set on fire by hell”** (vs. 6).

The Difficulty of Controlling the Tongue

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

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

— James 3:7-12

HAVING SHOWN the corruption of the tongue, James now describes how difficult it is to remedy this. He points out a paradox. Man has been greatly successful in taming just about everything else except the tongue: **“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue”** (vs. 7-8). The entire world is a testimony to the truth of James' words. We all sin with the tongue; none of us has ever been successful in taming it. Sins of the tongue are committed by those of all ages, sexes, and temperaments. While many other sins are **“tamed”** by age or will or experience, **“no man can tame the tongue”**.

The key here is that **“no man”** can tame the tongue; yet, what man is unable to do, God is able to do. Men may try, through resolution, to tame their tongue, but their attempts will be doomed to failure. They will be like David, who tried to tame his tongue through his own will: **“I said, ‘I will watch**

my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.' But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased" (Psalm 39:1- 2). Rather than through our own resolution, we should enlist God's help, and pray as David did later: **"Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips"** (Psalm 141:3).

James goes on to describe the nature of the tongue as **"full of deadly poison"** (vs. 8), as a snake. With our tongue, we can be poisonous. Certainly, to the extent our words turn people away from Christ, they become death. Before you speak, remember that your tongue can be deadly poison, and handle it with care, as you would any other poison.

James then speaks of the hypocrisy of the tongue: **"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness"** (vs. 9). The tongue is the author and instrument of hypocrisy. The same tongue is put to the best and worst use: the praising of God and the cursing of men. Do we really believe that we can sing praises to God, read His Word aloud, speak out in prayer, and then also curse our brothers? The cursing of men is an affront to God, who made each man for His purpose. Rather than curse men, even those who do you wrong, pray that they would fulfill God's purpose in their lives.

In conclusion, James shows that the hypocrisy of the tongue is, in fact, contrary to nature: **"Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?"** (vs. 12). Nature itself abhors hypocrisy. Nevertheless, we, contrary to nature, somehow think that we can speak bitter water and pure with the same tongue. However, James' point is that the bitterness coming from our mouths, in effect, nullifies the purity: **"Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water"** (vs.

12). The cursing of our brothers nullifies our praises to God, because our curses show that our praise is really not sincere. If it were, we would not insult God by cursing His prize creation, men **“who have been made in God’s likeness”** (vs. 9).

Wisdom from Heaven

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

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

— James 3:13-18

IN THIS SECTION of his Epistle, James speaks concerning true wisdom, the wisdom that comes from heaven. He catches our attention by asking: **“Who is wise and understanding among you?”** (vs. 13). James is asking about two characteristics: knowledge (or understanding) and the proper use of it (which is wisdom). Knowledge informs; wisdom directs. The two should go hand-in-hand. In fact, each by itself is ineffective. Knowledge by itself merely feeds one’s ego, as Paul states: **“Knowledge puffs up”** (I Cor. 8:1); wisdom by itself is useless, having no substance to act upon. Unfortunately, the two are all too seldom found together.

Now, we would all naturally desire to answer James' question: "Me! I have wisdom and understanding!"; however, whether or not we are worthy to answer in this way can be determined by the way that we act. James states that the person who is truly wise, will **"show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom"** (vs. 13). The proof of wisdom is the proper use of it, as demonstrated by a good life, lived in humility. This is contrary to the way that the worldly wise display their wisdom and knowledge. Most attempt to display these things through arguments and boasting. The worldly wise are eager to dispute and debate, displaying their wisdom by degrading another man's.

The truly wise man does not puff himself up or make express efforts to parade his knowledge. His goal in a discussion is not to display his understanding and wisdom, but to shed light on the situation through his understanding and wisdom. His goal is not to claim victory in a discussion, but that both parties would be edified by the dialogue. Many times it is not the one who claims victory that truly wins an argument in God's eyes. The true victor is the one who displays the **"humility that comes from wisdom"** (vs. 13). To do this, it is necessary, at times, to walk away from a discussion that is beginning to turn bitter or to refrain from insisting on getting in the last word. Indeed, the truly wise and knowledgeable have a greater obligation to use their God-given gift of wisdom properly, in the way prescribed here in God's Word.

One can discern in his own heart whether his wisdom is ungodly or is from God by determining whether his wisdom is accompanied by **"bitter envy and selfish ambition"** (vs. 14) or not. Is the goal of your display of wisdom to show someone else up? Is the goal to show others how smart you are, to raise their estimation of you? This is ungodly wisdom, full of **"envy and selfish ambition"**. Again, the goal of wisdom that is from

heaven, on the contrary, is to build others up, to increase their knowledge and bring them into a greater understanding of the things of God.

If we have ungodly wisdom, wisdom full of **“envy and selfish ambition”**, James tells us: **“Do not boast about it or deny the truth”** (vs. 14). Some are proud of their displays of knowledge; they are proud to show others up; they brag about how they were victorious in an argument, leaving the other party speechless. James warns us not to **“boast about”** such wisdom, for it is ungodly wisdom. Still others, while not boasting, relish in their hearts their displays of knowledge, their intellectual victories in arguments, all the while claiming to have true wisdom. James warns us not to **“deny the truth”**, for such wisdom is, again, ungodly.

As James puts it: **“Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil”** (vs. 15). Here, James gives us the characteristics and origin of ungodly wisdom. In character, such wisdom is **“earthly”** and **“unspiritual”**. It is concerned with this world and the things of this world, not spiritual matters. It is concerned with gaining worldly esteem, not growing in spiritual maturity. The wisdom of the world and the wisdom from heaven are at odds with each other. **“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength”** (I Cor. 1:18, 22-25).

The origin of worldly wisdom is, as James states, **“of the devil”** (vs. 15). Satan is the author of worldly wisdom, seeking to undermine the work of God through the wisdom of world. So many of the worldly wise enjoy scoffing at God’s people and the things of the Lord. In fact, many academic disciplines, in developing theories about the workings of the creation, begin with the premise that there is no God. It is no wonder then that their conclusions leave so little room for Him.

Make no mistake, Satan is **“full of wisdom”** (see Ezek. 28:12) and so, we must be careful. Satan can even use God’s people to do his work through worldly wisdom when we attempt to defend the things of God with a worldly attitude. The end result is actually to turn people away from God because of the manner in which our “defense” of God was presented.

The fruit of ungodly wisdom is not only **“envy”** and **“selfish ambition”**, but also **“disorder and every evil practice”** (vs. 16). As is so often the case, the key to discerning that which is true is by examining its fruit. Godly wisdom is edifying; ungodly wisdom results in confusion and evil. Ungodly wisdom so often leads to sin: pride, blasphemy, derision, slander, etc. This is in contrast to Godly wisdom, which is, as James points out, **“first of all pure”** (vs. 17). The primary fruit of true wisdom is purity of heart and purity of life. And **“how can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word”** (Psalm 119:9). The best use of wisdom and the way to be pure is to study and obey the Word of God. To the extent that one ignores the teachings in the Word of God, he is lacking in true wisdom.

James goes on to enumerate additional fruits of wisdom that comes from heaven. Such wisdom is also **“peace-loving”** (vs. 17). True wisdom avoids rather than stirs up strife. “True Christians will strive to keep peace, to make peace, to preserve

where it is” [Manton, 314]. To be **“peace-loving”** to be like God. Christ said: **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God”** (Matt. 5:9). Christ, though He was to be betrayed, instituted the sacrament of communion, making peace with man; and while He was being crucified, He prayed for His murderers. God, though wronged by man since the beginning of creation, answered that prayer of Christ and made peace with man through Jesus Christ.

One cannot claim to have Godly wisdom if he is not peace-loving. In order to keep the peace, at times one must allow the other party to be incorrect. “A man may err in logic that doth not err in faith” [Manton, 318]. In most situations, it is better to walk away from a discussion rather than allow it to escalate into an argument.

Note the priority that James gives, though. True wisdom is **“first of all pure, then peace-loving”** (vs. 17). Purity should not be sacrificed for peace. One must not, in the interest of peace, give the impression that he condones something that is not pure. If he does, he may make peace with man, but he violates peace with God.

True wisdom is also **“considerate”** and **“submissive”** (vs. 17). It is **“considerate”** in that it is willing to listen to the other’s point of view in a respectful manner. It is **“submissive”** in that it will consider that viewpoint and give up one’s own view when it is clear that the opposite view is correct. Those who are truly wise are not afraid to admit that they were wrong; on the contrary, the goal being light, they willingly embrace a view that was not originally their own if it turns out that it is the correct view.

Wisdom from heaven is also **“full of mercy”** (vs. 17). It will respectfully lead people into the truth, rather than intellectually “beating them into submission”. Along the same

lines, true wisdom will gracefully forgive those who are found to be wrong.

The truly wise do not merely know the truth, but they practice it. As James says, they are **“full of ... good fruit”** (vs. 17). Head knowledge is not enough and is, indeed, worthless in and of itself. We must act upon the knowledge that we have, living a life that reflects our God-given wisdom.

Those who have wisdom from heaven are also **“impartial”** (vs. 17). They will not rate a point of view based upon the fame or fortune of the one who expresses it, but solely upon the merits of the viewpoint itself. In general, we as Christians are not to show partiality based upon external circumstances.

Finally, those who are truly wise are to be **“sincere”** (vs. 17). Our behavior should reflect what we truly believe. “In true wisdom there is much light, but no guile... We should be as willing to do them good, as to proffer it; to reprove, as to flatter; to pray to God for them in secret, as to make professions of respect to themselves” [Manton, 320-321].

To conclude, James makes a final statement about being **“peace-loving”** (vs. 17). He encourages such an attitude, by pointing out: **“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”** (vs. 18). I believe that James highlights the **“peace-loving”** trait of true wisdom for two reasons: first, peace-loving is a trait that is so often absent from those who are worldly wise; second, peacemaking is a thankless job. Those who try to make peace between warring parties are usually scorned by both sides. So, James gives an extra word of encouragement to those who are **“peace-loving”**, reminding them that they will reap what they sow. Again, Christ specifically said: **“Blessed are the peacemakers”** (Matt. 5:9).

Now, James tells us much about the characteristics of wisdom that is from heaven, but he does not here tell us how we may receive such wisdom. However, in chapter one, he

explicitly states: **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him”** (James 1:5). So, seek this wisdom through prayer.

Strife Among Christians

¹ What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

— James 4:1-3

JAMES BEGINS this section with a provocative question: **“What causes fights and quarrels among you?”** (vs. 1). He does not postulate that there might possibly be strife among Christians; he states as a fact that there are **“fights and quarrels”** among us. There is quite a contrast between the end of the last section, speaking of peacemaking, and the beginning of this one. This section suggests that James' audience has much progress to make in order to attain the ideal that James described in the last section. And, alas, we do. Unfortunately, there is and always has been strife among Christians. Even in the apostolic age, there apparently was much strife in the young churches. For example, Paul was worried that, when he came to visit the church at Corinth, there would be **“quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder”** (II Cor. 12:20). Even in the commendable church at Philippi, there were quarrels, for Paul

pleads with two women there **“to agree with each other”** (Phil. 4:2).

James here attempts to find a remedy to the **“quarrels and fights”** among Christians by exploring **“what causes”** them. To successfully find a remedy, one must find the true cause. James postulates that the cause of the quarrels is the **“desires that battle within [us]”** (vs. 1). We often try to place the blame for our strife on external circumstances and pressures, but the true origin is our own lusts. Think about it. Bring to mind any quarrel that you have had in your life (with your spouse, with your friends, with your parents, etc.). Was not the reason that you were quarreling due to some worldly desire of yours that was in jeopardy of being fulfilled?

These worldly desires **“battle within you”** (vs. 1). As Paul points out: **“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want”** (Gal. 5:17). There is an on-going battle between the Spirit of God in us and our sinful nature. One of the fruits of this battle is the strife that we have with others.

Almost without exception, all quarrels and fights can be traced to the fact that, as James says, **“You want something but don’t get it”** (vs. 2). This unfulfilled desire leads you to **“kill and covet”** (vs. 2). Now you may think that James is exaggerating a bit on this point. You say, “I have never killed due to a desire that I have had!” However, you forget that, in the Kingdom of Heaven, anger is tantamount to murder. Remember that Christ said: **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment”** (Matt. 5:21-22).

And so, we **“kill and covet”**, and we **“quarrel and fight”**, but we still **“cannot have what we want”** (vs. 2). Evil means never arrive at full satisfaction. We may even, through our **“killing, coveting, quarreling and fighting”**, attain the desire for which we originally fought so hard. However, a goal attained in such a way is never fulfilling. We get, but we do not get enough. We get, but we want more. Wealth begets desire for more wealth; power begets desire for more power.

For true satisfaction, we must seek what we desire through correct means, which is, as James points out, through prayer: **“You do not have, because you do not ask God”** (vs. 2), not quarreling and fighting, is the correct, lawful means to get what you want. By asking God, we are forced to reflect on the motives for our desires. “Prayer is not for God’s information, but the creature’s submission” [Manton, 338]. We should take no actions that we would be hesitant, or worse, ashamed to bring before God. God, through Isaiah, warned those who pursued their desires without presenting them before God: **“Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, ‘Who sees us? Who will know?’”** (Isa. 29:15).

Yet, when we ask God, sinful as we are, at times we **“ask with wrong motives”** (vs. 3). This is why, as James points out, that when we ask God, at times we **“do not receive”**. We may even have convinced ourselves that our petition is for God’s glory. We may have convinced ourselves that the lottery winnings for which we are praying will do much to advance the cause of God. We pray and pray and pray and we still do not receive. We despair and cry out, “God, why don’t you answer my prayers?!”

When we ask, and yet do not receive, we must examine our petitions. **“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get**

on your pleasures” (vs. 3). God will never be a servant to our lusts. Our primary motivation in life should be to please God and carry out His will, and so, our petitions to God should reflect this. We should examine our petitions and ask ourselves: “How does what I am praying advance God’s work? Am I prepared to receive what I am praying for, or will I stumble from the temptations and testings that it will bring? Have I sought God’s direction in this matter, or have I just presented Him with my plan, ignoring His direction?”

To pray with the correct motives is difficult for us, as sinners. Therefore, we need to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even in what we ask for. **“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express... [T]he Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will”** (Rom. 8:26,27). And then, when we seek the guidance of the Spirit of God and pray according to God’s will, we are promised that our prayers will be answered: **“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we asked—we know that we have what we asked of Him”** (1 John 5:14-15). There is no greater feeling than seeing your own will line up with God’s will and experiencing the answered prayers that result. “God’s glory is the end of prayer, and the beginning of hope” [Manton, 313].

Friendship with the World

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? ⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

—James 4:4-6

HAVING ESTABLISHED that worldly desires cause strife between man and man, James now points out that worldly desires also cause strife between man and God. Speaking to those who **"ask with wrong motives"**, James addresses them as **"adulterous people"**. The relationship between God and his people is depicted as a marriage relationship in the Bible. For example, God tells Israel through Isaiah: **"For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is His name—the Holy One of Israel is your redeemer"** (Isa. 54:5). Israel is portrayed as the wife of God throughout the Old Testament. When Israel is unfaithful, they are charged by God with being adulterous. For instance, when God tells Hosea to take an adulterous wife so that his marriage can be a model of God's relationship to Israel, He says: **"Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD"** (Hos. 1:2).

Similarly, the Church in the New Testament is depicted as the bride of Christ. For instance, when Paul gives instruction concerning marriage, he says: **"Husbands, love your wives,**

just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). Then later, when Paul summarizes his exhortations about the roles of husbands and wives, he says that he is **“talking about Christ and the church”** (Eph. 5:32). Paul also tells the church at Corinth: **“I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him”** (II Cor. 11:2).

Therefore, when we are unfaithful to God, when we turn our back on Him and become wedded to the world, we are adulterers. We are pledged to Christ; we must be careful that we may be presented to Him as a **“pure virgin”** at the wedding supper of the Lamb (cf. Rev. 19:7). He bought us, so we are to be only His. The fact that we are the bride of Christ must be taken very seriously. In the law of God, adultery is a very serious crime, punishable by death (see Lev. 20:10). Also, do not forget, there are varying degrees of adultery. Although one may not consummate his worldly desire, God still considers those who lust after the things of the world to be adulterers (see Matt. 5:27-28).

We must come to realize that, as James says, **“friendship with the world is hatred toward God”** (vs. 4). God and the world are at odds. As James continues: **“Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God”** (vs. 4). This is a difficult concept for many people to grasp, our ties to the world being so strong. The teaching in the Bible, however, is uncompromising on this point. We are not, as Christians, to desire the world and the things of the world, as John says: **“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world”** (I John 2:15,16). We must distance ourselves from the world

and remain separated to God, for the world is under the control of Satan. Satan is referred to in the Bible as **“the god of this age”** (II Cor. 4:4) and **“the prince of this world”** (John 14:30). **“We know that we are the children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one”** (I John 5:19). However, those of us in Christ can be set free from the control of the world and its leader, for Christ **“gave Himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age”** (Gal. 1:4). And so, to free yourself from your ties to the world, **“set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God”** (Col. 3:1,2).

James solidifies his argument that friends of the world are enemies of God by reminding us that **“Scripture says... the Spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely”** (vs. 5). The Scripture to which, I believe, James is referring is Deut. 5:9, when God says: **“I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”** God does not want to share us with any other gods. He is to be the focus of our life, not man-made idols. It is so easy to let our hobbies and worldly pursuits to take precedence over God and the things of God. The worldly pursuits the focus of our life. Unfortunately, we are all apt to fall into friendship with the world, to let our desires be for the things of the world. God realizes how easy it is for this to happen, so, although He **“envies intensely”**, He also **“gives us more grace”** (vs. 6). God lures us, not by force or wrath, but by grace back to Him.

God not only tells us that He gives us grace, but He tells how we may receive this grace, for **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble”** (vs. 6; James is citing Prov. 3:34). By citing Scripture in this passage, James is trying to get us to realize that no Scripture is, as he says, **“without reason”**. God never speaks vain words. We not only have promises in Scripture, but also directions: you cannot receive the promises without following the directions. If you claim the promises of

God without following His directions, you are ignoring part of the Word of God and thus, making vain the passages that give the directions.

So, as James tells us here, the Bible says that God's grace is obtained through humility. The proud do not believe that they need God. They believe that they can make it on their own. They believe that they can achieve satisfaction and enlightenment by pursuing their worldly goals and ambitions. Thus, the proud are drawn into friendship with the world, and hatred toward God. The proud shun God because they do not want Him to interfere with their worldly ambitions. On the other hand, the humble are drawn toward God. They realize that they are nothing except what God has made them to be. They realize that whatever gifts and talents they have are given to them by the grace of God; and so, rather than using these gifts and talents to pursue worldly ambitions, they desire to use them for the glory of God. In humility, they come to God and receive His grace.

There are many examples in the Bible of God casting down the proud: Pharaoh proudly said, **"Who is the LORD that I should obey him?"** (Ex. 5:2), but was brought to the place where he not only obeyed the Lord, but asked for the Lord's blessing (Ex. 12:31); David in pride wanted to number his people, so God sent a plague among the people to humble him (see I Chron. 21); Uzziah the king exalted himself and thought that he could serve as priest also, but God struck him with leprosy (see II Chron. 26:16-21); Nebuchadnezzar exalted himself, but was made to eat grass like a cow (see Dan. 4); Peter, in pride, said that he would never deny Jesus, yet denied Him the very same evening (see Matt. 26); Herod accepted the praise of the people who said, "This is the voice of god!", and so was struck with worms (see Acts 12); etc. Pride caused the downfall of Satan when he said, **"I will make myself like the Most**

High” (Isa. 14:14). Pride also had a part in causing the fall of man, when he was tempted to **“be like God”** (see Gen. 3:5). God hates pride, and opposes it where it is found.

Submission to God

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

— James 4:7-10

THE FIRST STEP in turning from the world and demonstrating humility is to **“submit yourselves to God”** (vs. 7). Eventually, whether they acknowledge it or not, all will submit to God, either by choice or by force. God states unequivocally: **“By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear”** (Isa. 45:23). Forced submission after this life will be much more painful than voluntary submission beginning in this life. Indeed, submission to God is for our good, anyway: just ask all those who are submitted to Him. Is He a hard taskmaster? By no means! Rather, a loving Father. The benefits to submission are many: joy, peace, and eternal life (to name a few).

We must examine ourselves: are we truly submitted to God? Are we willing to commit everything, all that we do, to Him?

In all things can we say, “May God's will be done”? Do we submit willingly or grudgingly? Does our submission come from a sense of honor or solely from a sense of duty? We should feel honored to submit to the Lord of the universe, but so many, on the contrary, resist God, while submitting to the devil.

Now, submission to God will bring opposition from the devil. Satan desires to draw you into the pride of the world and the things of the world. Therefore, James exhorts: **“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”** (vs. 7). Indeed, those who are most submitted to God will face the greatest opposition from the devil. “The best are exercised with the sorest conflicts. When the thief breaketh into the house, it is not to take away coals, but jewels” [Manton, 360]. Satan takes pride in using those who follow God, or claim to follow God, for his purposes: John tells us that the devil **“prompted Judas Iscariot...to betray Jesus”** (John 13:2); in the book of Acts, Satan filled the heart of Ananias to lie to Peter concerning a gift he was bringing (Acts 5:3); even Peter was used by Satan to tempt Jesus to avoid the cross, so that Christ rebuked Peter, saying: **“Get behind me, Satan!”** (Matt. 16:23). So, we must not be surprised that we are tempted and tormented by the devil. As Peter says: **“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”** (I Peter 5:9).

Yes, we must resist the devil, or be taken captive by him; there is no middle ground. How do we resist him? We should resist him through prayer; through watchfulness and preparedness; through acknowledgement and confession of sin to God; through remembrance of the sweetness of victory and

bitterness of failure; through fixing our thoughts and eyes on Jesus; through the remembrance that Jesus' eyes are fixed upon us. The benefit of resistance is that, as James points out, the devil will flee from you for a time. Oh, what times of peace are those when the devil has fled for a time, when we can serve the Lord unhindered!

We are to resist the devil, so that we may **“come near to God”** (vs. 8). Sin drives us away from God, as Isaiah declares: **“Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear”** (Isa. 59:1,2). However, through resistance of the devil, through confession of sin to God and through the blood of Christ, we can **“come near to God”**. Paul reminds us: **“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ”** (Eph. 2:13).

James further exhorts us: **“Come near to God and He will come near to you”** (vs. 8). To do this, though, you must: **“Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded”** (vs. 8). He says **“wash your hands”** to represent the cleansing of our outward actions, the external manifestations of our worldliness and impurity. He says **“purify your hearts”** to represent the cleansing of our inward thoughts and attitudes, the internal sources of our worldliness and impurity. God requires that we be clean inside and out. This is required for us to draw near to a holy God, as David says: **“Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart”** (Psalm 24:3-4).

Furthermore, we are to **“grieve, mourn and wail”** over our sin and double-mindedness in trying to be a friend of the world and a friend of God at the same time. Christ told us:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). We should cry out, as Paul, **“What a wretched man I am!”** (Rom. 7:24). James goes on and tells us: **“Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom”** (vs. 9). We have a tendency at times to take our sin lightly. We must not smirk or giggle over our sin, but **“change our laughter to mourning”**. We are not to have joy in pursuing worldly desires, as we formerly did; but we are to change our **“joy to gloom”**. **“It is a good exchange to put away carnal joy for godly sorrow”** [Manton, 376].

But your gloom will not last, for if you **“humble yourselves before the Lord... He will lift you up”** (vs. 10). Let your joy come from the Lord, as He lifts you up. Unlike the joy that comes from the world, His joy is pure, His joy is complete, His joy is everlasting.

Disrespect for the Law

¹¹ **Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.** ¹² **There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?**

— James 4:11-12

AGAIN, JAMES EXHORTS us concerning sins of the tongue, as he has in every chapter. He says, **“Brothers, do not slander one another”** (vs. 11). This relates to the preceding section (James 4:1-10) because the slander spoken of here comes from the same source as the quarrels and fights spoken of in the previous section: the source of both is pride. We slander and speak against our brothers because we want everyone to realize how great we are in comparison to them.

The word translated **“slander”** here denotes telling outright lies about someone, but it also denotes spreading news about the true shortcomings of others. We are not to do either. **“Brothers”** are not to speak against **“brothers”**. Reviling is common in the world, and as such, it is a difficult habit to break as we come to God because we are exposed to it so much. However, slander and reviling do not befit the people of God. In Psalm 15, David enumerates the qualities of the person who may **“dwell in [God’s] sanctuary”**. Among other things, he

“has no slander on his tongue” and **“casts no slur on his fellowman”** (Psalm 15:3). Slander and reviling, rather, befit those of the devil, for Satan is called **“the accuser of our brothers”** (Rev. 12:10).

James goes on to say that **“anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it”** (vs. 11). Now, the child of God would never explicitly speak against the law of God; he would not hold up the Bible to ridicule. Nevertheless, James is saying that when we speak against our brother, we indeed are reviling the law of God, the very words of God. The law of God explicitly says that we are not to lie (Lev. 19:11) and we are not to **“go up and down as a talebearer among thy people”** (Lev. 19:16, KJV). So, to practice these things is to show contempt for these laws.

Any sin that is practiced without remorse in effect judges the law. When one knowingly continues in some activity that he knows is against God’s law, he is judging the law and putting himself above the Word of God. To do so is dangerous, for **“there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy”** (vs. 12). The law has authority because the Lawgiver controls eternity. We have no authority or power, so who are we to put ourselves above the law?

When we do not like a law of God, we often try to think of reasons why it does not apply to us. We put ourselves above the law by rejecting and ignoring parts of it. We make excuses, saying, “Oh, that was a cultural command,” or “I’m not under law, but under grace.” We slowly become more and more tolerant of sin. In doing so, we gain the respect of the worldly. They say of us, “Look at him. Even though he is a Christian, he’s ‘cool’”, because we tolerate their sins and even engage in them ourselves. We call our sins by different names, convincing ourselves that to practice them is all right. “Drunkenness is

good fellowship, censure is conference and good discourse, error is new light, rebellion is zeal of public welfare” [Manton, 382]. We would do well to remember that the Lawgiver is **“the one who is able to save and destroy.”** We had better respect His law. Let us not forget, **“The law of the LORD is perfect”** (Psalm 19:7).

The Will of the Lord

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

— James 4:13-17

JAMES, WHO SPOKE in the previous section about those who take lightly God’s law, goes on to speak of those who take lightly God’s providence. He commands our attention by saying, **“Now listen,”** because so many of us do not realize that the behavior he describes is sinful. James takes to task those who say, **“Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money”** (vs. 13). Those who plan in such a way, not acknowledging God’s desires and work in their lives, actually are a type of atheist. There are three types of atheists: absolute atheists (those who deny the existence of God), partial atheists

(those who deny some specific attribute of God, such as His omniscience, His omnipotence, etc.), and practical atheists (those who deny that God is active in and cares for His creation). Those who deny God's providence are the third type of atheist. And atheism is an appropriate term in this case, for isn't it as bad to deny God's providence, as to deny the existence of God? To make plans with no regard for God's will is to deny a very important aspect of God's nature: that He loves us and has a specific will for our lives.

In James' hypothetical situation, the speaker has decided everything. He has decided when, where, how long, what will be done and what the result will be. He is confident in himself and in his plan. He is sure of his ability to carry out his plan and **"make money"**. This is reminiscent of a parable that Jesus told. **"The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'"** (Mark 12:16-19). This man's prosperity made him overly confident of his own abilities. He saw himself as being in control of his life. He saw himself as the master of his destiny and gave no regard to the true master, the Lord. The outcome of his life, however, was very different than he imagined: **"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"** (Luke 12:20).

Making a similar point, James states, **"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow"** (vs. 14). In times of prosperity, we become confident in our own control of our lives. We do not realize that the whole course of our lives could

change in a moment, even though we read daily in the newspaper of people whose lives are disrupted by unexpected events: earthquakes, fires, murders, disease, etc. We have no assurance of comfort or earthly prosperity tomorrow.

James asks us to contemplate this: **“What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes”** (vs. 14). This is a sobering thought, even for Christians. We do not like to be brought face to face with the end of our life on this earth. Nevertheless, God wants us to consider the fact that life on earth **“is a mist”**, for there are many places in the Bible where life is described in similar terms: life is like fading flowers of the field (Isa. 40:6-7), like a windblown leaf (Job 13:25), like a fleeting shadow (Job 14:2), like a breath (Ps. 39:5), etc. By meditating on this, we come to realize that we in fact are not in control of our lives. This realization, though sobering, brings us to a proper perspective of life. Man can never wisely plan his life until he understands the brevity of it. Through the realization that we do not control our lives, we turn to God, saying: **“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom”** (Ps. 90:12); we come to say as David, **“My times are in Your hands”** (Ps. 31:15) and as Jeremiah, **“I know, O LORD, that a man’s life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps”** (Jer. 10:23). Our response to this realization should be a changed life. We should make every effort not to waste what little time we have on this earth, for life is short. We should try not to burden ourselves with things of this world: “The ship goes the swifter the less it is burdened; men take in too much lading for a mere passage” [Manton, 391]. We should rather **“store up treasures in heaven”** (Matt. 6:20). Most importantly, we should seek, in all things, the will of God in our lives: **“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed,**

do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col. 3:17).

Rather than devising and boasting of our own plans for our lives, James tells us: **“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’”** (vs. 15). All we do must be tested by the Lord’s will, not just spiritual matters, but also personal, financial, governmental, civil, domestic, etc. Always leave room in your plans for the Lord’s will. More than that, never jump into anything without seeking the Lord’s will through prayer. It is a good habit to literally say, **“If it is the Lord’s will...”** when making plans. If you do not say it, you should at least think it. If you do not think it, start saying it, so as to convince your heart of the truth of it!

Now, do not get the wrong idea. James is not forbidding the planning out of your life; he is only forbidding the ignoring of God in planning your life. We are to plan, but in submission to God’s will. There are many examples in the Bible of godly men planning their future: Joseph planned for the famine (see Gen. 41:35); the disciples in Antioch planned to aid the church in Judea when a famine was predicted by prophets (Acts 11:39); Paul, by God’s will, planned to visit the Roman church on his way to Spain (Rom. 15:24); etc. In the book of Proverbs, ants are held up to us as an example of how we should live, because they **“store up their food in the summer”** (Prov. 30:25; also Prov. 6:6-8).

So, we must plan, but plan according to God’s will. And how do we make sure that we do God’s will? First and foremost, obey His revealed will, the commandments in the Bible. This is the starting point. You can never be within God’s will if you are living in disobedience to His clearly revealed commandments. Second, commit all that you do to His will. Do nothing that you have not tested through prayer. Third, seek His will. Actively endeavor to find ways to serve Him.

Fourth, listen for His guidance. Keep a spiritual ear tuned for His marching orders. He may speak to you through His Word; He may speak to you through the counsel of the godly; He may speak directly to your heart. Fifth, always leave room for Him to give further guidance. God seldom gives us the whole picture at once. He usually guides us one step at a time. We tend, with the first step, to plan out the whole journey. We must be flexible so that we are ready at any time to abandon our itinerary for God's itinerary.

There are great benefits to seeking God's will in all things. By seeking God's will, we lose uncertainty about our future prosperity. We are assured of future prosperity, not necessarily financial prosperity in this life, but eternal prosperity through inheritance into the riches of God's kingdom. And in this life, we have promises for following His will. As is often cited, **"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose"** (Rom. 8:28); and, **"Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart"** (Ps. 37:4).

James chastens those who ignore God's will: **"As it is, you boast and brag"** (vs. 16). To believe that we have control over our lives is presumptuous; it is **"boasting"**. Such an attitude comes from the pride of the world. The world would tell us, "You're on your own"; and the world would like it so. The world does not desire to submit to God's will or be in any way accountable to God. Those of the world would like to use their short lives to follow after their own pleasures and desires. However, "we were sent into the world, not to grow great and pompous, but to enrich our souls with spiritual excellencies" [Manton, 387]. As James says, **"All such boasting is evil"** (vs. 16). It is evil because it presumes that man is lord of his own life; it is evil because it keeps one from God's guidance and will; it is evil, because it rejects God's personal care.

James concludes this section by stating: **“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins”** (vs. 17). We know that we are to seek God’s will, and even knowing this, many ignore the direction of God and go their own way, make their own plans. To do so, as James points out, is sin. It is not enough to know what is right, we must do it. All our studying the Word of God is no good if we do not put the things we learn into practice. Worse, to know what we should do and to neglect to do it is sin. Our knowledge brings responsibility. As James exhorts earlier in the epistle: **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”** (James 1:22).

This last verse in chapter four hits home to all of us. We all know of some **“good we ought to do”**. There are people we ought to pray for, praises to be sung, thanks to be given, resources to be shared. There’s a friend who should be told of God’s love. There’s a helping hand to be lent. There’s a peace to be made in a long-held grudge. Let us begin today to do this good that we ought to do.

Warnings to Oppressors

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

— James 5:1-6

HERE, JAMES ADMONISHES the rich oppressors who were persecuting the church in Jerusalem. He does this not only to condemn the oppressors, but also to encourage the oppressed, letting them know that the oppressors will not go forever unpunished.

This is the third time in his epistle that James refers to the rich, all unflatteringly. In chapter one, James told the one who is rich to **“take pride in low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower”** (James 1:10). In chapter two, James warned of giving the rich preferential treatment in worship assemblies, especially since the rich were, as James pointed out, exploiting them, dragging them off to court and blaspheming Christ (James 2:6-7).

It is difficult for fallen man to be rich and to be godly. Jesus warned us of this, when He said: **“I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven”** (Matt. 19:24). The rich, in general, are admired by the worldly and by the wicked, and so, are subjected to many temptations. The rich have the resources to carry out the whims of their fleshly desires, and so, are more apt to fall into a sinful lifestyle. The rich have all their worldly needs satisfied and see themselves as self-sufficient, and so, are more likely to see no need for God. Now, riches are not bad in themselves. “Riches are given to the good, lest they should be thought evil; to the bad, lest we should think them the only and chiefest good” [Manton, 400]. The sin of riches comes from our reaction to them. Christians who are rich must be on guard. Paul tells Timothy: **“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment”** (1 Tim. 6:17). And so, if we are rich in this world, we must be careful how much we love our riches, trust in our riches, live for our riches. We must make all the more effort to seek God and what He would have us do with our riches.

The wicked rich lose the true enjoyment of riches on earth (which is to use them for God’s glory), as well as the prospect of eternally enjoying them (which comes through using them to store up treasures in heaven). As Paul continues to tell Timothy: **“Command [the rich] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasures for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold**

of the life that is truly life” (I Tim. 6:18-19). True prosperity is not in possessions, but in the use of them for God’s glory.

James, by saying **“listen, you rich people”**, specifically targets his admonition at the rich oppressors of the church in Jerusalem. He warns them to repent, saying: **“Weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you”** (vs. 1). **“The misery”** of which James speaks has two fulfillments: first, in the destruction of Jerusalem that came in 70 AD; ultimately, in the end-time judgment that all wicked oppressors will face. The judgment of the wicked rich is inevitable; nevertheless, the rich seem to themselves invincible. They forget God and say: **“Nothing will shake me; I’ll always be happy and never have trouble”** (Psalm 10:6).

James goes on to picture the time of judgment. The wealth of the wicked will be of no use in the judgment. It will have **“rotted”**, become moth-eaten and **“corroded”**. Rather than helping them in the judgment, their hoarded wealth will testify against them; it will be proof of their wasted efforts, their following after fleshly desires and their striving after the things of the earth. Their riches may have given them enjoyment on earth, but the testimony of their corroded wealth will haunt them for eternity.

James enumerates some of their sins specifically: **“Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you”** (vs. 4). James must say **“Look!”** presumably because these wicked rich are so accustomed to their sin that it has to be brought to their attention. Also, their sin is bad enough that it is **“crying out against [them].”** Gross sin is said to cry out to God, especially sin committed against the helpless: Abel’s blood cried out to God (Gen. 4:10); the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah reached the ears of the Lord (Gen. 18:20-21); the cries of the Israelites under Egypt’s oppression also reached the Lord’s ears

(Ex. 3:9). The extreme miserliness of the rich people that James is addressing is shown in the fact that they not only failed to give to the needy (by hoarding their wealth), but also failed to pay their debts to those who worked for them.

However, **“the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty”** (vs. 4). God is in control; He is sovereign; He is the **“Lord Almighty.”** The wicked rich **“have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence”**, they have **“fattened [themselves] in the day of slaughter”**, as hogs unaware of the coming doom, but their extravagance will end on their death bed. They have **“hoarded P 86 wealth in the last days”**, failing to store up treasures in heaven (see Matt. 6:20). What good is comfort in this short life when it comes at the expense of comfort throughout eternity?

Extravagance often leads to injury and oppression (the rich never being satisfied with what they have, but always wanting more), and so the rich James speaks of have **“condemned and murdered innocent men”** (vs. 6). Innocence in itself will not keep one free from being oppressed. Oppression of the innocent started with Abel, carried on through Christ, and continues today. Unfortunately, man-instituted governments do not always prevent such oppression. The rich that James speaks of apparently used the existing judicial system to carry out their oppression. However, God sees and will rejudge all cases man has unjustly judged.

The oppressed, rather than fight the oppressors, reflected the attitude of their Lord and did not oppose the mistreatment. The writer of the book of Hebrews, possibly referring to the same oppression, spoke of the attitude of the faithful through oppression: **“Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution, at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation**

of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions” (Heb. 10:33-34). The great riches of our inheritance in heaven make our oppression here on earth not worth even bothering with. Unfortunately, this attitude is very hard to find nowadays, even among Christians. So many Christians spend so much time complaining about, protesting, and agonizing over the mild economic annoyances (high taxes, low raises, etc.). What a waste of time! We have **“better and lasting possessions”**! Our riches are in heaven! The Lord is our **“exceeding great reward”** (Gen. 15:1, KJV)!

Patience

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹ Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

— James 5:7-9

GIVEN THE JUDGMENT that the oppressors will undergo, those who are oppressed should **“be patient, then,... until the Lord’s coming”** (vs. 7). James spoke in detail of the judgment of the oppressors in order to lead into this exhortation. “Patience is a sense of afflictions without murmuring, and of injuries without revenge” [Manton, 418]. We can afford to **“be patient”** because our reward is in the next life. Such patience is a recognition of God’s sovereignty and a demonstration of one’s faith.

Thoughts of the Lord's coming can inspire such patience. There are some things that just won't be taken care of until the Lord comes again. Until the Lord comes, sin will remain, oppression will continue, pain will be a part of day to day life. However, when the Lord returns, all oppression will disappear, for **"righteousness will be the scepter of [the Lord's] kingdom"** (Heb. 1:8); all affliction will be gone forever: **"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away"** (Rev. 21:4).

James gives, as an example of the patience we should have, the farmer who **"waits for the land to yield its valuable crop"** (vs. 7). In waiting for the Lord, we should have the same attitude as the farmer, saying, "This is my seedtime, heaven is the harvest; here I must labour and toil, and there rest" [Manton, 421]. For the farmer, the time of waiting is full of trials and testings: with drought, flood, pestilence, etc. These trials increase the farmer's toil, but they also sweeten the reward. The crop is all the more valuable because of the trials and testings. And so, through our trials and testings, we come to value all the more the reward, the coming of our Lord. Note that the farmer is **"patient...for the autumn and spring rains"** (vs. 7). These rains are not his reward, but they are signs to him that the reward is forthcoming, that the harvest will be successful. So, we also should be comforted by the signs of the Lord's coming, and be strengthened in our faith that our reward is forthcoming. Given the magnitude of our rewards as compared to the farmer's, we should have much more patience than the farmer. "Consider him that waits for a crop of corn; and will not you wait for a crown of glory? If you should be called to wait longer than the husbandmen, is not there something more worth waiting for?" [Manton, 421].

So, we are to **“be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near”** (vs. 8). We are to **“stand firm”** in faith and hope, despite the situation of our lives on earth. And, indeed, **“the Lord’s coming is near”**. Make no mistake, the Lord Jesus Christ will come back to earth. He said, **“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”** (John 14:3); also, at the ascension of Christ, the angels told Jesus’ disciples: **“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven”** (Acts 1:11).

We should all have the awareness that the Lord will come soon. Even if the Lord decides to tarry in coming back bodily to earth, He will come soon for each of us individually on our death-beds. Our lives should take this fact into account. Jesus told us: **“Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come”** (Matt. 24:42).

Finally, not only are we to show patience in affliction, but James also tells us: **“Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged”** (vs. 9). Many people show an abundance of Christian charity to non-believers, but their patience is non-existent towards other Christians. Our brothers need our love, patience, and forgiveness as much as non-believers, for we are all still sinners. So, show patience towards oppressors and brothers alike, for **“the Judge is standing at the door!”** (vs. 9). The Lord’s coming is not only our hope, but also a great incentive to live a godly life.

Patience Through Suffering

¹⁰ Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

— James 5:10-11

IN THE FIRST PART of chapter five of his epistle, James warned rich oppressors of their impending judgment. Then, he encouraged his oppressed brothers in the Lord, telling them to **“be patient...until the Lord's coming”** (James 5:7). He told his brothers to be patient just as the farmer is patient **“for the autumn and spring rains.”** In verses 10 and 11, he offers as examples of patience **“the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord”** (vs. 10).

Because “man is a creature that is led more by patterns than by precepts” [George Swinnock], the Bible is full of examples for us to follow. There are many afflicted, oppressed prophets; prophets who **“faced jeers and flogging”**, who were **“chained”**, who were **“put to death by the sword”**, who **“went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated”** (Heb. 11:36 -37). Jeremiah, Micah, and Joseph all spent time in prison; Isaiah was sawn in two, John the Baptist was beheaded. The Apostle Paul enumerates the things he suffered: **“Five times I received**

from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked” (II Cor. 11:24-27). At times, we complain under our affliction, but “our betters have endured far worse” [Manton, 427].

Since most of us are not called to follow the prophets in suffering to the extent that they did, we have all the more reason to be patient to the extent they were. Given our light affliction, we have no reason not to be long on patience. **“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”** (II Cor. 4:17-18). Certainly, our rewards in heaven will make any discomfort we experience here on earth seem trivial. As Paul says: **“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us”** (Rom. 8:18). Similarly, James here says: **“We consider blessed those who have persevered”** (vs. 11). By considering the suffering prophets as being **“blessed”**, James overlooks their momentary afflictions in favor of their eternal rewards.

James goes on to cite a specific example, that of Job. He says: **“You have heard of Job’s perseverance...”** (vs. 11). Job certainly is the prototypical example in human history of the patient sufferer. Though he vehemently discussed his situation

with God during his affliction, Job committed himself to God and His providence. After losing his livelihood and his children, Job persevered in his faith and patience and said: **“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.”** (Job 1:21). After his body was struck with painful boils, Job continued to persevere, saying: **“Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”** (Job 2:10).

Job exemplifies that we, the people of God, should view our afflictions differently than those of the world view theirs. After losing their livelihood, their children, and their health, those of the world would consider that they have lost everything. For us, however, these things are but temporary blessings of God for our comfort and happiness on this earth, and they are but a foreshadow of the blessings He has prepared for us in the next life. Yes, we may lose our livelihood here, but we have riches stored up in heaven; yes, our children may pass from this life, but in doing so, they only precede us to our heavenly mansions; yes, our earthly bodies may deteriorate, but only as that of a caterpillar, and like a caterpillar, our bodies will metamorphose into a glorious new being.

Those of the world lack the two important qualities that are needed in order to bear affliction with patience: faith and hope. We have faith to believe that, indeed, **“the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away”** (Job 1:21). Job’s example shows us that godly people will experience affliction within God’s will. Through faith, we believe that, even in our afflictions, the Lord is in control. Also, through faith, we have hope. James tells us not only to consider **“Job’s perseverance”**, but also **“what the Lord finally brought about”** (vs. 11). As David tells us: **“Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”** (Psalms 30:5).

We all have the hope of eternal blessings when we pass from this life. In Job's case, the blessings of God were restored to him in his life on earth, as **"the LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first."** (Job 42:12).

We should look at our afflictions in terms of **"what the Lord will finally bring about"** (vs. 11). The Lord afflicts us to strengthen us and to bring out the best in us. **"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it"** (Hebrews 12:11). Who would have heard of Job if he had never been afflicted? Because of his affliction, however, Job has become the supreme godly example of patience through suffering. Job's endurance has become a support and inspiration for countless people throughout history who have suffered affliction.

We must remember, **"the Lord is full of compassion and mercy"** (vs. 11). He is full of compassion concerning our afflictions. He sees our pain and, in His time, will rescue us from it, when to do so is most advantageous to us. He is full of mercy concerning our sin. We deserve affliction as punishment for our sin, but God, in His mercy, afflicts us in discipline, as a loving Father would. **"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons."** (Heb. 12:7). The affliction the world bears is punishment; the affliction we experience is fatherly discipline. "There is as much difference between the sufferings of the saints and those of the ungodly as there is between the cords with which an executioner pinions a condemned malefactor and the bandages wherewith a tender surgeon binds his patient" [John Arrowsmith].

Prohibition of Swearing

¹² Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned.

—James 5:12

JAMES CONTINUES with his exhortations concerning patience by saying: **“Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else”** (vs. 12). By the word **“swear”**, different actions are referred to: oaths to God, usually made in the midst of affliction; vows to neighbors, usually made in desperation; curses using the Lord’s name (from which profanity has evolved), usually made in rage. None of these actions befit the children of God, nor are they consistent with the patient endurance of which James speaks in the previous section, so James says: **“Do not swear.”**

Certainly, cursing others or even cursing a situation does not display patient endurance. In our culture, in these times, swearing a curse has become a second-nature response to even the slightest bit of aggravation. It is one of the great tragedies of our age that the name of Jesus Christ is spoken forth much more in curses than in praises. Such cursing—whether we be using the name of the Lord, or some hybrid such as “Jeez”, “Gosh”, etc.—rejects (at best) or shows contempt for (at worst) the fact that God is involved in our situation, and also demonstrates a lack of faith that He is working everything for our good. Christians should not follow the world in expressing aggravation through curses in God’s name.

Also, making vows to neighbors by swearing oaths does not display patient endurance. Such vows are usually made in desperation, in an effort to convince our neighbors that our

promises will be kept. We say, “I swear to God that I will repay you” or some such thing. Our need to make such vows is aggravated by the fact that we have been less than truthful in the past, so James says (quoting Jesus, see Matt. 5:37): **“Let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and your ‘No,’ no, or you will be condemned.”** We make such vows thinking that our neighbors are the only ones who can relieve our desperate situations. In rashly, desperately appealing to our neighbors with such vows, we display our impatience in the midst of our trouble, and we ignore God’s work in the situation.

In addition, swearing oaths to God Himself does not display patient endurance. In the midst of affliction, we make all sorts of vows, uttering promises to God that we have no desire to carry out. We say, “God, if You just get me out of this situation, I will be holy and never miss church and pray all the time and be faithful in tithing...” or some such thing. In making such oaths, we again show a lack of faith that God is working the situation for our good. Moreover, by making such oaths, we are turning God into a mercenary by implying that He will not work for our good unless we give Him something. We are exalting ourselves by presuming that we have something of value to give to God, that He needs our holiness, or church attendance, or good deeds, or tithes. Rather than swearing oaths to God, we should commit the situation to Him in prayer, and patiently wait to see what the Lord will bring about.

Given all this, we see why James says, concerning this exhortation, **“Above all”**. From verses 7 to 11, James gave exhortations concerning having a patient attitude during times of trouble. More important than having the correct attitude is to let your actions reflect patience during affliction. Swearing does not reflect such patience, thus, James says: **“Above all, do not swear.”**

In the Old Testament law, oaths were not forbidden, but were given specific guidelines. Oaths were only to be taken in God's name (Deut. 6:13); His name was not to be misused in doing so (Ex. 20:7); oaths were not allowed to be broken (Lev. 5:4; 6:3). Over time, oaths were by-and-large misused, and their original purpose perverted. Originally, taking oaths before God was an act of worship that bound one's actions to the will of God. The oaths were used as a promise to God to worship Him in a way He prescribed (see II Chr. 15:14-15; Neh. 10:29; Ps. 132:2 for examples). Now, they have become either meaningless (as in the case of many marriages), or a way to try and twist God's arm into doing something (as in the case cited above, when we say, "God, if you'll get me out of this mess, I'll do such and such").

Originally, oaths between men were a method of preserving peace. As the writer of Hebrews states: **"Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument"** (Heb. 6:16; see also Gen. 26:28ff; 31:44). Oaths, rather than becoming a basis for peace, became a source of contention. In disobedience to the law that says they are only to make an oath in the name of God (Deut. 6:13), the Jews would swear in the name of things close to God. They hoped that what they swore by was not close enough to God, so that they would be excused from their oath. This would oftentimes lead to litigation and a determination P 96 would have to be made whether the oath was binding. So, rather than preserving peace as originally intended, the oaths, as used by men, caused dissension.

Jesus Himself chided the Jews on at least two occasions concerning their use of oaths. In the Sermon on the Mount, He said: **"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all:**

either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matt. 5:33-37). Later, in a discourse against the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said: **"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it"** (Matthew 23:16-22).

James warns that misuse of swearing and liberal use of the truth will lead to condemnation: **"Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned"** (vs. 12). Condemnation seems harsh, but deception is not appropriate for the people of God, for **"God is light"** (1 John 1:5) and God is the **"God of truth"** (Ps. 31:5; Isa. 65:16).

Prayer

¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

— James 5:13-16

IN VERSES 7 THROUGH 11 of this chapter, James exhorted us to be patient through suffering. Then, in verse 12, James forbade us from swearing, because swearing does not demonstrate patience through suffering. Here, in verses 13 through 18, James speaks on the preferred behavior in the midst of suffering, which is prayer.

He asks rhetorically, **“Is any one of you in trouble?”** (vs. 13). The answer is, of course, a resounding “Yes!” Christians, as we all know, are not immune to trouble. People misrepresent Christianity when they present it as a bed of roses. It is not depicted as such in the Bible. On the contrary, Christ said: **“In this world, you will have trouble”** (John 16:33). Our reward is not a trouble-free existence on earth, but rather a marvelous eternity in heaven. Those who are in trouble, as James says, **“should pray.”** Our troubles are a call to prayer; one benefit of our afflictions is that they draw us to God.

Not all are in trouble, so James asks: **“Is anyone happy?”** (vs. 13). He exhorts the **“happy”** to **“sing songs of praise.”** It is natural for us in our troubles to turn to God in prayer; we should just as readily turn to God in praise in times of blessing. Prayer and praise encompass all our moods. No matter what the situation, we are to turn to God.

James then asks: **“Is any one of you sick?”** (vs. 14). Christians are also not immune to sickness. Great men of faith have been often sick. Paul frequently mentions fellow servants of his that are ill: Trophimus was sick (II Tim. 4:20); Epaphroditus was so sick that Paul thought he would die (Phil. 2:26-27); Paul told Timothy to **“use a little wine”** because of his **“frequent illnesses”** (I Tim. 5:23); Paul himself had a **“thorn in [his] flesh”** (II Cor. 12:7-10), which many presume to be some sort of physical malady.

James exhorts the one who is sick to **“call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord”** (vs. 14). So, we are to pray for ourselves, but also, at times, to ask others, to pray for us, especially elders of the church or other faithful Christians. It is good for us to ask elders to pray for us in times of sickness, because we may be short of faith as a result of our misery, and so, their prayers may be more effective than our own. Also, they most likely would be in a better condition to listen to the Lord speak to their hearts, giving them special insight into the situation.

Notice that the one who is sick is to himself call the elders to pray for him. It is the duty of the afflicted to ask for prayer. He himself must acknowledge that he needs God’s deliverance. Recall that Christ hardly ever healed without being requested to (most times by the afflicted, sometimes by an intercessor).

In exhorting us to **“call the elders of the church”** to pray for us, James is levying implicit requirements for elders. Since they are to pray for the sick, they must be men of faith, filled

with the Spirit of God. They must also be compassionate, patient, and able to listen. They must have a warm disposition and be trustworthy, not prone to gossip. Not limited to elders, these are all implicit requirements for any servant of God who prays for the needs of others.

The elders are not only to pray for the sick one, but also **“anoint him with oil”**. The oil represents the joy, gladness and grace that comes from the Holy Spirit (see Ps. 23:5; 45:7; 133:2; Eccl. 9:8; I John 2:20). It is used here in prayer as a symbol of remembrance for the sick person, so that by remembering the grace of God and work of the Holy Spirit, their faith may be strengthened. In the Bible, the healing of God was often carried out through the use of physical symbols. Naaman was healed by washing in the Jordan River (see II Kings 5). Paul’s handkerchiefs and aprons were used to heal the sick (see Acts 19:11-12). Jesus Himself used His own saliva, some mud and the Pool of Siloam to heal a blind man (see John 9:7).

Note that the prayer and anointing is to be done **“in the name of the Lord.”** It is through Christ, and Christ alone, that we can **“approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”** (Heb. 4:16).

James goes on to describe the result of the foregoing: **“And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well”** (vs. 15). Faith is a necessary element for effective prayer. It is through our faith that God chooses to respond to prayers. However, let us not forget that it is not our faith alone or our own power that heals, but it is **“the Lord”** who, as James says, **“will raise Him up.”** The healing power is God’s power as He chooses to respond to our faith.

A normal part of correct prayer is to ask for forgiveness of sins, so James says: **“If he has sinned, his sins will be forgiven”** (vs. 15). We must not neglect to ask for forgiveness

of sins, even when we are praying for each other. Sometimes, ill health is not directly due to sin (see John 9:2- 3); however, there are many examples in the Bible where sickness is in fact directly due to sin: Miriam's jealousy of Moses led to leprosy (see Num. 12); the idolatry and sexual immorality of the Israelites when they were led astray by the Moabites led to a plague that killed thousands of people (see Num 25:8-9; cf. I Cor. 10:8); David's pride in numbering his army led to a plague in the land (see I Chron. 21); Herod's self-exaltation and acceptance of the people's worship led to his death by worms (see Acts 12:22-23), etc. "The body is often the instrument of sins, and therefore the object of diseases" [Manton, 455].

So, in our lives, sin and sickness are often related; thus, so are confession, forgiveness and healing. Successful prayer requires confession of sins. Sin separates us from God, making our prayers ineffective. As David testified: **"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have listened"** (Ps. 66:18). And of God's seeming ignorance of Israel's problems, Isaiah said: **"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear"** (Isa. 59:1-2). But God testifies, through John, that **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:9). Therefore, we should confess our sins and pray for forgiveness as readily as we pray for healing. God's pardon is the best way to be healed, much more satisfying and lasting than a doctor's medic.

James also tells us to **"confess your sins to each other"** (vs. 16). Confession of sin to one another is valuable. Knowing each other's shortcomings, knowing that others stumble as we do, leads to intimacy. It also leads to accountability with one another and mutual support in prayer for strength in the midst

of temptation. Moreover, by confessing our sins to each other, we are reminded that even elders need the grace and mercy of God. So, we are to **“confess [our] sins to each other”**, and then **“pray for each other”**, that is, pray concerning our sin. We are to do these things **“so that [we] may be healed”**, that is, body and soul: our body from sickness, our soul from sin.

Effective prayer requires not perfection, but confession. The cleansing of sin achieved by confession is valuable, for **“the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective”** (vs. 16). A righteous man, a man cleansed through confession and by the blood of Christ, is enabled through his righteous stand before God to be powerful in prayer. Such righteousness is the necessary fuel for powerful prayer. We must not forget the power of prayer, and what it can bring about. The great prophets of God were always men of prayer. James goes on to give us an example of such a man in the next section.

The Power of Prayer Exemplified

¹⁷ Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

— James 5:17-18

TO DRIVE HOME his point, James gives us an example of a man who was mighty in prayer. First, though, James begins by pointing out that **“Elijah was a man just like us”** (vs. 17). He says this to encourage us, that we may know that we too can be powerful men of prayer. Yes, we should respect the great men of faith and do our best to follow their example, but they were, by no means, perfect. In fact, the Bible, it seems, goes out of

the way to point out the great failings of the great prophets: Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's stumbling in faith, David's adultery, Elijah's loss of confidence in God, etc. The great prophets had weaknesses, sins, failings just like we do; nevertheless, they were empowered by the Spirit of God, just as we can be.

Yes, **"Elijah was a man just like us"**, yet, despite his humanness, **"he prayed earnestly"** and, as a result, did mighty things. We must not allow our frailty to keep us from praying (or serving God in any way, for that matter). An oft-used device of Satan is to convince us that we are unworthy to serve God. Satan tells us, "You're no Abraham, you're no David, you're no Elijah, etc."; however, James' point is, yes, we are like Abraham, David and Elijah. If only worthy people served God, Christ would have been God's only servant. It is not the worthiness of the servant that makes him effective, but the power of God's Spirit working through him.

God's Spirit certainly worked through Elijah. Elijah raised the widow's son from the dead (I Kings 17:22), brought down fire at Carmel (I Kings 18:38), brought down fire on Jezebel's soldiers (I Kings 19: 8), was himself brought up to heaven amidst the chariots of fire (II Kings 2:11). James gives us an example of Elijah's power in prayer: **"He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops"** (vs. 17-18). James is referring to the first recorded incident in Elijah's life, when he said to King Ahab: **"As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word"** (1 Kings 17:1). And so, it did not rain for three and a half years. Later, Elijah prayed **"earnestly"** for rain: **"...Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his**

knees. **‘Go and look towards the sea,’** he told his servant. And he went up and looked. **‘There is nothing there,’** he said. Seven times Elijah said, **‘Go back.’** The seventh time the servant reported, **‘A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.’** So Elijah said, **‘Go and tell Ahab, “Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.”’** Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel” (I Kings 18:42- 45). This episode demonstrates the fervency, perseverance, and persistent faith of Elijah in prayer. First, he **“bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees”** in fervency. Then, with perseverance, seven times he sent his servant out to survey the situation. Finally, when he saw tiny cloud, Elijah in faith knew that the matter was settled and that it would rain.

From this episode, we are shown that prayer, when executed correctly, is hard work. Prayer, in order to be effective, must not be lightly performed. It needs, as demonstrated by Elijah, fervency, perseverance, and a great amount of faith. Being hard work, prayer is a valuable service. Never underestimate the value of prayer as a service for the cause of Christ. Also, prayer is a service that anyone can perform. Many who cannot preach in the pulpit, or lead a congregation in worship, or travel to the far reaches of the earth preaching the gospel, can serve the Lord in just as valuable a way by bending their knee in the prayer closet. Private prayer is the purest of services, having no audience, no worldly glory, but accomplishing much for the kingdom of God. The lonely prayer of one man can have far-reaching effects, far beyond the original goal of the petition. For example, Elijah’s prayer caused the heavens to give rain, which, consequently, caused the earth to produce its valuable crop.

Being Our Brother's Keeper

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

— James 5:19-20

JAMES CONCLUDES his epistle with an exhortation to bring back to God those who **“wander from the truth”** (vs. 19). James himself has carried out this exhortation by writing an epistle full of advice on living a proper Christian life. If you heed the words of wisdom in this epistle, you will never **“wander from the truth.”** In this way, these verses sum up the whole epistle.

Notice that James here is speaking of **“brothers”** who wander from the truth. Our **“brothers”** in Christ at times err. In giving this exhortation, James is saying, in effect, that we are indeed our brother's keeper. We should be as concerned with the spiritual well-being of our brothers as we are their physical well-being. And so, we should as readily give advice concerning spiritual matters as we do concerning physical maladies. If our brother was physically sick, wouldn't we run to his aid, suggest the proper medicine, and nurse him back to good health? We should act the same way during his spiritual maladies. We should not tear our brother down in his time of spiritual weakness, but **“bring him back”**. Paul exhorts: **“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently”** (Gal 6:1).

The erring brothers of which James speaks have **“wandered from the truth”**, that is, the truth of the gospel. Somewhere along the way, they have picked up some doctrinal

error or some misunderstanding concerning the things of God. It is important that we bring such a brother back into a knowledge of the truth. The result of bringing our brother back is to **“save him from death”** and **“cover over a multitude of sins”**. Notice that the brother’s mere **“wandering”** now, will result in a **“multitude of sins”** later, culminating possibly in **“death”**. Sin is a disease that must be checked early on, or it will ravage the whole body and soul. However, we can stop sin’s ravaging effects by bringing our brother back to the way of truth, by taking the trouble to turn him back to the Lord.

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