

# The Tests of True Religion: A Study of the Book of James

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## 1. Accepting Adversity James 1:1-27

### Introduction

Prior to 1539, if one had said, “Turn with me to the first chapter of the Book of James,” there would have been a great rustling of pages in the congregation, with many puzzled looks. Up to that time, you would not have found the book where it is today in any English translation. Indeed, you would not have found the Book of James included among the New Testament books at all. This is because it was hidden away at the very back of the English Bible, along with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation. The obscure placement of this book is indicative of the initial reluctance the early church had accepting it and several other books into the canon of Scripture. Perhaps the greatest reason for this delay was due to the question of its authorship. Books that were most readily accepted into the New Testament canon were those written by apostles, whose doctrine and teaching accorded with other writings of the New Testament, and that were commonly regarded as Scripture by the churches as a whole.

James, as well as Hebrews and one epistle of John, is missing from the second century Muratorian Canon, a document which listed those books accepted as Scripture by the church as early as A.D. 170. Although other church fathers may have alluded to the Book of James, Origin, in his commentary on John, is the first writer to refer to the epistle by name and identify it as Scripture. Eusebius placed it among the disputed books, but accepted it personally and quoted it as Scripture. Its acceptance by Jerome and Augustine, as well as its inclusion by the Third Council of Carthage in A.D. 397, virtually assured its recognition as a part of our New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

### A Lesson From Luther

During the Reformation, the Book of James again came under careful scrutiny due to the influence of Martin Luther. Luther’s view of this book was stated in his introduction to his New Testament, first published in 1522:

In fine, Saint John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, Saint Paul’s Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Saint Peter’s first Epistle—these are the books which show thee Christ, and teach thee everything that is needful and blessed for thee to know even though thou never see or hear any other book of doctrine. Therefore is Saint James’s Epistle a right strawy Epistle in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it.<sup>2</sup>

We should not press these words farther than Luther intended, for he is saying that “in comparison with these other Epistles,” James is a “right strawy epistle.” He himself also said: “I will not have it in

my Bible in the number of the proper chief books, but do not intend thereby to forbid anyone to place and exalt it as he pleases, for there is many a good saying in it.”<sup>3</sup>

Tyndale was obviously influenced by Luther, for when he translated the New Testament, he placed the same four books that Luther viewed with suspicion at the end of his New Testament. In his prologue, however, he was more favorable than Luther regarding the value of these books.

Other reformers such as Zwingli, Beza, and Calvin readily and unhesitatingly accepted James on a par with other New Testament books. When Calvin wrote his commentary on the Catholic Epistles, he retained the order Luther had established but also clearly stated: “There are also at this day some who do not think it entitled to authority. I however, am inclined to receive it without controversy.”<sup>4</sup>

Even today there are those who would call the value of this book into question because they mistakenly suppose that there is some kind of conflict between James and Paul in their teaching on justification. More careful analysis of the teachings of both Paul and James shows that there is no discrepancy between their teachings. Hopefully, this will become apparent in our study of James.

I believe there is a lesson to be learned from Martin Luther’s response to the Book of James. *First, we should understand Luther’s uneasiness regarding the Book of James.* Luther was courageous in his stand for what we might call “reformation truth.” The Scriptures alone are the authoritative Word of God, and not the Roman Catholic Church. *It is Christ alone who saves men from their sins, by faith alone, apart from works.* The Roman Catholic Church appealed to the Book of James as the basis for some of its erroneous teaching. We can understand how Luther would tend to be hesitant about embracing the Book of James as the authoritative Word of God. Luther reacted so strongly to the misuse of the Book of James by the Catholic Church that he became somewhat suspicious of the book itself. Wrong interpretation of a scriptural text should not reduce our confidence in the biblical text itself. I think it would be safe to say that some of us have tended to shy away from texts that have been wrongly interpreted or applied.

Second, though he was a great hero of the faith for standing firm against the errors of the Roman church, Luther was not infallible. Luther was absolutely right in his opposition to the Roman Church regarding the authority of Scripture and the sufficiency of the work of Christ for man’s salvation. He was not right about everything, however. He was a man, and thus he had his strengths and his weaknesses. Being right in some very important points of doctrine did not make him right in every point. We must be careful not to look to Luther as our only authority in the interpretation of Scripture, any more than we should look to the Catholic Church, or to any other church, or to any other man. Being right in one point doesn’t mean that we are right in all points.

Third, Luther’s failure to accept the Book of James as fully authoritative and as a part of the inspired Word of God is not that different from what many Christians do. We all make choices regarding our interpretation of the Word of God. Those who are strongly convinced that the return of Christ will precede a 1,000-year millennial reign tend to ignore, avoid, or even deny texts that might appear to say otherwise. Those who are amillennial have no problem ignoring or explaining away texts like [Revelation 20](#) (especially verses 2-7). Those who believe in limited atonement seek to set aside verses that appear to teach an unlimited atonement. And those who hold to unlimited atonement are tempted to set aside those texts that would seem to support limited atonement. Those who dislike Paul’s teaching on head coverings ([1 Corinthians 11](#)), or the submission and silence of women in the public ministry of the church ([1 Corinthians 14:34-38](#); [1 Timothy 2:9-15](#)) will find a way to set them aside. Charismatic Christians tend to overlook certain texts, while non-Charismatics may choose to overlook others. Like it or not, we are all somewhat selective in terms of the weight we give to various books and texts of the Bible.

## **A Catholic Epistle**

If I happen to refer to the Book of James as a Catholic Epistle, please do not think that I am using the term “catholic” to refer to the Catholic Church, as though there were “Catholic” and “Protestant” epistles. The word “catholic” means universal. James is one of the seven epistles (James, I and II Peter, I, II, III John and Jude) that are referred to as the “Catholic” or “General” Epistles. These are (with the exception of II and III John) epistles that were not written to specific churches. They were written to a broader group of believers and not restricted to the church in any one place.

## The Author

JAMES 1:1A

From James, a slave of God and of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction to this book, the author identifies himself simply as James. This presents us with a bit of a problem since the New Testament refers to several men as “James.” For example, there is James, the son of Alphaeus, but we see little of him in the New Testament, and few would view him as the author of this epistle. Then, there was James, the son of Zebedee, and brother of John. He is unlikely to be the author since he died as a martyr in the year 44, as recorded in [Acts 12](#). The third “James” is the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the most likely author of this epistle for several reasons:

*First, the writer did not think it necessary to further identify himself.* The Book of Acts presents James as a prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem. When Peter was miraculously released from prison and went to the house of Mary, he instructed his friends to go to James, and to the brethren ([Acts 12:17](#)). When Paul went up to Jerusalem after his conversion, he saw none of the apostles but James ([Galatians 1:19](#)). James presided over the Jerusalem Council, as recorded in [Acts 15](#). The prominence of James, the brother of our Lord, and leader in the church in Jerusalem, was such that no further identification was needed so far as he was concerned. James could have referred to himself as the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, but I believe that humility and a sense of propriety restrained him from doing so.

Second, there are a number of striking similarities in the vocabulary of the Epistle of James to the speech of James at the Jerusalem Council as recorded in [Acts 15](#). Just one example is the form of greeting found in [James 1:1](#) and [Acts 15:23](#). This greeting is not used by any other writer in the New Testament in the commencement of their writing.<sup>6</sup>

*Third, this Epistle seldom speaks of the Lord Jesus, but is strongly influenced by His teaching.* Doremus Hayes states: “James says less about the Master than any other writer in the New Testament, but his speech is more like that of the Master than the speech of any one of them.”<sup>7</sup> Especially does James draw from the teachings of our Lord on the Sermon on the Mount. As another has written: “There are 21 similarities between the teachings of Christ and the Epistle of James. All but three of these refer to the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>8</sup> These similarities seem best explained by the conclusion that James, the brother of our Lord, is the author.

## The Time of Writing

In a work such as that of James, it is especially difficult to determine with any certainty when the book was written since there are no historical incidents in the book itself to serve as chronological points of reference. As a rule, conservative scholarship has tended to view the time of writing as very early in the history of the church. Since James, the half-brother of our Lord, died in A.D. 62, the book must have been written prior to this time. Perhaps it was written before A.D. 50 and the Jerusalem Council,

since neither the Council nor its decision is mentioned in this epistle. If so, this book is the earliest book of the entire New Testament. This would mean that James wrote before any of Paul's epistles were penned, epistles that dealt with matters such as the relationship of Jews and Gentiles, or the revelation of the mystery of the church. Rather than viewing James' epistle as contradictory to the writings of Paul – something untenable to Christians who believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptures – we must understand this book within the confines of the doctrine of progressive revelation. The doctrines of Christology (the doctrine of Christ), Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), and Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) were not yet spelled out clearly. James speaks little of these or not at all, for in the wisdom of God, it was Paul who would soon do this.<sup>9</sup>

## James' Style of Writing

I must admit that I do have a greater level of difficulty when interpreting and preaching from the Book of James, compared with Paul's writings. Paul's logic and writing style is more western; James' style appears to be much more eastern. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul uses what I call "linear logic." Paul lays a foundation, and then proceeds to build upon this foundation. He moves from point "a" to point "b" to point "c," and eventually to his conclusion. Often, Paul will begin by laying a doctrinal foundation (e.g., [Romans 1-12](#); [Ephesians 1-3](#)), and then move on to the practical outworking of that doctrine (e.g., [Romans 13-16](#); [Ephesians 4-6](#)). James is much more "circular" in his logic. He introduces a theme or topic, expands upon it, and then moves on to another topic – only to return again and again to the same topic, each time adding more detail. In chapter 1, James introduces the subject of riches and poverty (1:9-11). He then takes up the same subject from a different perspective in chapter 2 (2:1-26). The subject then is taken up indirectly in 4:1-10 and 13-17 and 5:1-11. James mixes his materials something like a baker adds ingredients to make a cake batter.

Having said that James is somewhat circular in his writing style, I must go on to add that James is also very simple and concise in his writing style. Few of us fail to grasp what he is saying, though we may well be uncomfortable with it, because it is so simple, straightforward, and convicting.

## The Recipients of this Epistle

[JAMES 1:1B](#)

To the twelve tribes dispersed abroad. Greetings!

One final word of introduction is necessary, pertaining to the recipients of this epistle. James addresses this work to **"the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad."** By this I understand that he is writing primarily to Jewish Christians who have been dispersed from Jerusalem. In [Acts 2:9-11](#), we read of all the distant places Jews had come from to observe the Feast of Pentecost. These folks had already been dispersed abroad, before the death of our Lord. When we come to [Acts 8:1](#), we read of the persecution that resulted from the stoning of Stephen, and we are told **"they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."**

Surely when Jewish converts to Christ dispersed to far away places there were many questions that these new believers needed to have answered. We need to view this epistle as having been written during a very critical transitional period in the history of the church. This is at a time when Old Testament Jewish saints have come to faith in the Messiah, aware that they are living in a new dispensation, and that they are now participants in the New Covenant. How are Jewish Christians to relate their faith in Jesus Christ to their Jewish heritage? These things James begins to deal with from a Jewish perspective. Paul will also explore these matters from a more gentile-oriented point of view.

## Correcting Jewish Misconceptions Regarding Adversity

James chapter 1 deals with the way the Christian should handle adversity. His teaching should be understood against the backdrop of some false assumptions held by many Jews, including our Lord's disciples. Based upon God's covenant promises with Israel ([Deuteronomy 28-31](#)), individual Jews were inclined to expect God to invariably bless them materially in response to pious living. Conversely, they expected that those who did evil were to experience divine discipline in various forms. In short, they expected God to bless them for doing good and to punish others for their sin.

We see this mindset revealed by Job's friends in the Book of Job. In truth, Job was being tested with adversity because of his piety, and not because of sin ([Job 1:1-12](#)). Job's friends persisted in trying to force him to confess that his suffering was the result of some sin he had committed. If he but forsook his sin, they insisted, then God would again bless him. Asaph, the author of [Psalm 73](#), had the same assumptions about prosperity and poverty, and he was frustrated and angry with God because the wicked appeared to prosper while the pious did not ([Psalm 73:1-14](#)). Even our Lord's disciples bought into this thinking. When they came upon the man who was born blind, they revealed their wrong assumptions when they asked the Master, "**Rabbi, who committed the sin that caused him to be born blind, this man or his parents?**" ([John 9:2b](#)). James is going to give a very different perspective on the Christian's attitude toward adversity.

## James' Teaching on Adversity

[JAMES 1:2-4](#)

2 My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything.

*First, I would have you note that James is telling us to expect adversity as the rule, rather than the exception.* He does not say, "Consider it nothing but joy if you fall into all sorts of trials," but rather "**when you fall into all sorts of trials.**" Peter likewise informs us that suffering should not surprise us (see [1 Peter 4](#), especially verses 12ff.). Adversity need not be sought; it will surely come our way. He says that we will "**fall into**" all sorts of trials, not that we must "*jump into*" these trials.

*Second, James informs us that these trials will come in many different forms – "all sorts of trials" (verse 2).* In my lifetime, I have experienced and observed many different forms of adversity. I have seen those who suffered financially. I have seen those who were very comfortable financially agonize over some physical malady within the family that no amount of money can solve. I have seen parents agonize over their children, and children agonize over their parents. Trials may come from one's boss, or from one's employees. Trials come in various shapes and sizes, but they all are a form of adversity.

Third, James instructs us that when we encounter these trials, we are to wholeheartedly rejoice in them, knowing that God has sent them into our lives as a part of His sanctifying process. These trials, James writes, are a testing of our faith. Adversity tests the strength of our faith:

If you show yourself slack in the day of trouble,  
your strength is small! ([Proverbs 24:10](#))

Adversity is like a stress test, pushing us up to and beyond our limits, so that we will recognize our dependence upon God, and call on Him for help in the time of trouble. Adversity is designed to produce endurance in our lives. And this endurance perfects us, so that we will become complete, lacking nothing.

James forces us to look at ourselves – and at the process of sanctification – in an entirely different light. So many people think of themselves as basically okay, except for their sin. They admit that they

need Jesus to forgive their sins, but they feel that the rest of their life does not need any radical change. Some would even go so far as to assume that they are just a great big bundle of human potentiality. They may need God for salvation, but in some way they foolishly suppose that God really needs them. “If only God would save a man like \_\_\_\_\_, just think of what he (or she) could do for His kingdom.” The truth is that we have nothing to offer God, and that we need everything from Him. When we think that we are sufficient in and of ourselves, we deceive ourselves. God brings adversity into our lives to show us our deficiencies, and as we see these deficiencies, we realize that we must cry out to God to supply what we lack. The entire Christian life is a process of recognizing our deficiencies, and seeking His grace to supply our needs. The process of sanctification is never completed in this life, but when we are complete, we will lack nothing, because He has amply provided for our every deficiency. *To resist and detest adversity is to resist the sanctifying and perfecting work of God in our lives. To rejoice is to embrace His perfecting work in us.*

## A Deficiency Common to All Suffering Saints: Wisdom

JAMES 1:5-8

5 But if<sup>10</sup> anyone is deficient in wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without reprimand, and it will be given to him. 6 But he must ask in faith without doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed around by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 since he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

As I have indicated by the footnote in verse 5, the “if” is not really “iffy.” James assumes that everyone is deficient in wisdom. If there is ever a time when our lack of wisdom is apparent, it is when we are in the midst of adversity. We need wisdom to rightly assess our situation and to determine our response to it. At times like this, we need divine wisdom, which we do not possess within ourselves. It is the kind of wisdom which God possesses, and which He promises to give to those who ask for it. Many of our teenagers wear a bracelet that reads: WWJD. This stands for, “What would Jesus do?” Isn’t that the question we all need to ask? Isn’t what Jesus would do in our circumstances the wise thing we should do? James goes on to encourage us to pray for wisdom by assuring us not only that God will answer our prayer for wisdom, but that He will do so without shaming or humiliating us. This is because He is glorified when we confess our dependency and His sufficiency. God delights in the fact that we express our dependence on Him.

James sets down only one condition and that is that we pray in faith, without wavering. It is never wrong to pray for wisdom, and there is never a time when God will not grant us that wisdom – except when we ask with an inner wavering. This wavering is a vacillation between one thing and another. I’m not sure that I really like the word “**doubts**” here. Is James suggesting that this person doubts God will answer his prayer? Perhaps, but frankly I doubt it. In verse 9, James tells us that this wavering fellow is “**double-minded**,” literally “two-souled.” This term is found only twice in the New Testament, and both times it is in the Book of James. Notice the second instance of this term in [James 4:8](#), in context:

6 But he gives greater grace. Therefore it says, “**God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.**” 7 So submit to God. But resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and make your hearts pure, you **double-minded**. 9 Grieve, mourn, and weep. Turn your laughter into mourning and your joy into despair. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you ([James 4:6-10](#), underscoring mine).

In chapter 4, James is talking about pride and humility. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (verse 6). The saints are encouraged to submit to God and to resist the devil (verse 7). They



are to humble themselves before the Lord, who will exalt them (verse 10). They are to grieve, mourn, and weep. To be double-minded in chapter 4 was to waver between submitting to God or to the devil. It would appear that it was to waver between humility and pride (pride being a very devil-like characteristic). Thus, it would seem that the choice was between drawing near to God in adversity, or arrogantly going one's own way, which is also Satan's way. I therefore understand that what James is saying is that we had better not ask for wisdom from God unless we are also willing to follow the wisdom He provides. God will not **"cast His pearls before swine;"** He will not reveal wisdom to those who are not committed to follow it.

By inference, then, we can see that faith manifests itself in stability, steadiness in the midst of life's storms. But a deficiency of faith manifests itself in instability. The one who lacks faith bounces hither and yon, blown about by the winds of adversity, as well as the winds of false doctrine (see also [Ephesians 4:14](#)). Faith rests assured that God is in control, and that adversity has come from His loving hand, to build us up in His strength. Faith rejoices in adversity, because it is for our good, and for His glory.

## On Rags and Riches

[JAMES 1:9-12](#)

9 Now the believer of humble means should take pride in his high position. 10 But the rich person's pride should be in his humiliation, because he will pass away like a wildflower in the meadow. 11 For the sun rises with its heat and dries up the meadow; the petal of the flower falls off and its beauty is lost forever. So also the rich person in the midst of his pursuits will wither away. 12 Happy is the one who endures testing, because when he has proven to be genuine, he will receive the crown of life that God promised to those who love him.

In turning to wealth and poverty, James has not really changed subjects. In the Jewish mind, wealth was the measure of one's piety. The pious were expected to prosper, while the wicked were to suffer. This is why our Lord's story of the "Rich man and Lazarus" in [Luke 16:19-31](#) was so shocking to the Jews who heard it. James wants both the rich and the poor to see their circumstances from an eternal perspective. Note, however, that James indicates to us that there will be both rich saints and poor saints, and both of them are exhorted to respond to their circumstances in a godly manner. He does not accept the premise that the pious prosper and the wicked suffer.

It has never been very difficult for me to understand James' words to the poor man, instructing him to take pride in his high position. After all, Jesus said,

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" ([Luke 6:20](#)).

The story of Lazarus and the rich man tells it all. A few years of doing without is nothing, compared to an eternity of bliss.

But what of the rich man? How can James say that he is to take pride in his humiliation? What is his humiliation, and how can he take pride in it? James tells us, I believe:

10 But the rich person's pride should be in his humiliation, because he will pass away like a wildflower in the meadow. 11 For the sun rises with its heat and dries up the meadow; the petal of the flower falls off and its beauty is lost forever. So also the rich person in the midst of his pursuits will wither away.

The rich man's humiliation is his earthly demise. When Paul wrote, **"For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain"** ([Philippians 1:21](#)), he was expressing a universal truth for every believer. I am reminded of our Lord's words in [Luke 16:11](#):

“If then you haven’t been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches.”

“**True riches**” are not earthly riches, but heavenly riches. If “**true riches**” are heavenly riches, then it is our earthly demise that opens the door to true riches. It should not just be the poor who look forward to heaven then, but also the rich, because there is where our true riches await us at our arrival:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 that is, **into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you, 5 who by God’s power are protected through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.** 6 This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials. 7 Such trials show the proven character of your faith, which is much more valuable than gold—gold that is tested by fire, even though it is passing away—and will bring praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 You have not seen him, but you love him. You do not see him now but you believe in him, and so you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 because you are attaining the goal of your faith—the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:3-9, emphasis mine).

Doesn’t this sound a great deal like the first verses of James? Our inheritance is not earthly, but heavenly. This is what the Old Testament saints had to learn as well:

13 These all died in faith without receiving the things promised, but they saw them in the distance and welcomed them and acknowledged that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. 14 For those who speak in such a way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 In fact, if they had been thinking of the land that they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 **But as it is, they aspire to a better land, that is, a heavenly one.** Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13-16, emphasis mine).

And so the rich man is to realize that his earthly wealth is paltry, in comparison with the heavenly wealth that awaits him. Since it is his earthly demise that takes him to heaven, the rich man exults in his death, his humiliation.

It’s something like this. Suppose that there are two men. The first has a 16-foot wooden rowboat, with a 25-horsepower motor. The second has a rubber life raft, powered by oars. Both men are assured that when their boats wear out they will inherit a 120-foot luxury yacht. The man in the rubber raft obviously is eager for the day when he can leave his raft behind and possess his yacht. But so is the man with the wooden rowboat. As his 16-foot boat grows old, and begins to leak, its owner rejoices in the boat’s demise, because he knows that the time for him to possess the luxury yacht is drawing near.

## When Temptations Arise, Who Do You Blame?

### JAMES 1:13-18

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each one is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desires. 15 Then when desire conceives, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is full grown, it gives birth to death. 16 Do not be led astray, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or the slightest hint of change. 18 By his sovereign plan he gave us birth through the message of truth, that we would be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.



It isn't difficult to see a connection between adversity and temptation. In the midst of adversity, we may be tempted to think or act in a sinful manner. Many folks wrongly conclude that times of stress somehow justify ungodly responses. There is a sinister dimension to the words, "I am tempted by God." It is one thing to say, "The devil made me do it;" it is quite another to lay the blame on God. You can see how one could twist reality to come to such a conclusion. Their distorted logic would go something like this:

God is sovereign; He is in control of everything.

God is the One who brings adversity into the lives of His people.

God has brought adversity into my life.

In such times of adversity, I am tempted to act in an ungodly manner.

If I yield to this temptation, I sin.

Therefore, God is the source of my temptation.

If I fail, it must be God's fault, because He led me into temptation.

It seems to me that verses 13-18 take up the subject of the double-minded man, mentioned in verse 8. The double-minded person wavers between humble submission to God and prideful disobedience. It is that proud disobedience which seems to underlie the logic that blames God for our sin and names Him as the source of our temptation.

James speaks in very absolute terms in verses 13-18. He says that one should never blame God for the temptation we face. He also says that God cannot ever be tempted by evil, and that He never tempts anyone with evil. God tests us, but He never tempts us.<sup>11</sup> Temptation, James tells us, comes from deep within us, and not from God. Jesus made this clear as well:

18 He said to them, "Are you so foolish? Don't you see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot make him unclean? 19 For it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then goes out into the sewer." (This means all foods are clean.) 20 He said, "What comes out of a person makes him unclean. 21 For from within, out of the human heart, comes evil ideas, immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, evil, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, and folly. 23 All these evils come from within and make a person unclean" ([Mark 7:18-23](#)).

I like this quotation by John Owen, which I received by way of e-mail through "Christian Quotation of the Day":

"Temptations and occasions put nothing into a man, but only draw out what was in him before."  
John Owen (1616-1683)

The God who cannot be tempted (because there is no sin within Him, which responds to temptation) does not tempt, either. Temptation comes from within the one tempted. It begins with desire, and when this desire is facilitated, the fruit it bears is that of sin. And sin results in death. Sin and death are the result of a sequence of events, all of which begin with a desire which is not proper, and which is not rejected and resisted.

When James says, "**Do not be led astray, my brothers and sisters. . .**," he indicates that when we see God as the source of our sin, we have been terribly deceived. God is not the source of any temptation, but He is the source of any and every truly good gift. This God who does not tempt and who gives good gifts is immutable – He never changes. As James puts it, "**there is no variation or**

**the slightest hint of change”** (verse 17). The God who is good and immutable is also sovereign (verse 18). It was through God’s initiative that we were brought to life, through the instrument of His Word (verse 18). If there is any basis for faith and stability, it is in knowing that God is good, that God is unchanging, and that He is sovereign. The good work which God began in us by saving us, He most surely can be expected to finish (see also [Philippians 1:6](#)). God is going to redeem all creation, which has suffered the curse as the result of the fall, and man’s salvation is a prototype, firstfruits of the subsequent salvation or restoration of **“all things”** (see [Romans 8:18-25](#)).

## The Relation Between Word and Deed

[JAMES 1:19-27](#)

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters! Let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. 20 For human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness. 21 So put away all filth and evil excess and humbly welcome the message implanted within you, which is able to save your souls. 22 But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. 23 For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. 24 For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was. 25 But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out—he will be blessed in what he does. 26 If someone thinks he is religious yet does not bridle his tongue, and so deceives his heart, his religion is futile. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

God sends adversity our way to perfect us, as James indicated in verses 2-4. Adversity reveals our deficiencies, and God graciously provides for our needs in times of trial, producing maturity and wholeness (without deficiency). While God uses adversity to perfect His saints, adversity often brings out the worst in men. Not only are we more prone to anger and harsh words, we may strike out in anger. No wonder James has already warned us about blaming God for tempting us (verses 13-18).

James has already assured us that when we lack wisdom and ask for it in faith, God will give it to us (verses 5-7). That wisdom will often come from the Word of God, but it may also come from those who can give godly counsel from the Word, often from those who have endured such affliction themselves (see [2 Corinthians 1:3-7](#)). We should therefore be quick to hear and to heed godly counsel. Conversely, we should be slow to speak and slow to anger. How easy it is to “blow up” in times of adversity, saying and doing things that are foolish and hurtful.

Some people have learned that anger is a way of manipulating others. How many children today get their way by throwing a fit? Anger actually does work, in that it intimidates others, or makes them feel guilty, so that they give in to us in an unhealthy way. Human anger may produce sinful results, but James tells us that it will never achieve God’s righteousness. The flesh never produces righteousness, and human anger is a manifestation of the flesh:

16 But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh; for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, **outbursts of anger**, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, 21 envyings, murders, drunkenness, carousings, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God! 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 **gentleness, and self-control**. Against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to

Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also behave in accordance with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, being jealous of one another ([Galatians 5:16-26](#)).

We have two choices as Christians. Either we may surrender to the passions of the flesh, which lead to death, or we may surrender to the implanted Word of God, which “**is able to save our souls**” (verse 21). James has just told us that it is the Word of God that was the instrument of our conversion; now he tells us that the Word of God is the instrument of our sanctification. As you can see, I understand the expression “**able to save your souls**” as a reference to the present aspect of our salvation. There is a past dimension (our initial conversion), a present dimension (our sanctification), and a future dimension -- our ultimate perfection (when we go to be with Him; see [1 John 3:2](#)) – to our salvation.

Merely hearing God’s Word is not enough. Even studying and comprehending great portions of the Bible is inadequate. The Bible is a book to be read, and practiced, just as our Lord taught:

21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. . . 24 “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house; but it did not collapse because it had been founded on rock. 26 Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, and it collapsed; it was a tremendous fall!” ([Matthew 7:21, 24-27](#)).

“If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them” ([John 13:17](#)).

Jesus used very strong words when He rebuked the scribes and Pharisees. Perhaps the most common term He used to describe them was “**hypocrites!**” They said one thing and did another. They believed certain things to be true, but they did not act accordingly:

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and his disciples, 2 “The experts in the law and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat. 3 Therefore pay attention to what they tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach” ([Matthew 23:1-3](#)).

James does not wish this to be true of the saints, and so he urges them to hear the Word of God and to heed it, by putting it into practice. He then articulates two primary areas of application, which I believe are very instructive. The first area of application is personal. He characterizes a saint as looking carefully into the Word, and when he or she does so, the Word reveals them for what they are, as we see also in Hebrews:

12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing even to the point of dividing soul from spirit, and joints from marrow; it is able to judge the desires and thoughts of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from God, but everything is naked and exposed to his eyes to whom we must render an account ([Hebrews 4:12-13](#)).

The Word of God exposes all of our sins, all of our weaknesses, all of our needs. If we are to be doers of the Word and not just hearers, then we must do something about those sins that our study of the Word reveals. To study the Word of God without applying it is useless and foolish. When we study God’s Word and heed it, then we are blessed in what we do. If we do not apply the Word in our deeds, we miss much of God’s blessing. James leaves us with just one specific area of personal application at this point (though he will take up the subject of the tongue later on – see chapter 3): keeping reign on our tongue (verse 26). We appear to be going back to verse 19 and to James’ instruction to be “**slow to speak.**”

If there is one thing I like about James, it is that his writing is incredibly simple and straightforward. There are always those, like the lawyer in [Luke 10](#), who want to quibble over details (10:29), but the Bible speaks so plainly that this is really hard to do. Why is it that so many seem to think that spirituality is measured by the quantity of our speech, while the Scriptures frequently instruct us to be quiet (see also [1 Corinthians 14:26-38](#); [1 Peter 2:18—3:7](#))?

If the first area of application is directed toward one's self, the second area of application is directed toward ones' neighbors, and in particular, those who are in need:

"Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world" ([James 1:27](#)).

How often we wish to use our Bible knowledge in other ways. We prefer to teach our neighbors, even when they don't wish to be taught. We prefer to correct our fellow-believers, because their understanding of the Word is not identical with ours. We may prefer to point out the sins of others. There certainly is a proper time for teaching and preaching and even rebuking, but here James tells us that the proper application of the Word is to come to the aid of widows and orphans. (You will recall that when Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for being hypocrites in [Matthew 23](#), He specifically mentioned that they pray long prayers, but steal widows' houses (23:14)). The real test of religion is how one who is strong deals with those who are weak. The biblical model is that the strong use their strengths to minister to the needs of the weak.

James begins with the personal application of the Word – taking heed to its mirror message; he then moves to the public application of the Word – caring for the widows and the orphans in their affliction. But James then moves back, once again, to the personal application of God's Word: we are to keep ourselves unstained from the world (verse 27).

As I read the Book of Hebrews, I see the author being greatly concerned about his readers, who are Jewish Christians. Their identification with Christ has brought them considerable persecution, and for some time they have endured. But as time has passed, there are some who appear to have begun toying with the idea of falling back by keeping step with the world. The writer urges them to persevere and to endure:

32 But remember the former days when you endured a harsh conflict of suffering after you were enlightened. 33 At times you were publicly exposed to abuse and afflictions, and at other times you came to share with others who were treated in that way. 34 For in fact you shared the sufferings of those in prison, and you accepted the confiscation of your belongings with joy, because you knew that you certainly had a better and lasting possession. 35 So do not throw away your confidence, because it has great reward. 36 For you need endurance in order to do God's will and so receive what is promised. 37 For "**just a little longer**" and "**he who is coming will arrive and not delay.**" 38 "**But my righteous one will live by faith, and if he shrinks back, I take no pleasure in him.**" 39 But we are not among those who shrink back and thus perish, but are among those who have faith and preserve their souls ([Hebrews 10:32-39](#), underscoring mine).

James seems to be saying the same thing the writer to the Hebrews says. They are to endure adversity with a stability that is grounded in faith. They are not to waver between loving and serving God and loving this present world. They are to deal with the sins that the Word reveals, and they are to avoid the sins that the world urges us to enjoy.

## Conclusion

As we conclude our study of the first chapter of James, let me point out some areas of application.

*First, James is about faith, and not just about works.* Luther was wrong if he feared that James emphasized works to the exclusion of faith. James does have a lot to say about the relationship of faith and works, and rightly so. But what I wish to point out here is that James begins his epistle by talking about faith. Trials are a testing of our faith (1:3); and in order to obtain wisdom, we must ask God in faith (1:6). James does not talk about saints being saved by works, but about God giving us birth through the message of the truth (1:18). Let us never forget that James believes in salvation by faith every bit as much as Paul.

*Second, there is no place in true religion for an “upper story faith.”* I fear that this is one of the great failings in the church today, especially for those of us who live in the “buckle of the Bible belt.” How easy it is to intellectualize our faith, rather than to incarnate our faith. It is easier to study the Bible than to obey it. It is easier to debate points of theology than to evangelize our lost neighbors, or to care for widows and orphans who are in need. As Christians, we may make much “todo” about the Word, but we often fail to do that which the Word clearly commands. Knowing God’s Word is not enough. Doing God’s Word begins with taking a good look at ourselves – seeing our own sins and weaknesses and dealing with them, and then moving on to look out for others.

*Third, adversity is to be joyfully embraced as God’s good work in our lives.* It is clear from our text (and many others) that no adversity comes into the life of the Christian that has not been purposed by God. He does not allow us to suffer in order to destroy us, but to chasten and strengthen us. He promises to supply the wisdom we need to respond in a godly manner to our suffering. He assures us that our afflictions are for our good, as well as for His glory. For this reason, we are to rejoice in our afflictions.

This is much easier to say than it is to do. How are you doing with adversity? When affliction comes your way, what is your response to it? Do you see it as from the hand of a loving God, purposed for your sanctification? Do you rejoice in it? Do you seek to learn what it is that God purposed to accomplish in your life through your trial?

*Fourth, God is always to be praised for the blessings He gives, for all true blessings are from Him.* These blessings include those things that are a source of pleasure for us, and those which are painful.

*Fifth, God is never to be blamed for our failures in the midst of our afflictions.* God tests us, seeking to purify and strengthen us; He does not tempt us. In the final analysis, temptation comes from deep within each of us. We never fail because God has not provided a way of escape (1 [Corinthians 10:13](#)), but rather because we choose not to take it.

*Sixth, there is a very important lesson for us to learn from James regarding suffering, prayer, and faith.* How sad it is that some teach that God is obliged to deliver us from (or out of) suffering, if we simply have enough faith. How tragic it is to see someone in their last moments of life, agonizing about their lack of faith, because they have believed that God would deliver them if they only had the faith to believe and claim it.

Chapter 1 of James hits this error head-on. First, James does not portray suffering and trials as an evil, from which the Christian should seek to escape. James does not even encourage his readers to pray that God would deliver them from their trials. Quite differently, James urges his readers to joyfully embrace their trials, knowing they are from God and for a good purpose. We are told to pray when we fall into various trials, not for deliverance, but for wisdom. We are assured that our prayers requesting wisdom will assuredly be answered, and without any rebuke, if we but pray in faith. A lack of faith is what keeps us from wisdom, not from deliverance from our adversity.

Do you see how far apart James is from those who believe that they can, by faith, claim a healing or deliverance from pain, and be assured of getting what they request? James says that those who are facing trials should pray, and that their prayers must be in faith. But they are not assured of an escape

from pain and suffering; they are assured of receiving divine wisdom. Those who wrongly suppose that the Bible guarantees an escape will find that James speaks rather of endurance. Let us align our theology and our prayers with the theology and teaching of James.

Finally, I wish to say to anyone who has never received the forgiveness of sins and assurance of eternal life that adversity may be a blessing to you by turning you to Christ. Listen to these words from the psalmist and from our Lord:

67 I used to suffer because I would stray off,  
but now I keep your instructions.

71 It was good for me to suffer,  
that I might learn your statutes.

75 I know, LORD, that your regulations are just.

You disciplined me because of your faithful devotion to me ([Psalm 119:67, 71, 75](#)).

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil on account of the Son of Man!

23 Rejoice in that day, and jump for joy, for your reward is great in heaven; for their ancestors did the same things to the prophets.

24 “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your comfort already.

25 “Woe to you who are well satisfied with food now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

26 “Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for their ancestors did the same things to the false prophets” ([Luke 6:20-26](#)).

In the Gospels, how many people came to Jesus whose lives were free from trials? There were a few folks, like the rich young ruler. But as a rule, the people who came to Jesus were those who were in dire need. They may have been infirmed, or they may have sought help for a friend or family member. But they were typically people who had no other hope than Christ. When accused of associating with sinners, Jesus responded that He, like a doctor, had come to heal the sick, and not to work with the healthy ([Luke 5:31-32](#)). The trials of life are often the instrument God uses to show us our desperate need for the forgiveness of our sins and the power to live a life that is pleasing to God. Now, as in our Lord’s day, adversity may point us to Christ as the One who can forgive our sins and gain us entrance into heaven. If you have never acknowledged your sin and your trust in Christ alone for salvation, I urge you to do so now.

Teach me. O God, to use all the circumstances of my life today that they may bring forth in me the fruits of holiness rather than the fruits of sin.

Let me use disappointment as material for patience:

Let me use success as material for thankfulness:

Let me use suspense as material for perseverance:

Let me use danger as material for courage:

Let me use reproach as material for longsuffering:

Let me use praise as material for humility:

Let me use pleasures as material for temperance:

Let me use pains as material for endurance.

John Baillie, A Diary of Private Prayer [1949]<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> For the acceptance of the Book of James into the New Testament canon, cf. Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 359-360.

<sup>2</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *The Catholic Epistles*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, MDCCLV), p. 276.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

<sup>6</sup> For other similarities in language, cf. Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Doremus A. Hayes, "The Epistle of James," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: The Howard Severance Co., 1937), III, p. 1562.

<sup>8</sup> Gary L. Card, "The Relationship of the Epistle of James to the Sermon on the Mount" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965), P. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. [Ephesians 3:1-13](#).

<sup>10</sup> In the Greek language, this is a first class condition, assumed to be true.

<sup>11</sup> I must point out here that it is the same Greek word that is translated both "test" and "temptation." The context determines which meaning is intended. In this context, it is quite clear to the reader that God does "test" us, but He never "tempts" us.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Quotation of the Day, September 14, 2000, Feast of the Holy Cross.

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## 2. Words and Works: Practical Piety James 2:1-26

### Introduction

It was my first time to visit the American Civil Liberties Union Website, but my search on racial profiling took me there. They cited the following statistics from the research and resulting reports of the Minneapolis Star Tribune:

Over the past six years in Minneapolis, blacks were:

\*11 times more likely than whites to be arrested and thrown into jail, but not necessarily convicted, for drinking alcohol in public;

\*19 times more likely for trespassing;

\*27 times more likely for lurking;

\*42 times more likely for not having a valid driver's license.<sup>13</sup>

I would hope we would all agree that some law enforcement officials have been selective in their enforcement of the laws of our land, based upon racial biases. This is wrong, and it needs to be changed. But what troubles me even more is that many Christians don't forsake their biases when they become saints, and don't even leave their biases outside the church door. In the October 2, 2000, issue of *Christianity Today*, the cover page featured a study which argues that "evangelical beliefs actually frustrate racial reconciliation. . . ." I'm not sure I agree with the study, but I believe we must at least admit that there are discrimination issues in the church. Racial discrimination is but one piece of an even larger problem. I believe there is a great deal more "profiling" taking place in the church than we would like to believe. Such profiling has been taking place for a very long time. Consider this text in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke, for example:

1 Now one Sabbath when Jesus went to dine at the house of a leader of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely. 2 There right in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. 3 So Jesus asked the experts in religious law and the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" 4 But they remained silent. So Jesus took hold of the man, healed him, and sent him away. 5 Then he said to them, "Which of you, if you have a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" 6 But they could not reply to this.

7 Then Jesus, when he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, told them a parable. He said to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, because a person more distinguished than you may have been invited by your host. 9 So the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your place.' Then, ashamed, you will begin to move to the least important place. 10 But when you are invited, go and take the least important place, so that when your host comes he will say to you, 'Friend, move up here to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who share the meal with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

12 He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you host a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors so you can be invited by them in return and get repaid. 13 But when you host an elaborate meal, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" ([Luke 14:1-14](#)).<sup>14</sup>

This passage in Luke is a great text, loaded with implications, but allow me to simply point out the profiling that is taking place here. Jesus was attending a dinner. It was a dinner intended, at least in part, to put Jesus on the spot. It was a dinner hosted by one of the leaders of the Pharisees, and it was on the Sabbath. A man suffering from dropsy had been stationed there as bait, to see if Jesus would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus did heal the man, and then rebuked them for their hypocrisy as evident in the dual standard that Jesus exposed.

The guests at this dinner very obviously jockeyed for position. You will remember that the place at which one sat at an eastern table indicated their status and standing among the rest who were seated.

Jesus rebuked the guests for status-seeking and instructed them to sit at the lowest seat. In this way, you would never be asked to “move down” (since there was no lower place). If the host wanted to move you up, then your host would thereby honor you.

Having rebuked the guests at this dinner a second time (the first time was for their hypocrisy), Jesus turned to His host, for whom He also had a few well-chosen words. The host had been as guilty as his guests, because he had very carefully chosen those he placed on the guest list. Jesus observed that no one there was poor. Our Lord knew that the host was guilty of “profiling” in the selection of his guests. He chose those who were wealthy, knowing that they would feel obligated to reciprocate, and thus he would gain a return on his investment. If he had invited 30 guests to his table, he expected invitations from them all for him to be a guest at their table. It was a coldly calculated event.

Jesus told the host that if he was looking for a heavenly reward, he would have to change the way he chose his guests. He should rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.<sup>15</sup> These were the people in need. They were also the people who had no earthly means to repay their host for his hospitality. In terms of worldly economics, a banquet for the poor would have to be written off as a loss. But in heaven’s economy, it was a great investment, because the host would be generously repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

My point here is simply that profiling is not new. It is an evil that James indicts in the second chapter of his epistle. In chapter 1, James speaks of how true religion will be evident in the midst of one’s personal adversity and affliction. In chapter 2, James presses on to show how true religion is evident in our response to adversity in the life of others.

Chapter 2 flows very smoothly out of James’ words in chapter 1, further amplifying on them. James has already introduced the subject of wealth and poverty in chapter 1 (verses 9-11); now he has much more to add. James has also urged his readers to be quick to hear (and obey), and yet slow to speak (1:19). He is about to call our attention to some worthless words, and to some works that should have been performed, but were not. These works would be in obedience to Gods’ Word, which instructs us concerning the nature of true religion, which is to “**care for orphans and widows in their misfortune**” (James 1:27). James now turns to those in need and to examples of evil response to such needs.

## Faith and Favoritism

### JAMES 2:1-13

1 My brothers and sisters, do not show prejudice if you possess faith in our glorious<sup>16</sup> Lord Jesus Christ. 2 For if someone comes into your assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothing, and a poor person enters in filthy<sup>17</sup> clothes, 3 do you pay attention to the one finely dressed and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and to the poor person, “You stand over there,” or “Sit under my feet”? 4 If so, have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! Did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor! Are not the rich oppressing you and dragging you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one you belong to? 8 But if you fulfill the royal law as expressed in this scripture, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**,” you are doing well. 9 But if you show prejudice, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as violators. 10 For the one who obeys the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, “**Do not commit adultery**,” also said, “**Do not murder**.” Now if you do not commit adultery but you commit murder, you have become a violator of

the law. 12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. 13 For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment.

James begins by setting down a principle in verse 1, which might be paraphrased in this way:

“Favoritism is not compatible with the Christian faith.”

This principle is rooted in the character of God, who does not show partiality, and who commands His people not to do so, either:

17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God and awesome warrior who is unbiased and takes no bribe, 18 who acts justly toward orphan and widow, and who loves resident foreigners, giving them food and clothing ([Deuteronomy 10:17-18](#)).

6 He [Jehoshaphat] told the judges, “Be careful what you do, for you are not judging for men, but for the LORD, who will be with you when you make judicial decisions. 7 Respect the LORD and make careful decisions, for the LORD our God disapproves of injustice, partiality, and bribery” ([2 Chronicles 19:6-7](#); see also [Job 34:19](#); [Acts 10:34](#); [Romans 2:11](#); [Galatians 2:6](#); [Ephesians 6:9](#)).

God is always just, and His judgments are always without partiality. God’s Word declares that each and every person without exception is a sinner, deserving of eternal judgment ([Romans 3:9-19](#), 23). Men are not saved on the basis of race (contrary to Jewish thought), nor on the basis of wealth or position, nor on the basis of their good works. Men are saved on the basis of God’s sovereign choice, which has nothing to do with man’s merit. Men are saved on the basis of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, in the sinner’s place. That is grace, and grace is unmerited. Since God shows no partiality, He insists that we be like Him in this regard. Favoritism, then, is incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ.

James now provides an illustration of the principle he has just stated. He sets the scene in church.<sup>18</sup> Two men enter the church at the same time. One of the two is wealthy. He is wearing a gold ring and “**fine clothing**.” Literally, he is wearing “shining” or “bright”<sup>19</sup> clothing. The rich man is dressed in a way that is intended to display his wealth. He wants others, including the usher, to know that he is a man of wealth? Why? Because he desires to be treated with partiality.<sup>20</sup>

The other man (who arrives at the same time as the rich man) is poor. His clothes give him away. The difference is that the rich man is purposely wearing clothing that signals his wealth to others. The poor man has nothing else to wear. His clothing sends a signal that he does not really desire. The poor man’s clothing is not just old, and it is not just ragged. Literally, the poor man’s clothing is filthy. This same word “**filthy**” is used only one other time in the New Testament, in [Revelation 22:11](#), where it describes those who are morally filthy, and who will not enter into the kingdom of God. In the early 1970’s, when the “Jesus” people began to attend churches with their bare feet and less than clean clothes, there was some real consternation because these folks literally did dirty up the church.

The usher (“**you**”) immediately responds. He does not disappoint the rich man. The brightly attired guest is given a warm welcome and ushered to one of the finest seats; the poor man is barely tolerated and told to stand off out of the way, or to sit at the usher’s feet. (Notice that this man is not only given the poorest seating, but he is not allowed to sit on anything that he might soil with his filthy garments.) In responding to wealth and poverty in this way, the usher (or, in reality, the church) is guilty of sin. James will press this point home with several powerful arguments in verses 5-13.

First, in showing preferential treatment to the rich, one acts contrary to Christ (verses 5-6a).

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! Did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor!

When our Lord came to the earth at His incarnation, He came to heal the sick and to save the lost; He came to those who were needy. He came to lift up the humble and needy and to put down the arrogant:

50 "From generation to generation he is merciful to those who fear him.

51 He has demonstrated power with his arm; he has scattered those whose pride wells up from the sheer arrogance of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up those of lowly position;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy. . ." (Luke 1:50-54).

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and the regaining of sight to the blind,

to set free those who are oppressed,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, citing Isaiah 61:1-2).

29 Then Levi gave a great banquet in his house for Jesus, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 30 But the Pharisees and their experts in the law complained to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31 Jesus answered them, "Those who are well don't need a physician, but those who are sick do. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32).

26 Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were members of the upper class. 27 But God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose what the world thinks weak to shame the strong. 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something, 29 so that no one can boast in his presence. 30 He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

It is no wonder, then, that we would read these words from the lips of our Lord:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God belongs to you.

21 "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and jump for joy, because your reward is great in heaven. For their ancestors did the same things to the prophets" (Luke 6:20b-23).

God has chosen to save us and to bring us to glory, but when we discriminate against the poor, we choose to humiliate those whom God has chosen to bless. To discriminate against the poor and to favor the rich is to act in a way that is contrary to our Lord and to the way in which we were saved. To discriminate against the poor is to act contrary to the gospel, which is a matter of grace, not merit.

Second, to show partiality toward the rich flies in the face of our experience and common sense (verses 6b-7).

Are not the rich oppressing you and dragging you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one you belong to?

Remember that James is writing to Jewish Christians who are dispersed among the nations. They have begun to experience persecution. Some of their poverty was the direct result of their generosity (see [Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-37](#)), and some was the result of persecution because of following Christ (see [Hebrews 10:32-34](#)). The rich were quick to drag them into court. They could afford the legal costs and could also influence the outcome of the trial. As a rule, the rich were not a friend to the Jewish saints; they were their enemy. Why, then, would anyone show favoritism to their opponents? Rather than “biting the hand that fed them,” they were “feeding the hand of those who were biting them.” And if this personal insult and injury were not enough, the rich were also those who were blaspheming the very name of our Lord (compare [Psalm 73:1-14](#), especially verses 8-9). Favoring the rich is contrary to all good reason.

*Third, to show partiality toward the rich was to break God’s law (verses 8-11):*

8 But if you fulfill the royal law as expressed in this scripture, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*” you are doing well. 9 But if you show prejudice, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as violators. 10 For the one who obeys the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. 11 For he who said, “*Do not commit adultery,*” also said, “*Do not murder.*” Now if you do not commit adultery but you commit murder, you have become a violator of the law. 12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. 13 For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment.

The royal law commanded God’s people to “love their neighbors as themselves” (note the emphasis on “as”). Their neighbors included the wealthy and the poor (see [Luke 10:29-37](#)). The “as” means that we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves.<sup>21</sup> We must love our neighbors with the same level of concern and care that we have for ourselves. But in addition to meaning that we must love our neighbors and ourselves equally, James insists that we must love each of our neighbors equally, not treating one neighbor better than another. The royal law calls for equality. Showing partiality violates the principle of “equal treatment under the law.”

To show partiality to the rich and to discriminate against the poor is to break God’s law. And to break God’s law in this one matter is to become a violator of the whole law. These Jews to whom James wrote were no doubt scrupulous in keeping other parts of the law, but James says that this is of no value if the law is broken in the matter of dealing equally with our neighbors. Thus, we may not be guilty of breaking the law by committing adultery, but if we murder, then we are lawbreakers anyway. To break the law at one point is to break the whole law. Those who show partiality to others are lawbreakers.

Fourth, to show partiality in our judgments is to ignore the certainty of consequences when we stand before Christ as our Judge (verses 12-13).

12 Speak and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. 13 For judgment is merciless for the one who has shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment.

Those who show partiality make judgments about others based upon mere appearances (the bright and shining clothing of the rich man as opposed to the filthy clothing of the poor man). Those who discriminate become judges with impure motives (verse 4). Those who judge are also those who will be judged. There is a day of judgment coming for all men. There is a judgment for unbelievers ([John 5:22-29; Acts 17:30-31; Hebrews 9:27](#)), just as there is a different day of judgment for the saints ([1 Corinthians 3:10-15](#)). If men have not shown mercy to those in need, then they should not expect God to be merciful to them in their day of judgment:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” ([Matthew 5:7](#)).



1 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2 For by the standard you judge you will be judged, and the measure you use will be the measure you receive” ([Matthew 7:1-2](#); see also 18:21-25).

I have a friend named Zeke who is now retired, but who once was a high level executive for a large company. Zeke had never before involved himself with things like protesting against abortion clinics, but for some reason he felt led to do so on one occasion. It was on that occasion that Zeke was arrested, along with the others who were with him outside an abortion clinic. The judge would not allow Zeke to speak of his faith in Christ or to cite Scripture. He found Zeke guilty of breaking the law. After the judge pronounced sentence, Zeke said to the judge, “Your honor, someday you will stand in judgment before The Great Judge, and you will give an account for what you have done today.” These are sobering words, not unlike those of James.

## Worthless (Workless) Words

[JAMES 2:14-26](#)

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can this kind of faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go<sup>22</sup> in peace, keep warm and eat well,” but you do not give them what the body needs, what good is it? 17 So also faith, if it does not have works, is dead being by itself. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.”<sup>23</sup> Show me your faith without works and I will show faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; well and good. Even the demons believe that—and tremble with fear. 20 But would you like evidence, you empty person, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that his faith was working together with his works and his faith was perfected by works. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “*Now Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness,*” and *he was called God’s friend.* 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And similarly, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

In [James 1](#), James defined “true religion” in terms of one’s response to their own adversity. Now, in chapter 2, James is defining “true religion” in terms of one’s response to adversity in the life of a neighbor. In verses 1-13, James has described willful and blatant discrimination, which occurs even within the church. Now, in verses 14-26, James speaks of a much more subtle form of the sin of partiality. Our Lord simply called it hypocrisy (see [Matthew 23](#)). Hypocrisy is saying one thing, but doing another (see [Matthew 23:1-3](#), 14, etc.). This is precisely what James speaks of in verses 14-26 of chapter 2.

*The principle is stated in verse 14 and might be paraphrased this way: “Faith that is professed, but not practiced, is of no practical value to us or to others. It does not serve, and it does not save.”<sup>24</sup> Unused faith is useless faith.*

*James gives us an example of what he means in verses 15-16. Notice that James has set the rich man aside and has returned to the poor fellow, who is in need. We come upon a brother or a sister who is in great need. He does not have proper clothing, and he is hungry. Instead of providing this individual with the things he needs, we speak words which appear to be compassionate and caring, but which are not accompanied by any truly helpful actions. We send the needy person away, wishing them well. We even mention their very needs: “Keep warm and eat well.” It’s almost like sending them out with the words, “Don’t forget your lunch, and wear a warm sweater.” That’s what a mother would say to her child. But she would also hand them their lunch and their sweater. In this case, the one living “from hand to mouth” finds that we bless with our mouth but have nothing in our hand. This is*

especially cruel and deeply hypocritical. In some ways it is even more wicked than the blatant discrimination of verses 2 and 3. The wickedness of verses 15-17 is couched in caring terms. I don't know whether or not the lack of action and the hypocrisy was willful. From the vantage point of the one in need, it matters little. When these empty words have been spoken, he still lacks both food and clothing. The words do not warm his body nor do they fill his stomach. These pious-sounding words are worthless.

In verse 17, James escalates this matter to a much more serious and troubling level. We would probably like to think of the sin of verses 15 and 16 as a kind of misdemeanor offense, one that might merit a mere "slap on the wrist." Not so with James. He upgrades the offense to a felony. He says that worthless words are a most serious matter, and with this Jesus agrees:

33 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 Offspring of vipers! How are you able to say anything good, since you are evil? For the mouth speaks from what fills the heart. 35 The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. 36 I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. 37 For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned" ([Matthew 12:33-37](#)).

What we say with our mouths is a sampling of what is in our hearts. If our words are empty, so is our faith, James says. Are we inclined to minimize vain words and empty promises? James will not allow us to do so. He tells us that a false promise is akin to a false profession of faith. If our profession is merely empty words, without any corresponding works, our profession can hardly carry any weight.

As mentioned earlier, I am well aware of the fact that some think that the word "**save**" (verse 14; also 1:21) does not refer to one's eternal salvation, but to the saving of one's life. The Greek word certainly does cover a broad spectrum of meanings, including spiritual salvation. Whether or not this argument can be successfully made, no one I know of within evangelical circles would claim that James is arguing that faith plus works is required for salvation. All would agree that a man is saved by faith alone, apart from works ([Romans 3:28; 4:6](#)). Paul and James do not disagree on this, and I don't believe that Christians should spend a lot of time arguing this matter when we all agree that it is faith alone that saves, not faith plus works. The real issue is this: is our faith genuine? A mere profession of faith does not guarantee possession of faith.

Verse 18 conveys the words of an objector, who points out the folly of thinking that mere profession of faith is sufficient evidence of the possession of a saving faith. I believe the argument goes something like this. The hypocrite insists that he is saved, based solely on his profession of belief. This is like me insisting that I am the President of the United States simply because I say so. The objector comes along and says, "That's easy for you to say, but mere words are not compelling proof of anything, especially faith."

I understand what the objector says in the light of what our Lord said in [Mark 2](#):

3 Some people came bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. 4 When they were not able to bring him in because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Jesus. Then, after tearing it out, they lowered the stretcher the paralytic was lying on. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the experts in the law were sitting there, turning these things over in their minds: 7 "Why does this man speak this way? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 Now immediately, when Jesus realized in his spirit that they were contemplating such thoughts, he said to them, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up, take your stretcher, and walk?' 10 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,"—he said to the paralytic— 11 "I tell you, stand up, take your stretcher, and go home." 12

And immediately the man stood up, took his stretcher, and went out in front of them all. They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" ([Mark 2:3-12](#))

There was such a great crowd gathered to see and hear Jesus that the friends of the paralyzed man could not even get into the house where Jesus was speaking. They managed to lower their friend through the roof to where Jesus was. When Jesus saw their faith, He told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven. It didn't take a Harvard graduate to know what these words implied: Only God can forgive sins; therefore Jesus was claiming to be God. Jesus was God, and as such, He knew the thoughts of His opponents. They were thinking to themselves, "He is not God; His words are empty words." Jesus puts the challenge to Himself by saying to His critics, "Is it easier for me to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Arise, take up your mattress and walk'?" It was hardly possible to verify the words, "Your sins are forgiven," but one could readily validate the authority of Jesus when He spoke the words, "Arise, take up your mattress and walk." And so Jesus told this man to get up and walk, and he did. By curing this man's malady, Jesus proved that He had the power to heal. This certainly gave some credence to our Lord's claim to have the authority to forgive sins. Jesus' words were not empty words. His works accompanied his words. This is what set Jesus apart from the Pharisees. No wonder Matthew can tell us,

28 When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed by his teaching, 29 because he taught them like one who had authority, not like their experts in the law ([Matthew 7:28-29](#)).

I believe the objector is employing the same kind of logic. He says, "Sure, you claim to have faith, but you have no accompanying deeds to verify that you really possess true faith. I, on the other hand, have works. Is it not right to assume that my profession of faith carries much more weight if works accompany it?" The objector then drives home his point with a powerful example. "You profess to believe that there is one God. That's good. That's orthodox. But it doesn't prove you have saving faith. Why even the demons believe what you believe, and you would have to admit that they certainly do not possess genuine faith." Faith and works are something like love and marriage (at least, something like love and marriage used to be). In the words of the songwriter of a bygone day, "You can't have one without the other."

In verses 20-24, James moves on to Abraham, the "father of the faith" to the Jews, to prove that a profession concerning one's faith is justified in the sight of men when it is validated by works:

20 But would you like evidence, you empty person, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that his faith was working together with his works and his faith was perfected by works. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "*Now Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness,*" and *he was called God's friend*. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

The first question we must ask ourselves here is, "Who is the '**empty person**' whom James rebukes in verse 20?" Is this the objector of verses 18 and 19, or it is the one to whom the objector is speaking, the one who thinks a mere profession of faith is enough? The thrust of verses 20-26, along with the entire context, would seem to force us to conclude that James is once again rebuking the one who seeks to justify the hypocrisy of professing faith without practicing it.

I really like the way James has attacked this problem. He first gives a forceful illustration of how our words can be useless and of no practical value without accompanying works. He then extends this from a general principle to one that specifically applies to one's profession of faith and their salvation. He then critiques the error by means of an "objector," who first finds the argument lacking in logic, and next turns to a more theological objection ("the demons believe, too, but are not saved"). Finally, James himself re-enters with his objections. These are directly rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. He first turns to Abraham, the father of the faith to the Jews, and then to Rahab, a Gentile woman of faith. James thereby makes a "clean sweep" of this error.

Jacob was the black sheep of the family to the Jews, as he is to almost any reader of the Old Testament. But Abraham was revered as the father of the faith (see [Matthew 4:8-9](#); [John 8: 38-39](#); [Romans 4:16](#)). In verse 20, James takes up where the objector left off. Is it necessary to further prove that faith without works is dead? Then James will turn to Abraham, the “father of the faith.” Abraham was justified by faith before God when he believed God’s promise of a son:

1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” 2 Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.” 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” 5 And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness ([Genesis 15:1-6](#), NASB).

In [Romans 4](#), Paul makes a great deal of [Genesis 15:6](#) to show that Abraham was saved by faith, and not by works:

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter? 2 For if Abraham was declared righteous by the works of the law, he has something to boast about (but not before God). 3 For what does the scripture say? **“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”** 4 Now to the one who works, his pay is not credited due to grace but due to obligation. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness. 6 So even David himself speaks regarding the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 **“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the one against whom the Lord will never count sin.”**

9 Is this blessedness then for the circumcision or also for the uncircumcision? For we say, **“faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.”** 10 How then was it credited to him? Was he circumcised at the time, or not? No, he was not circumcised but uncircumcised! 11 And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised, so that he would become the father of all those who believe but have never been circumcised, that they too could have righteousness credited to them. 12 And he is also the father of the circumcised, who are not only circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham possessed when he was still uncircumcised” ([Romans 4:1-12](#) emphasis mine).

Paul says that Abraham was justified by faith when he believed God’s promise that he would have a child, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Abraham believed God and was called a believer before he did any works. Paul uses [Genesis 15:6](#) to prove that salvation has always been by faith, apart from works. In our text, James writes that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar (verse 21; see also [Hebrews 11:17-19](#)). Are James and Paul at odds with each other? Far from it! The justification that James speaks of here is not the “justification” of salvation by faith, but rather the justification or validation of his profession of faith before men. Men do not know the hearts of other men, as God does, and so the only evidence – the only justification – of true faith is a manifestation of the fruit of that professed faith.

This is completely consistent with the teaching of our Lord:

15 “Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are voracious wolves. 16 **You will recognize them by their fruit.** Grapes are not gathered from thorns or figs from thistles, are they? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree is not able to bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree to bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that

does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will recognize them by their fruit.” 21 **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.** 22 On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and do many powerful deeds?’ 23 Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Go away from me, you lawbreakers!’ 24 “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, but it did not collapse because it had been founded on rock. 26 Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, the flood came, and the winds beat against that house, and it collapsed; it was utterly destroyed!” ([Matthew 7:15-27](#), emphasis mine).

Finally, James turns to Rahab, the harlot, to show how this Gentile was justified before men by her works. Rahab was a Gentile and a harlot who lived in the city of Jericho. The nation Israel was coming to possess the Promised Land, and the people of Jericho knew it. The Israelites were the enemy, and anyone who aided or protected them would be considered a traitor. Rahab knew that God was with His people, and that the Israelites would defeat the people of Jericho. When the two spies came to her house, the king of Jericho heard of it and sent word for Rahab to turn the men over to him. She told the king that the men had already left, but that they could be caught if they were quickly pursued. She hid the two spies under piles of flax on her roof. She told them she knew about the exodus and the way God had given Israel victory over all her enemies. She confessed, **“For the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below!”** ([Joshua 2:11](#)). She then made these men pledge that they would spare her and her family when they attacked Jericho if she would spare their lives. Her profession of faith was justified (validated) when she followed through with her promise by letting the men down the wall of the city with a rope, sending the soldiers of Jericho after the men by the wrong route. Her profession was proven to be genuine by her practice.<sup>25</sup>

James sums up his argument in verse 26: **“Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”** Words without works are worthless; a mere profession of faith is useless without that faith being put into practice.

## Conclusion

In the first half of chapter 2, James is very explicit in his renunciation of favoritism in the church. Showing partiality is clearly forbidden in the Old Testament and the New. This is because God does not show partiality, and neither should those who trust in Him.

This world operates like American Airlines. Generally, those who don’t have much money ride coach; those with more money ride business class; and those who can afford it ride first class. That’s the way things work in this world, and we understand why. But this should never be the case in the church. The church should operate like the newly-established Legend Airlines. This airline has only one fare, and it is claimed to be the equivalent of first class. Everyone in the church should be treated equally. We are forbidden to practice partiality. Rather than to avoid the poor and the needy, we are to seek to serve them by meeting their needs. We do not shun the rich, either, but we must not show partiality to the rich. Incidentally, we are not to show partiality to the poor, either (see [Exodus 23:3](#); [Leviticus 19:15](#); [Deuteronomy 1:17](#)).

The two sections of [James 2](#) are surely related. Both sections have examples that relate to our treatment of the poor. In verses 1-13, discrimination is blatant. In verses 14-26, the sin of discrimination is more subtle and more hypocritical. But James sees both kinds of action as sinful. In both cases, it is our words that betray our sin. In verses 2-4, the “usher’s” words to the poor man are cold and cruel. In verses 15-16, the words of the one speaking are seemingly caring, but are really hypocritical.



The evils that James condemned centuries ago are still taking place in the church today. They may or may not look like the examples James has given, but they are very similar in kind to what is condemned in our text. Allow me to suggest some areas of church and Christian life to which we need to give careful consideration.

In both of James' examples, the clear desire of the one showing partiality was for the poor to go away, to keep out of our sight and stay out of our way. The intent is to avoid getting our hands dirty and having to give of our resources to meet the needs of the poor. In this case, the rich wish to remain where they are, so to speak, and want the poor to go away.

It doesn't work quite the same in America. For one thing, the rich and the poor don't live in the same areas. In our city, the poor live in the urban ghettos and the more affluent live in the suburbs. Time after time churches that were once located downtown have chosen to move to the suburbs, "where many of their members have moved." It is usually not a conscious act of shunning the poor, but the effect is the same as telling the poor to go away, except that we leave them behind. We go, and they stay – in the ghettos. I think we should agonize much more than we do about moving away from the poor. As a rule, the poor cannot come to us, but we can go to them.

The church growth movement is based upon the principle of homogeneous grouping. The church seeks to appeal to a particular piece of the "church market," and I have to tell you that it is the rare exception that any church seeks to attract and minister to the poor. The church should be a diverse group of people, racially, socially, and economically. A church full of look-alikes does not impress the world; it is impressed when a very divergent group can be seen living together in love and unity. We should not show partiality in terms of those we seek to minister to in our churches.

We also tend to show partiality in both our evangelism and our discipleship programs. We tend to avoid those who show no promise, no great potential, and to actively recruit those who are the "shakers and movers" in our society. And when some well-known athlete or personality makes a profession of faith, we can't get to these people fast enough. Jesus did not pick the "cream of the crop" when He chose His disciples. Indeed, He did not pick the cream of the crop when He chose to save us. His great love, grace, and power is evident when He takes seemingly insignificant people and uses them significantly. Beware of showing favoritism in evangelism ("We need to reach these college students, because they are the leaders of the next generation.") and discipleship.

We show much partiality in our development and fund-raising efforts. The temptation is to apply to those foundations with lots of money, or to individuals who are wealthy. In this way, we get more "bang for our buck," or so we think. I am not saying that fund-raising should exclude the rich; I am saying that the vast majority of fund-raising efforts I know of exclude the poor. And yet Jesus said that the poor widow who gave her last two mites gave more than all the others, all the rich ([Mark 12:41-44](#)). Jesus Himself seems to have been supported by the contributions of average people with limited means ([Luke 8:1-3](#)). Of course, Jesus did borrow the grave of a rich man for a few days ([Matthew 27:57-61](#)).

Have you ever noticed that the boards of churches and Christian organizations are very disproportionate, in terms of race, employment (white or blue collar), and economics? We are inclined to think that it is the wealthy who will do the best job of leading ministries. Is this not showing partiality?

There is a fair bit of partiality shown in churches, based upon one's job title, and upon one's spiritual gifting. Certain spiritual gifts are prized more than others. Leadership and boards may very well be disproportionate in terms of the spiritual gifting represented by its leaders. (Those who are good talkers are more often leaders than those who are more quiet and reflective.) The "pastor" or pastoral staff may be looked upon with a kind of favoritism that is inappropriate. I say this based upon our Lord's own words:



25 But Jesus called them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions use their authority over them. 26 It must not be this way among you! Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” ([Matthew 20:25-28](#)).

6 “They [the experts in the law and the Pharisees] love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them ‘Rabbi.’ 8 But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher and you are all brothers. 9 And call no one your ‘father’ on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one teacher, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” ([Matthew 23:6-12](#)).

We often thoughtlessly practice partiality in church activities, socials, retreats, and ski trips. We plan an activity and invite everyone to come. But the cost will very likely prove prohibitive for some of our members. They quietly stay home, not because they didn’t want to go, but because they did not have the means to go. This shames the poor and violates the teaching of our Lord and of James. In our church, we have purposed to have no activities that exclude some on the basis of cost. This means that we must subsidize some of the trips and retreats, and this we gladly do.

The church is not to be like American Airlines, with first-and-second-class seating. It is to be like Legend Airlines, that gives first class seating to all its passengers. We are to treat one another equally and without partiality because we are all equal in Christ. We do not all have the same income, live in the same kind of houses, or drive the same kind of cars. But we were all equally lost in our sins and saved solely by the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. We are all equally unable to do anything pleasing to God in the power of the flesh, and thus are all equally dependent upon God. Favoritism is wrong because it is contrary to the nature of our God and of the gospel by which we were saved.

An interesting thought came to mind as I was preparing this message. James is very strong on equality among believers, and he takes a firm stand against partiality, *when it comes to the rich and the poor*. But I fear that James was not as strong in his stand against partiality when race was the issue. I remind you of this text in Galatians:

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he had clearly done wrong. 12 **Until certain people came from James**, he had been eating with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he stopped doing this and separated himself because he was afraid of those who were pro-circumcision. 13 And the rest of the Jews also joined with him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray with them by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” ([Galatians 2:11-14](#) emphasis mine).

The Jerusalem Jewish leaders, including the apostles, had a difficult time reconciling themselves to the fact that our Lord had come to save Gentiles as well as Jews. And when this happened, there was no first and second-class status. Both Jews and Gentiles were made one with Christ and one in Christ:

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh—who are called “uncircumcision” by the so-called “circumcision” that is performed in the body by hands—12 that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, the one who turned both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, in his flesh, 15 when he nullified the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of

two, thus making peace, 16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, 18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer foreigners and non-citizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, 20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit ([Ephesians 2:11-22](#)).

Coming to terms with full equality between Jews and Gentiles was a difficult transition for the apostles and the Jewish church, as we can see in the Book of Acts. When Peter went to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and preached the gospel to those gathered, his fellow-apostles and other leaders called him on the carpet ([Acts 10-11](#)). And even when it became apparent that God was saving Gentiles as well as Jews, the Jewish believers were not quick to act on this truth:

12 The Spirit told me to accompany them without hesitation. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He informed us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and summon Simon, who is called Peter, 14 who will speak a message to you by which you and your entire household will be saved.' 15 Then as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them just as he did on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, as he used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 Therefore if God gave them the same gift as he also gave us after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to hinder God?" 18 When they heard this, they ceased their objections and praised God, saying, "**So then, God has granted the repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles.**" 19 Now those who had been scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, **speaking the message to no one but Jews** ([Acts 11:12-19](#), emphasis mine).

I take it that James, the author of our text, was one of those who was slow to adjust to the new equality of Gentile believers. It was Peter and the others who came to Antioch "from James" who influenced the Jewish saints there to stop eating with the Gentiles, and to eat separately. This was clearly racial discrimination, and Paul strongly rebuked Peter and Barnabas, along with others, for doing so. My point is not to diminish the force of James' instruction in our text, but to remind ourselves how easily we may be blindsided by the sin of partiality. In principle, we may be strongly opposed to partiality, and we may see the evils of favoritism in some areas, while we are completely blind to its evils in other areas. I think this is true of many of us in relation to racial discrimination, and so James is not alone. Let us learn from James, both from his strengths, and from his weaknesses. His words are the inspired Word of God; his works, like ours, fall short of God's standard.

As I studied this passage and some of the scholarly works as well, I was reminded of a warning Paul repeated in his teaching:

14 Remind people of these things and solemnly charge them before God not to wrangle over words. This is of no benefit; it just brings ruin on those who listen. 15 Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately ([2 Timothy 2:14-15](#)).

Some Christian scholars I read have spent a great deal of time arguing over the meaning of the word "**save**," disputing with other saints who hold to a different view. None of these men hold to a heretical view, and yet they spend their time arguing with each other. And the worst of it is that in the process, we come away missing the point of the text, which is that we must not practice partiality. As we leave this text, let's focus on the message, and not on disputes over words.

Finally, let me say to you that it is not enough to merely give mental assent to the truth of the gospel. There are many who would admit that they are sinners, and who would tell us that they believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins. But some people who give assent to the gospel give no evidence of any change in their conduct. Let me simply remind you that James tells us that any faith that does not bear some kind of fruit gives those of us who look on little basis for confidence about your profession. Don't misunderstand me here! One is saved by faith alone, apart from works. But a living faith should bear some fruit. I do not wish to close this lesson without asking you, as kindly as I can, "Is your faith a living faith, or a dead faith?" Jesus Christ came to save sinners, by grace, through faith in His shed blood on the cross of Calvary. I pray that you have entrusted your eternal destiny to Him by accepting His free gift of salvation. And I pray that those who observe our lives will not have to wonder about the sincerity of our profession.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.aclu.org/news/2000/w072300b.html>

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

<sup>15</sup> This suggests to me that while the man with dropsy was carefully placed outside, where Jesus would have to encounter the man on his way into the leader of the Pharisees' house, this man was not an invited guest, even though he probably needed this meal more than any of the guests.

<sup>16</sup> Translators have a difficult time figuring out what to do with the term "**of glory**" here. I wonder if James is not making a contrast between the "**glory**" of our Lord and the meager "glory" of men, particularly the rich, with shining clothes. Does anybody think they should be treated preferentially? Do we feel obliged to be impressed with the glory of men? Let us remember who really has glory, and how paltry any human glory is when compared to His glory.

<sup>17</sup> Used elsewhere only in [Revelation 22:11](#) of the morally filthy.

<sup>18</sup> The original term is literally "synagogue," and there are those who would debate over what this means. I think it is safe to think of this as "church," which is something we can relate to.

<sup>19</sup> The same term is employed in [Luke 23:11](#) to refer to the "elegant" robe which they had mockingly placed upon our Lord at His trial. It was, however, a robe that signified royalty. The term is also used in [Acts 10:30](#) to describe the attire of the angel who, clothed in shining garments, appeared to Cornelius. I wonder if one of the reasons that James chose this description (shining, or bright) was to contrast the rich man's "glory" with that of our Lord, our "**glorious Lord**" (verse 1). How shoddy is any man's glory when compared to that of our Lord.

<sup>20</sup> For me, this sheds light on Peter's instructions to women in [1 Peter 3:3](#) and Paul's instructions to women in [1 Timothy 2:9](#). The attire which Peter and Paul forbid women to wear is that which sets them apart as wealthy. It drew attention to those so attired, and it gave them an improper prominence, in relation to their husbands, and in relation to God.

<sup>21</sup> This is a minimum standard. In [Philippians 2](#), Paul says that we are to set the interests of others before our own.

<sup>22</sup> “Go” is an imperative. While this sounds like a blessing (as is intended by the speaker), it is really a polite way of saying, “Go away!”

<sup>23</sup> By closing the quotes here, the NET Bible indicates the decision that the objector’s words end here. I am inclined to see the objector speaking through verse 19.

<sup>24</sup> I am well aware of the great debate over the meaning of the word “save” here, but I am not going to be sidetracked by it. I will explain my reasons later in this message.

<sup>25</sup> Some will agonize over the fact that Rahab’s act of faith was to tell a lie, as well as to let the spies down by a rope. I would say two things about her lie. First, lying and deception was accepted as a fact of life in time of war. Second, this woman was a pagan, who had just come to faith. She did not understand God’s ways. Whether or not her actions are approved by all, they were prompted by a genuine faith. Her actions proved that she had come to trust in God. That is James’ point.

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## 3. Taming the Tongue James 3:1-18

### Introduction

In his book entitled *Killing Giants, Pulling Thorns*,<sup>26</sup> Chuck Swindoll has reminded us of this epitaph, etched faintly on a gray slate tombstone on a windswept hill in an English country churchyard:

Beneath this stone,  
a lump of clay,  
Lies Arabella Young,  
Who, on the twenty-fourth of May,  
Began to hold her tongue.

I think we would all have to admit that Arabella Young began to hold her tongue a bit too late. As we come to [James 3](#), it would have been very easy for me to title this message: “Teachers, Hold Your Tongues.” You can see from the first verse of chapter 3 that this would be a fitting title for the chapter.

Our subject is not new to James; he spoke of the tongue in chapter 1:

<sup>19</sup> Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters! Let every person be quick to listen, **slow to speak**, slow to anger. <sup>20</sup> For human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness. . . <sup>26</sup> If someone thinks he is religious **yet does not bridle his tongue**, and so deceives his heart, his religion is futile. <sup>27</sup> Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world ([James 1:19-20](#), 26-27, emphasis mine).<sup>27</sup>

In chapter 2, James once again deals with the tongue:

<sup>12</sup> **Speak** and act as those who will be judged by a law that gives freedom. . . <sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can this kind of faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup> and **one of you says to**

**them**, “Go in peace, keep warm and eat well,” but you do not give them what the body needs, what good is it? ([James 2:12, 14-16](#), emphasis mine).

I had always thought that the expression “**slow to speak**” meant something like, “Think before you speak.” My friend, Jon Hodges, suggested to me that in the light of [James 3](#), it must mean, “Be reluctant to speak.” I think Jon is right. James writes to us in chapter 1 about “bridling our tongues,” and then goes on to instruct us to “**speak . . . as those who will be judged. . .**” in chapter 2 (verse 12). In [James 2:14ff.](#) he exposes the hypocrisy of speaking a word of blessing without doing anything to be a blessing. James has indeed been talking about the tongue, and he is going to take the matter even farther in chapter 3.

## A Word of Warning to Would-Be Teachers

[JAMES 3:1-2A](#)

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly. 2 For we all stumble in many ways.

As we can see from verse 1, James is aiming his words of warning toward those I would call “wannabe teachers.”<sup>28</sup> His words of warning are usually softened in translation so that the force of the imperative is played down, as though he were giving a word of advice. The King James Version puts it as strongly as it should be, in my opinion:

My brethren, be not many masters,<sup>29</sup> knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

I believe that James is speaking primarily to those who want to teach, who assert themselves as teachers, and yet should not be teachers at all. Let us consider why James would see this as a very serious problem, which he felt obliged to address.

*First of all, adversity seems to attract many counselors and teachers who wish to instruct us as to why we are suffering.* We see this in the Book of Job, where his three friends persist in trying to convince him that he is suffering because of some unconfessed sin, and not because of righteousness. In the end, God rebuked these men for not speaking what was true of Him ([Job 42:7-9](#)). Many are those with words of counsel and advice when we are suffering some kind of adversity. Many of these folks should give heed to these words of warning from James.<sup>30</sup>

*Second, there will always be those who seek to be teachers in order to promote their own interests.* In [Acts 20](#), we find Paul warning the elders of the church at Ephesus that even some of them will become false teachers, in order to gain a following:

30 Even **from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away after them.** 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. 32 And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” ([Acts 20:30-32](#), emphasis mine).

Third, there was a particular problem with “wannabe teachers” within Judaism:

6 “They [the scribes and Pharisees] love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and **to have people call them ‘Rabbi’**” ([Matthew 23:6-7](#), emphasis mine).

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relationship to God 18 and know his will and approve the superior things because you receive instruction from the law, 19 and if **you are convinced that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,** 20 **an educator of the senseless, a teacher of little children,** because you have in the law the essential features of knowledge and of the truth . . . ([Romans 2:17-20](#), emphasis mine).

5 But the aim of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. 6 Some have strayed from these and turned away to empty discussion. 7 **They want to be teachers of the law,** but they do not understand what they are saying or the things they insist on so confidently ([1 Timothy 1:5-7](#), emphasis mine).

Jesus knew it and exposed it for what it was: The scribes and Pharisees were eager to be teachers because this was a place of status, and they were status-seekers. Paul points out the same problem. In [Romans 1](#), Paul demonstrated why Gentiles are sinners, rightly under divine condemnation: they had the revelation of God in nature and they rejected it, choosing to worship creation rather than the Creator ([Romans 1:18-23f.](#)). The Jews were probably saying “Amen” throughout chapter 1, assuming that they were not Gentile sinners (see [Galatians 2:15](#)). But Paul has a shockingly different assessment of the Jews. Because they had been privileged to be the custodians of the Law, they felt that they had mastered the Law. They considered themselves the scholars, the experts in the Law, who should teach the ignorant what the Law was all about (see [John 7:47-49](#)). Paul found them guilty of failing to practice that which they taught (not unlike our Lord did in [Matthew 23](#)).

It did not take long for false teachers to begin to emerge in the New Testament church. A good portion of this false teaching came from Jewish false teachers, who seemed to feel that they had a higher level of understanding. They did not abide within sound doctrine, but were constantly engaged in speculation and word wars ([1 Timothy 1:4-7](#); see also [2 Corinthians 11:3-5](#), 13-15, 22; [Titus 1:4](#); [2 Timothy 2:23](#); [4:4](#)).

Among those Jews who were dispersed abroad were those who felt that they were superior in knowledge, especially knowledge of matters pertaining to the Law, and so they were inclined to teach the ignorant. James tells them – indeed, orders them – to be very hesitant to teach, knowing that the judgment of teachers is more severe ([James 1:1](#)). Why would it be a more severe judgment? There are at least two reasons that James does not give in his epistle that we find elsewhere:

First, those who are teachers should have a greater knowledge of the truth, and thus they become more accountable.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked” ([Luke 12:48b](#)).

Second, we all will be judged according to our words, so teachers, whose work involves many words, will be more accountable.

36 “I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. 37 For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned” ([Matthew 12:36-37](#)).

### **Wishful Thinking: If the Tongue Could Only Be Tamed**

[JAMES 3:2B-4](#)

If someone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect individual, able to control the entire body as well. 3 And if we put bits into the mouths of horses to get them to obey us, then we guide their



entire bodies. 4 Look at ships too: though they are so large and driven by harsh winds, they are steered by a tiny rudder wherever the pilot's impulse directs.<sup>31</sup>

James has instructed "wanna-be teachers" that they should be hesitant to teach, because the judgment of teachers will be more severe. He has also indicated that all of us stumble in many ways (2a). James will now focus on a particular form of stumbling. He turns to the topic of stumbling in one's speech, a timely topic for teachers. If a man does not stumble in what he says, then that man is perfect. If a man can perfectly control his tongue, then he would also be able to control every other part of his body as well. What a glorious thought! I fear that some would-be teachers might actually believe that they have mastered their tongues because they are able to master others with their tongue.

James has said that if a man can control his tongue, he can control his entire body. He now sets out to illustrate this tongue/totality principle, first with a horse, and then with a ship. In 1:26, James has already used the term "**bridle**," and now he takes up the same term.<sup>32</sup> Once the bit is in the horse's mouth, the rider can control the entire body of the horse. One controls the entire horse by controlling its mouth. Next, James turns to the illustration of a ship. A ship is very large, and strong winds propel it; but when the captain has control of its very small rudder (comparatively speaking), he has control of the entire ship. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the tongue could be controlled? If a man could bring his tongue under control, then he could bring his whole body under control. But this will never happen, as James is about to show.

## The Tongue Is Powerful, But Deadly, and Out of Control

JAMES 3:5-8

5 So too the tongue is a small part of the body, yet it has great pretensions.<sup>33</sup> Think how small a flame sets a huge forest ablaze. 6 And the tongue is a fire! The tongue represents the world of wrongdoing among the parts of our bodies, that pollutes the entire body and sets fire to the course of human existence and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and sea creature is subdued and has been subdued by humankind. 8 But no human can subdue the tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

It took me a while to see the strong contrast James is making here. In the previous section (2b-4), James engaged in a little wishful thinking: If only the tongue could be tamed, then the whole body could be brought under control. Now, in verses 5-8, we see the ugly reality of the matter: The tongue cannot be controlled, and there is a devastating result for the whole body – it is corrupted by the tongue. The key to our body's control is also the key to our body's destruction.

Like the rudder of a ship, the tongue is a very small member of the body, and it is powerful, but not in the way we would like to think. The tongue, James tells us, does "talk big." It boasts, he says, of great things. The tongue is powerful, but often in a most destructive way. The tongue of man is like a fire, which sets a whole forest ablaze. My wife and I were driving through Montana this past summer, and we drove through one of the many forest fires which devastated that part of the country. A friend told us the story of how one of the many forest fires was started this summer. A grasshopper was somehow attached to the exhaust pipe of a car and caught on fire. The grasshopper sprung from the car and onto the ground, where this burning bug set a whole forest ablaze. A small flame can ignite a great fire.

The tongue, James tells us, is a fire, ignited by hell itself. The last part of verse 6 is very difficult for translators, but the sense of it is relatively simple. The tongue is a "**world of evil**," which adversely

impacts the rest of our bodies. If the tongue could be controlled, we could control the whole body. But since the tongue is a deadly fire and out of control, it wreaks havoc with the rest of the body. The whole gamut of humanity and society is set ablaze by the tongue.

How ironic it is that man is able to harness the power of a raging river, to prevent flooding, and to produce hydroelectric power. Man has learned to harness the power of the atom, for destructive and productive ends. Man has been able to subdue every kind of creature, from a parrot to a killer whale, and yet with all his success in bringing things under his control, man is powerless to control his own tongue. In verse 8, James switches from the imagery of fire to that of poison. The tongue is a restless evil, and its poison is deadly.

If the tongue could be controlled, the whole body could be controlled. But the fact of the matter is that the tongue – like a raging forest fire – is totally out of control and uncontrollable. And its great power is the power to destroy and corrupt. Isn't it interesting that man can control the creatures of nature, but not himself? The one thing that distinguishes man from beast – the tongue – is the one thing that man cannot control. And if things are not bad enough, James goes on in verses 9-12 to give us even more bad news.

### **Worst of All, It Is Deceptive**

[JAMES 3:9-12](#)

9 With it we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse people made in God's image. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. These things should not be so, my brothers and sisters. 11 A spring does not pour out fresh water and bitter water from the same opening, does it? 12 Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers and sisters, or a vine produce figs? Neither can a salt-water spring produce fresh water.

Not only is the tongue destructive and completely out of control, the tongue is also deceptive. When I was growing up many years ago, I used to watch old-time western movies about "cowboys and Indians." The Indians would sometimes say of the white man, "He speaks with forked tongue." Today we would say, "He talks out of both sides of his mouth." Unfortunately, this assessment is true. Once again, James will show us how completely unlike nature man is. In nature, "what you see is what you get." A spring will either produce fresh water or bitter water, but it does not produce both. A fig tree produces figs, and not olives, and a vine does not produce figs. A salt-water spring does not produce fresh water. What something is by nature determines what it produces – and what it produces doesn't change.

Man's tongue is different. Sad as it may be, the tongue is capable of producing both blessing and cursing, as different as these things may be. At one moment, my tongue may speak words of truth and blessing, with absolute sincerity. Just moments later, it may speak something terrible, something corrupt. We can see this truth illustrated by the tongue of Peter:

13 When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 **Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** 17 And Jesus answered him, **"You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven!"** 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on the earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven." 20 Then he instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was

the Christ. 21 From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 **So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you.”** 23 But he turned and **said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on man’s”** ([Matthew 16:13-23](#), emphasis mine).

Within the space of a few moments (and a few verses), Peter has changed from being a spokesman for God to speaking for Satan. This is exactly what James is saying; the same tongue can both bless and curse. We cannot trust the words of the tongue because they can so quickly change to something completely different.

## The Source of the Problem: Two Wisdoms

[JAMES 3:13-18](#)

13 Which of you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show his works done in the gentleness that wisdom brings. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfishness in your hearts, do not boast and tell lies against the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where there is jealousy and selfishness, there is disorder and every evil practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, accommodating, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and not hypocritical. 18 And the fruit that consists of righteousness is planted in peace among those who make peace.<sup>34</sup>

At this point in our text, one has to say, “How can it be that man can control every creature, but he cannot control his tongue? How can it be that while every natural entity produces one kind of fruit, the tongue produces both blessings and cursings?” I believe verses 13-18 answer these questions. In verse 1, James began this chapter by warning “wannabe teachers” that they should keep silent. One of the main reasons these folks should not teach is because they would do it for the sake of their own egos, not for the edification of others. In other words, “wannabe teachers” want to teach to show people how wise they are. Thus, the whole matter really comes down to wisdom.

The chart at the end of this lesson will summarize what I believe James is saying in verses 13-18. These verses are all about wisdom – two kinds of wisdom. There is a worldly wisdom that makes much of the teacher, of his style, and of the novelty of his content. We see this very clearly in the church at Corinth. Some folks were gaining a personal following, resulting in division ([1 Corinthians 1:11-12](#)). Paul refused to employ this kind of wisdom, but rather determined only to preach Christ and Christ crucified (1:23), even though it was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1:22-25). These slick teachers were arrogant and taught their brand of worldly wisdom by means of deceitful and manipulative methods. Paul refused to employ such methods ([1 Corinthians 4:6](#); [2 Corinthians 2:17](#); [4:2](#)).

Worldly wisdom is from below; it is earthly, natural, demonic (3:15). God’s wisdom is from above. Worldly wisdom denies the truth, and in a selfish and boastful way, produces the fruit of **“disorder, every evil practice, and destruction”** (3:5-6, 10, 16). Worldly wisdom tends to be mere words. Heavenly wisdom certainly uses words, but it manifests itself in godly works. The wisdom from above consists of God-given wisdom and understanding (see [James 1:5](#)) that produces the fruit of purity (see 1:21, 27), a peaceable spirit which is gentle and accommodating (slow to anger, 1:19-20), and which is impartial (contrast 2:1-3) and not hypocritical (see 2:15-16).

Man is a fallen creature, and this is painfully evident wherever we look. A Christian is a **“new creation”** in Christ, but he is also a person whose flesh is weak, and who cannot withstand temptation

in the power of the flesh (see [Romans 7](#)). The same mouth may sometimes speak divine wisdom, while at other times, it speaks human wisdom. This explains why man is unique among the creatures God has made. If one is truly wise, he will control his tongue, and as a result, he will be slow (reluctant) to speak.

In the abundance of words transgression is not lacking;  
but the one who refrains his lips is wise ([Proverbs 10:19](#)).

The shrewd person conceals knowledge,  
but the heart of fools publicizes foolishness ([Proverbs 12:23](#)).

The person who is knowledgeable restrains his words,  
and one who has discernment has a cool spirit ([Proverbs 17:27](#)).

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding  
but rather in disclosing what is on his mind ([Proverbs 18:2](#)).

The one who guards his mouth and his tongue  
keeps his life from troubles ([Proverbs 21:23](#)).

Do you see someone who is hasty in his words?  
There is more hope for a fool than for him ([Proverbs 29:20](#)).

## Conclusion

As we seek to explore the implications and applications of this chapter, we must first turn to its meaning for those to whom it was specifically directed. “Wanna-be teachers” are instructed to be very reluctant to become teachers, knowing that more severe judgment will come to them *as teachers*. This text is not intended to discourage those who should teach. Timothy is one such teacher who needed to be encouraged – even prodded a bit – to teach:

11 **Command and teach these things**. 12 Let no one look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in your speech, conduct, love, faithfulness, and purity. 13 Until I come, **give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching**. 14 Do not neglect the spiritual gift you have, given to you and confirmed by prophetic words when the elders laid hands on you. 15 Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that everyone will see your progress. 16 **Be conscientious about how you live and what you teach**. Persevere in this, because by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you ([1 Timothy 4:11-16](#), emphasis mine).

3 I am thankful to God, whom I have served with a clear conscience as my ancestors did, when I remember you in my prayers as I do constantly night and day. 4 As I remember your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 5 I recall your sincere faith that was alive first in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice, and I am sure is in you. 6 Because of this **I remind you to rekindle God’s gift that you possess** through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control ([2 Timothy 1:3-7](#), emphasis mine).

1 I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, 2 **preach the message, be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and teaching** ([2 Timothy 4:1-2](#), emphasis mine).

James is not concerned with encouraging the “Timothys” here, but with silencing those who, for self-serving reasons, were aspiring to be teachers. Throughout chapter 3, James has sought to show how dangerous the tongue can be, especially for the teacher who has an audience, or who therefore has

the opportunity to inflame or poison (to follow through with his analogies) a large number of people. How many cults have been the fruit of a winsome teacher's heresies? How many churches have been split by a teacher of error? How many seminaries have been corrupted by a charming teacher who departs from the truth of God's Word? The damage that has been done – and is yet to be done – is great, and so is the judgment that will fall on those who teach with wrong motives and a wrong message.

This warning should not be viewed as though it were limited only to preachers and pastors. It applies to everyone who teaches. This includes both men and women, for women teach younger children in the Sunday school, and mothers teach their children at home. They also teach women's Bible studies. Men teach in many different contexts as well, and they should heed these words of warning. In our church, we have an open worship meeting, where any man is free to stand and teach or share, and so this warning would certainly apply to all the men of the church.

In a somewhat different way, Paul also encourages people more generally to remain silent. We see this instruction regarding silence in several of Paul's epistles:

9 Likewise the women are to dress in suitable apparel, with modesty and self-control. Their adornment must not be with braided hair and gold or pearls or expensive clothing, 10 but with good deeds, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. 11 A woman must learn quietly with all submissiveness. 12 But **I do not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man. She must remain quiet** (1 Timothy 2:9-12, emphasis mine).

26 What should you do then, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a song, has a lesson, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all these things be done for the strengthening of the church. 27 If someone speaks<sup>35</sup> in a tongue, it should be two, or at the most three, and one after the other. And someone must interpret. 28 **But if there is no interpreter, he should be silent in the church. Let him speak to himself and to God.** 29 Two or three prophets should speak and let others evaluate what is said. 30 And **if someone seated receives a revelation, the person speaking should conclude.** 31 For you can all prophesy one after another, so all can learn and be encouraged. 32 Indeed, the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, 33 for God is not characterized by disorder but peace. As in all the churches of the saints, 34 **the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. Rather, let them be in submission, as in fact the law says.** 35 If they want to find out about something they should ask their husbands at home, **because it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church.** 36 Did the word of God begin with you, or did it come to you alone? (1 Corinthians 14:26-36, emphasis mine).

Silence can edify, just as speech can. When women obey Paul's instruction to remain silent, they demonstrate submission to their husbands, and to the instructions of the Word of God. But it is not just women who are to be silent. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul requires men not to speak in tongues when there is no one present to interpret. He requires a man to stop talking and to sit down and listen (to be "quick to hear"?) if another receives a revelation while he is speaking. Paul says that after two or three men have already exercised a particular gift (here it is tongues or prophecy), no one else should seek to exercise that gift in that particular meeting. That is enough of one good thing, and time for other forms of edification.

What I am trying to say is that there are times when every one of us should remain silent. According to James, every one of us should be reluctant to speak, rather than to compulsively strive to speak. There are some folks who should not speak at all. These are the folks who do not have the message of the gospel right, or they are motivated by selfish desires. But for all the rest of us – men and women – we need to learn when to be quiet and to listen to what others have to say. We may wish to rebuke or to complain when we should put up with our situation silently (see 1 Peter 2:18-3:2). We may wish to give advice when the wise thing to do is to keep silent. While there are many times when it would be

wrong to remain silent, there seem to be at least as many times when it would be wrong to speak. Silence really can be golden.

Once again, James has returned to the relationship between our words and our works. The “wanna-be teachers” seem to be convinced that wisdom is a matter of words alone. James does not deny that wisdom is spoken in words, but he also wishes us to understand that wisdom is demonstrated in works. James tells us that the mouth is capable of incredible duplicity; it is capable of speaking words of blessing and words of cursing. We cannot know true wisdom by words alone. The person who is truly wise is the one who lives life skillfully (this is what Proverbs is about), so that we know to whom we should listen. Reading in James reminded me of these words of Paul:

31 Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. 32 And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 **I have desired no one’s silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that these hands of mine provided for my needs and the needs of those who were with me. 35 By all these things, I have shown you that by working in this way we must help the weak,** and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” ([Acts 20:31-35](#), emphasis mine).

16 Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained. 17 **Be imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and watch carefully those who are living this way, just as you have us as an example.** 18 For many live (about whom I often told you, and now say even with tears) as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, they exult in their shame, and they think about earthly things ([Philippians 3:16-19](#), emphasis mine).

And what you learned and received and heard **and saw in me**, do these things. And the God of peace will be with you ([Philippians 4:9](#), emphasis mine).

4 We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 in that **our gospel did not come to you merely in speech**, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (surely you recall the character we displayed when we came among you to help you). 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, when you received the message with joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, despite great affliction. 7 As a result you became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia ([1 Thessalonians 1:4-7](#), emphasis mine).

6 But we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined life and not according to the tradition you received from us. 7 For you know yourselves how **you must imitate us, because we did not behave without discipline among you, 8 and we did not eat anyone’s food without paying. Instead, in toil and drudgery we worked night and day in order not to burden any of you. 9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give ourselves as an example for you to imitate.** 10 For even when we were with you we used to give you this command: “If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat” ([2 Thessalonians 3:6-10](#), emphasis mine).

In his speaking and writing, Paul could appeal to his audience to consider his lifestyle in order to see how he practiced what he preached. Paul’s authority and credibility came, in part, from the way he lived out his life. His words and his works were consistent. What Paul preached, Paul practiced. Note, too, that when Paul lays down the qualifications for an elder, he calls for qualities in the candidate’s life which are observable, and which demonstrate true wisdom:

1 This saying is trustworthy: “If someone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a good work.” 2 The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, 3 not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not contentious, free



from the love of money. 4 He must manage his own household well and keep his children in control without losing his dignity. 5 But if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for the church of God? (1 Timothy 3:1-5).

Likewise, those who are false teachers will be known by their fruits:

15 "Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are voracious wolves. 16 **You will recognize them by their fruit.** Grapes are not gathered from thorns or figs from thistles, are they? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree is not able to bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree to bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 7:20 So then, you will recognize them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:15-20, emphasis mine).

8 And just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these people—who have warped minds and are disqualified in the faith—also oppose the truth. 9 **But they will not go much further, for their foolishness will be obvious to everyone,** just like it was with Jannes and Jambres (2 Timothy 3:8-9, emphasis mine).

1 But false prophets arose among the people, just as there will be **false teachers** among you. These false teachers will infiltrate your midst with destructive heresies, even to the point of denying the Master who bought them. As a result, they will bring swift destruction on themselves. 2 And many will **follow their debauched lifestyles.** Because of these **false teachers**, the way of truth will be slandered. 3 And in their greed they will exploit you with **deceptive words. Their condemnation pronounced long ago is not sitting idly by;** their destruction is not asleep (2 Peter 2:1-3, emphasis mine).

Whether it be wisdom or folly, you can be certain that either will be evident in the works of a man. True wisdom is practical and practiced by those who would teach it.

It has been observed that the words of James are more like the words of Jesus than any other New Testament author. We can certainly see the similarity of James 3:8-12 with these words of our Lord:

43 "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from brambles. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for his mouth speaks from what fills his heart" (Luke 6:43-45).

The *heart* is the key to controlling the tongue. James is not calling for more will-power and determination to control our tongues. If the tongue is set ablaze by hell, then only heaven can help us. And God has provided us with this help. He has given those who have placed their trust in Him a new heart. We are to be keepers of the heart, so that the thoughts of our heart are on Him who died for us. As our hearts are filled with Him, with His Word, with His salvation and grace, then our lips will reveal the overflow of our hearts.

More than any act of guarding, guard your heart, for from it are the sources of life (Proverbs 4:23).

The fruit of our lips, then, reveals the condition of our hearts. In the Book of Romans, Paul turns to a number of Old Testament texts to show that we are all sinners, deserving of God's eternal wrath. A number of these focus on the tongue:

3:9 What then? Are we better off? Certainly not, for we have already charged that Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin, 3:10 just as it is written:

“THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE,  
 3:11 THERE IS NO ONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,  
 THERE IS NO ONE WHO SEEKS GOD.  
 3:12 ALL HAVE TURNED AWAY,  
 TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME WORTHLESS;  
 THERE IS NO ONE WHO SHOWS KINDNESS, NOT EVEN ONE.”  
 3:13 “THEIR THROATS ARE OPEN GRAVES,  
 THEY DECEIVE WITH THEIR TONGUES,  
 THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS.”  
 3:14 “THEIR MOUTHS ARE FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS” ([Romans 3:9-14a](#)).

Does your tongue betray the fact that you are a sinner, deserving of God’s eternal wrath? Then God has given us the solution in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your acceptance of Christ’s provision for your salvation involves your heart and your tongue:

10:8 But what does it say? “**The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart**” (that is, the word of faith that we preach), 10:9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10:10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation. 10:11 For the scripture says, “**Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.**” 10:12 For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. 10:13 For **everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved** ([Romans 10:8-13](#)).

If you have never acknowledged your sin, I urge you to do so this very day. If you desire the freedom of God’s forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life, then I would urge you to do as Paul has indicated above – believe in your heart that Jesus died for your sins and that God raised Him from the dead. Trust in Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is through Him alone that we can be saved.

**The Two Wisdoms**  
**James 3:13-18**

	<b>Origin / the Root</b>	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Actions</b>	<b>Results / Fruit</b>
<b>Worldly Wisdom</b>  (see 1 Corinthians 1:18—2:5)	<b>From Below</b>  Earthy,  Natural,  Demonic (3:15)  (see <a href="#">John 8:33-47</a> )	Bitter jealousy  Selfishness (3:14)  Jealousy  Selfishness (3:16)	Arrogant (3:5, 14)  <b>(WORDS)</b>	Boasting  Lies against the truth (3:14)	Disorder,  Every Evil Practice (3:16)  Destruction (3:5-6, 8)  Cursing (3:10)

<p><b>Heavenly Wisdom</b></p> <p>(see 1 Corinthians 2:6-16)</p>	<p><b>From Above</b> (3:17)</p> <p>(see <a href="#">John 1:1-18</a>)</p>	<p>Wise</p> <p>Understanding (3:13)</p>	<p>Gentleness (3:13)</p> <p><b>(WORKS)</b></p>	<p>Pure,</p> <p>Peaceable,</p> <p>Gentle,</p> <p>Accommodating,</p> <p>Full of mercy and good fruits,</p> <p>Impartial</p> <p>Not hypocritical (3:17)</p>	<p>Righteousness,</p> <p>Peace (3:18)</p> <p>Blessing (3:10)</p>
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<sup>26</sup> Charles Swindoll, *Killing Giants, Pulling Thorns* (Zondervan, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

<sup>28</sup> I think it is significant that in verse 1 James distinguishes the “wanna-be teachers” (“**you**”) from those who are teachers, like James (“**we**”).

<sup>29</sup> The word rendered “**masters**” in the KJV is found 58 times in the King James Version. It is translated 40 times “**Master**” (capital “M,” referring to our Lord); 7 times it is translated “**master**” (small “m”); 10 times it is rendered “**teacher**”; and once it is translated “**doctor**.” The point is that this is a term of status. Some men want to be teachers because it is a position of status.

<sup>30</sup> I have counseled these people who are in a time of personal crisis to watch out for those who will come with advice and to plan on rejecting most of it. Much of the advice is not biblical and is in fact unbiblical, even though it may be couched in spiritual terms.

<sup>31</sup> There is a sense in which one who is skilled in speaking can manipulate a large number of people, and James’ illustrations might be understood this way. The second half of verse 2 forces me to view these illustrations differently, because James begins by saying that if one could control what he says, he could control the whole body. In this paragraph, then, the tongue is spoken of as the key to self-control.

<sup>32</sup> These are the only times this term is used in the New Testament.

<sup>33</sup> See this bold arrogance at work in false teachers in [2 Peter 2:18](#); [Jude 16](#).

<sup>34</sup> There are some who would say that verses 13-18 are only loosely connected to the earlier portion of chapter 3. I believe they are very tightly connected, as we shall hope to show.

<sup>35</sup> By my count, some form of the word “**speak**” occurs 22 times in [1 Corinthians 14](#).

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## 4. Real Religion Requires Repentance James 4:1—5:6

### Introduction

Unfortunately, some of the evils James enumerates in the first 3 verses of chapter 4 are the kinds of wrongdoing we have almost come to expect among saints: conflicts, quarrels, and envy. But it seems as though James is going a bit far when he adds “**murder**” to the list, not just in verse 2, but also later on in chapter 5, verse 6.

This list of evils reads a great deal like the front page of our daily newspaper. I reviewed the newspapers for this past week and found one article describing the murder of a 38 year-old man who was deaf and probably mute as well. It seems that a 14 year-old boy shot this man because he did not understand that he was being told to hand over his money – which was only enough change to pay for his bus ride home. Within hours of this tragic murder, an 80 year-old woman was abducted while making a quick trip to the store. A young man kidnapped the woman and later killed her, so that he could drive her car and purchase some gifts for his friends with her credit card.

In our text, James seems to be saying that things were so bad that professing Christians were behaving similarly. How could this be? A quick reading of the Book of 1 Corinthians would answer this question. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul speaks of a sin in the church that shocked the pagan Corinthians. In chapter 1 of James, the reader is told not to blame God for his sin, or for his temptation. James tells us that temptation comes from within, and that good and perfect gifts come from above ([James 1:13-17](#)). Now, in James chapter 4, he will give us additional details on the source of our sins.

### The Source of Strife, and Its Cure

[JAMES 4:1-10](#)

#### **THE MALADY AND ITS PRIMARY CAUSE**

1 Where do the conflicts and where do the quarrels among you come from? Is it not from this, from your passions that battle inside you? 2 You desire and you do not have; you murder and envy and you cannot obtain; you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask; 3 you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, so you can spend it on your passions.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that there is conflict among the saints to whom James is writing should come as no surprise to us. We find the disciples arguing among themselves in the Gospels about who was the greatest (e.g., [Mark 9:33-34](#); [Luke 9:46](#); [22:24](#)). We find divisions and even lawsuits among the Corinthian saints ([1 Corinthians 1:11-12](#); [6:1-6](#)). Even the wonderful church at Philippi had two women who were at odds with each other ([Philippians 4:1-3](#)). The difference here is that James tells us this conflict even led to murder (4:2; see also 5:6). Doesn't this description seem inaccurate, or at least exaggerated? There are those who would say that James is using hyperbole (a fancy term for exaggeration), and

that he employed the term in some metaphorical sense. I think he meant us to understand the term literally, and that he used it to shock us in order to get our attention. He says this to make the point that the conflict he speaks of is a very serious matter indeed. I believe there are two reasons why James included murder here as a sin that was possible among those to whom he wrote.

*First, we must reluctantly admit that there is no sin of which the saint is incapable.* We need only look at people in the Bible to see this. Moses took the life of an Egyptian, because he was mistreating a Hebrew ([Exodus 2:11-12](#)). David committed adultery and attempted to cover it up by murdering Bathsheba's husband, Uriah ([2 Samuel 11:14-25](#)). If we think that we are incapable of any other sin, we deceive ourselves.

*Second, James is speaking about the path of sin, and where it inevitably leads.* In [Proverbs 1](#), the "two paths" are described: (1) the path of folly, which leads to death (see 1:8-12, 16-19, 32) and, (2) the path of wisdom, which leads to life (1:20-23, 33). To pursue the desires of the flesh places one on the road to death and destruction:

15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Absolutely not! 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or obedience resulting in righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves to sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching you were entrusted to, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness ([Romans 6:15-18](#)).

5 For those who live according to the flesh have their outlook shaped by the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit have their outlook shaped by the things of the Spirit. 6 For the outlook of the flesh is death, but the outlook of the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the outlook of the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to the law of God, nor is it able to do so. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. . . 12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh 13 (for if you live according to the flesh, you will die), but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live ([Romans 8:5-8](#), 12-13).

I think the consequences of being on the path of sin are especially clear in our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

21 "You have heard that it was said to an older generation, '**Do not murder,**' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says 'Fool' will be sent to fiery hell. 23 So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. 25 Reach agreement quickly with your accuser while on the way to court, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the warden, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not at all get out until you have paid the last penny" ([Matthew 5:21-26](#)).

In this text, Jesus takes up the teaching of the Law concerning the sin of murder. There were many who dealt with this law legalistically. That is, they assumed that when the law forbade murder, that was as far as it went. The same approach was taken with regard to adultery and divorce ([Matthew 5:27-32](#)). Jesus put this matter in a very different light. To Him, murder is not only a terrible sin, it is the fruit of unholy anger.

Jesus traces the source of the sin of murder back to an angry spirit. He calls attention to an angry attitude toward others which causes one to view others as worthless, folks whom the world would be better off without. Now don't pretend to be so pious that you don't know what this is like. It's the attitude that you and I have toward someone who cuts in front of us on the freeway, or runs a red light. We say to ourselves, "You idiot!" When we look upon someone else as worthless, then by inference

we imply that the world would be very well off without them. What a rationale this is for murder. That is why Jesus forbids us to have this kind of anger toward others. We are to be reconciled to our enemy quickly, before our differences escalate any further. Murder, then, is the fruit of unresolved anger and hostility. This means that any of us, if we became angry enough, is capable of murder. James is not being as hypothetical as we might wish to think.

The reason why Christians have quarrels and conflicts is because they have allowed their fleshly desires – their “pleasures” – to dominate their lives. These “pleasures” wage war within each of us – within our bodies. They also result in conflicts and strife with one another in the body of Christ. The opposite effect happens when we “mortify the flesh,” when we daily die to self. Those who “**put off the old man**” put the interests of others ahead of their own. They become servants, rather than striving to be masters. They promote unity within the body of Christ. This is a central theme in the Book of Philippians, especially chapter 2.

The church at Corinth is a tragic illustration of the self-seeking James warns us about in our text. They had divisions among them, which resulted in some Christians taking other Christians to court (1:10-17; 6:1-11). Pleasure seeking dominated the lives of many of the saints. One man was living boldly in open sin (1 Corinthians 5). Others were also guilty of sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). And some were so tempted by a good meal that they were willing to participate in heathen worship to eat “**meat sacrificed to idols**” (1 Corinthians 8-10). Paul exemplifies the servant leader, who sets aside his right to be supported, for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9). He stresses the need for self-control, for bringing our body into submission, rather than allowing it to dominate us (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). And then he cites case after case from Israel’s history to show that Israel’s failures were often the result of pursuing fleshly pleasures (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). If all this were not bad enough, pleasure seeking had corrupted the most sacred gathering of all – the meeting of the saints to remember our Lord’s death at the Lord’s Table (1 Corinthians 11:17ff.). Those who came early refused to wait for those who had to arrive later (this would be the poor). These early-comers stuffed themselves with food and drink, so that their “worship” looked a great deal like the pagan worship ceremonies some saints were willing to attend. The Corinthians were also self-indulgent in their participation in the church meeting. Many were not concerned with edifying others, but rather with the showing off of their own gifts and wisdom. No wonder James looks upon pleasure seeking with great disdain.

As I read verses 1-3, the focus is upon those who do not possess the “pleasures” they desire, and so they become willing to act in a sinful manner to obtain what they want. They “**desire and do not have;**” they “**murder and envy,**” but they are still not able to obtain what they desire. These people are the have-nots, who want much and sin much to obtain, but they are still not successful. James tells them that they do not have what they want because they have not prayed for it. They have sought blessings from everyone but God. But even if they had prayed, they would not have obtained what they sought because they would ask wrongly. God does not give us what we request simply to satisfy our fleshly lusts. He meets all of our true needs, but He does not cater to our every whim. The pursuit of fleshly lusts is the pursuit of vanity, and in this pursuit, we always come up short. God desires for us to be content in our circumstances (Philippians 4:11-13) and to learn endurance (James 1:2-4). That which we most need is wisdom, not wealth (James 1:5-8). God wants us to “**be perfect, not deficient in anything**” (1:4), but this has much more to do with our character than with our earthly possessions.

## A Contributing Factor

JAMES 4:4-5

4 Adulterers, do you not know that friendship with the world means hostility towards God? So whoever decides to be the world’s friend makes himself God’s enemy. 5 Or do you think the scripture means nothing when it says, “The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning”?



Our struggle is not just with the flesh – our inner cravings and desires – it is with the world and with Satan as well. In verses 4 and 5, James rebukes his readers for their worldliness – their improper attachment to the world, with its values and desires. We will either stand with our Lord, and find the world against us, or we will stand with the world against our Lord:

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” ([Matthew 6:24](#)).

18 “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you. 20 Remember what I told you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they obeyed my word, they will obey yours too” ([John 15:18-20](#)).

14 “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them, because they do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world. 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but that you keep them safe from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world” ([John 17:14-16](#)).

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, 16 because all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away with all its desires, but the person who does the will of God remains forever ([1 John 2:15-17](#)).

James cannot state his warning more forcefully. He calls those who have become friends with the world “**adulterers**” (verse 4). In the Old Testament, Israel is represented as the bride of God, so that when the Israelites turn from God to idols, they are accused of harlotry (see [Exodus 34:15-16](#); [Deuteronomy 31:16](#); [Isaiah 54:5](#); [Jeremiah 3:20](#); [Hosea 9:1](#)). Similar imagery is employed for the church in the New Testament (see [Matthew 16:4](#); [2 Corinthians 11:1-2](#); [Ephesians 5:24-28](#); [Revelation 19:7](#); [21:9](#)).

Verse 5 is somewhat problematic because it is cited as a Scripture quotation, and yet we do not find any verse in Scripture that is exactly like it. We can certainly say that this quotation captures the sense of the Old Testament Scriptures. God is frequently pictured as a jealous God, who is provoked to jealousy when His people turn from Him ([Deuteronomy 32:6, 21](#); [Exodus 20:5](#); [34:14](#); [Zechariah 8:2](#)). God has placed His Spirit within us, and He desires fellowship with us. When we become friends with the world, it deeply grieves the Spirit of God within.

## The Remedy: Repentance

[JAMES 4:6-10](#)

6 But he gives greater grace. Therefore it says, “**God opposes the proud,<sup>37</sup> but he gives grace to the humble.**”<sup>38</sup> 7 So submit to God. But resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and make your hearts pure, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn, and weep. Turn your laughter into mourning and your joy into despair. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

The question which immediately comes to mind in relation to verse 6 is this: “Why does God give “**greater grace**,” and for what reason?” There are various explanations, but it would seem to me that the “**greater grace**” referred to here is the additional grace God extends to those who are His wayward children. Lost sinners experience God’s initial saving grace when He draws them to Himself in salvation. But having become His children, we still are “prone to wander,” and we sometimes stray

from Him. It is great grace that draws us to Him in salvation; it is greater grace that woos us back to Him when we stray. For those who are in despair at the fact that they have “messed up,” James gives these encouraging words, **“but he gives greater grace.”**

When we humble ourselves in repentance, He pours out even **“greater grace”** upon us, drawing us back into fellowship and communion with Him. When we have come to see that we have become too friendly with the world, we need but to humbly submit ourselves to God, and at the same time resist the devil, who will then flee from us. The devil does not dare to harm us when we have drawn near to God. As we draw near to God, we will discover that we become much more aware of His presence in our lives.

The word “repentance” is not found in our text, but the concept is certainly here. James is telling us what repentance looks like. It begins with a deep sense of humility, which includes the absence of human pride. It manifests itself in a hatred of sin and in the putting off of sin. It involves a cleansing of our hearts and our hands (that is our innermost motivations and our deeds). The wavering double-mindedness we once exhibited disappears, and a single-minded devotion to knowing and serving God takes its place. Repentance involves a godly sorrow:

10 For sadness as intended by God produces a repentance that leads to salvation, leaving no regret, but worldly sadness brings about death. 11 For see what this very thing, this sadness as God intended, has produced in you: what eagerness, what defense of yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what deep concern, what punishment! In everything you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter ([2 Corinthians 7:10-11](#)).

James rightly calls for those who are repentant to **“grieve, mourn, and weep”** (verse 9). There is no place for a smile when one is repentant.

Years ago I taught sixth grade in a public school. I loved teaching, and I loved those kids, but I did use a paddle occasionally (it was really legal then). I used the paddle sparingly, and it only came out on rare occasions when it was obviously necessary. I purposed that while I would give only one swat, it would be painful enough that the student would not come back to class with a smile or a smirk on his face. One day, the principle called a student out of class because of some discipline problem. A few minutes later, that same student returned to class, with a big grin on his face. One of my students made a very profound observation. He said, “Look at him; he’s gone to the principal’s office, and yet he’s got a smile on his face.” The inference was that no one who was taken out of class to be disciplined should come back grinning. I agree, and so does James. There is great joy in serving our Lord, and even times for levity, but not when one is repenting of sin. I know that there are those who teach that one merely has to admit to having sinned, and that forgiveness is then virtually automatic. I believe that in order for repentance to be genuine, it must be accompanied by sorrow.

James once again calls for humility in conjunction with repentance in verse 10. When we humble ourselves before God, He is the one who will exalt us. This is most certainly **“greater grace.”**

As we prepare to move on, let me simply call your attention to the fact that these words from the pen of James are strong words. In fact, this call for saints to repent sounds a great deal like other instances where unbelievers are called to repent for salvation (for example, [Luke 3:7-17](#)). God takes all sin seriously. Those who are on the path of sin are on the path that leads to death. One can hardly take sin too seriously:

6 “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a huge millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! It is necessary that stumbling blocks come, but woe to the person through whom they come. 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into

eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into fiery hell” ([Matthew 18:6-9](#)).<sup>39</sup>

## First Example of Arrogance

[JAMES 4:11-12](#)

11 Do not speak against one another, brothers and sisters. He who speaks against a fellow believer or judges a fellow believer speaks against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but its judge. 12 But there is only one who is lawgiver and judge—the one who is able to save and destroy. On the other hand, who are you to judge your neighbor?

It is possible that some may read the words of James in 4:1-10 and feel that somehow they have not been indicted. If so, James sets out to give us other examples of pride in our life, which calls for humble repentance. The first example is found in verses 11 and 12; the second is in verses 13-17. In verses 11 and 12, James indicts us for being arrogant when we speak against one another. James has already said much about our speech. We are to be “**quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger**” (1:19). In chapter 3, James has warned that we should be reluctant to speak as a teacher. Now, he is telling us that we should be slow to speak against a brother.

What does James mean by “speaking against” someone? Barclay says, “Usually this term means to slander someone when he is not there to defend himself.”<sup>40</sup> R. V. G. Tasker adds, “In the process of backbiting, James seems to suggest, the slanderer is in fact passing judgment.”<sup>41</sup>

It is very important that we understand what James is and is not saying here. He is not forbidding us to confront those who are sinning with their sin. There are too many texts that make it clear that we are our brother’s keeper.

15 “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, that **at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established**. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or tax collector. 18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven. 19 Again, I tell you the truth, if two of you on earth agree about whatever they ask, my Father in heaven will do it for them. 20 For where two or three are assembled in my name, I am there among them” ([Matthew 18:15-20](#)).

1 Brothers and sisters, if a person is discovered in some sin, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness. Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too. 2 Carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ ([Galatians 6:1-2](#)).<sup>42</sup>

James forbids us to speak against our brethren behind their backs; he does not condemn us for confronting them for sin face to face. James does not forbid us to confront a brother or sister when they have clearly violated the Word of God. Those who are quick to say, “**Judge not**. . .” are those who do not want to be under the scrutiny of others. But we are responsible for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our task is not to judge others where only God can judge. God alone can judge the motives and intentions of men, and so we should not be judging here (see [1 Corinthians 4:2-5](#)). Our task is to rebuke others in those areas where God had clearly identified their actions as sin.

It is also wrong to judge our brothers and sisters in matters that are not addressed in Scripture.<sup>43</sup> When we go beyond the Scriptures (see [1 Corinthians 4:6](#)), we are treading on very thin ice indeed. James tells us that when our standards are not clearly biblical standards, we are actually passing judgment on the law. We are placing ourselves above the law, rather than under it. We are

saying, in effect, “God’s law did not go far enough here, so I will inject my own values and views. When we go beyond the law, we judge the law, and we once again find ourselves “playing God.” I would understand that in almost every indictment the Jews made against our Lord, it was based upon their expansion of the law (i.e., their traditions), and not the law itself.

James’ argument, then, goes something like this: It is wrong to speak against a brother or sister because it is judging them. Judging is God’s business, not ours. When we judge our brother or our sister, we “play God.” We “play God” by judging His Word, when we set ourselves over Him who is both the author and the interpreter of the law. God alone is the lawgiver, and He alone has the power to save or to destroy. When we judge our neighbor, we completely lose sight of our proper place in God’s scheme of things. Setting ourselves over others, and over the law, is exceedingly arrogant. How many of us can avoid the condemnation of this sin?

## A Second Example of Arrogance: Presuming Future Success

JAMES 4:13-17

13 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into this or that town and spend a year there and do business and make a profit.” 14 You do not know about tomorrow. What is your life like? For you are a puff of smoke that appears for a short time and then vanishes. 15 You ought to say instead, “If the Lord is willing, then we will live and do this or that.” 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 So whoever knows what is good to do and does not do it is guilty of sin.

What James says here is not new. The Bible forbids us to boast about the future, as though we can control it, or even predict it:

Do not boast about tomorrow; for you do not know what a day may bring forth ([Proverbs 27:1](#)).

16 He then told them a parable: “The land of a certain rich man produced an abundant crop, 17 so he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ 18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to myself, “You have plenty of goods stored up for many years; relax, eat, drink, celebrate!”’ 20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded back from you, but who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ 21 So it is with the one who stores up riches for himself, but is not rich toward God” ([Luke 12:16-21](#)).

How easy it is to make assumptions about the future. The hypothetical example James gives us is the kind that would be made by those who have experienced success in business. The illustration makes a number of false assumptions:

*First, this fellow assumes that he will be alive in the future.* One split second of time could change that. It might be a car accident, or a bolt of lightning, or a heart attack, but life can suddenly cease. Such was the case with the rich fool in [Luke 12](#).

*Second, he assumes that he will be in a certain place at a certain time.* I live in Dallas, Texas, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I know better than to assume I will be anywhere at a particular time. I may encounter a traffic jam on Central Expressway. I may very well experience a delayed or cancelled flight on my journey to a more distant place. How could anyone in the ancient world possibly assume that they would be in a particular place at a particular time? This is sheer presumption.

*Third, he assumes that he will start a successful business and make a profit within a specified period of time.* Starting a business is a very high-risk venture. This fellow presumes that he will start a business in a distant place, and that the business will succeed, and that he will be making a profit

within a year. This is absolutely amazing. No businessman I know of would talk with this degree of confidence, unless he was trying to convince his banker to give him a loan. This is nothing less than pure arrogance.

James rebukes anyone who would be so arrogant as to presume upon the future. He reminds us of the brevity and uncertainty of life. Life is a very delicate thing, just a puff of smoke, just a vapor:

1 I decided, "I will watch what I say  
and make sure I do not sin with my tongue.  
will put a muzzle over my mouth while in the presence of an evil man."

2 I was stone silent;

I held back the urge to speak.

My frustration grew; 3 my anxiety intensified.

As I thought about it, I became impatient.

Finally I spoke these words:

4 "**O LORD, help me understand my mortality  
and the brevity of life!**

**Let me realize how quickly my life will pass!**

5 **Look, you make my days short-lived,  
and my life span is nothing from your perspective.**

**Surely all people, even those who seem secure, are nothing but vapor.**

6 **Surely people go through life as mere ghosts.**

**Surely they accumulate worthless wealth  
without knowing who will eventually haul it away."**

7 But now, O sovereign Master, upon what am I relying?

You are my only hope!

8 Deliver me from all my sins of rebellion!

Do not make me the object of fools' insults!

9 I am silent and cannot open my mouth  
because of what you have done.

10 Please stop wounding me!

You have almost beaten me to death!

11 You severely discipline people for their sins;

like a moth you slowly devour their strength.

**Surely all people are a mere vapor.** (Selah) (Psalm 39:1-11, emphasis mine)

1 The LORD, my protector, deserves praise—

the one who trains my hands for battle,  
and my fingers for war,

2 who loves me and is my stronghold,

my refuge and my deliverer,

my shield and the one in whom I take shelter,

who makes nations submit to me.

3 O LORD, "Of what importance is the human race, that you should notice them

**Of what importance is mankind, that you should be concerned about them?**

**4 People are like a vapor,**

**their days like a shadow that disappears.**

5 O LORD, make the sky sink and come down!

Touch the mountains and make them smolder!

6 Hurl lightning bolts and scatter them!

Shoot your arrows and rout them!

7 Reach down from above!

Grab me and rescue me from the surging water,  
from the power of foreign  
8 who speak lies,  
and make false promises.  
9 O God, I will sing a new song to you!  
Accompanied by a ten-stringed instrument, I will sing praises to you,  
10 the one who delivers kings,  
and rescued David his servant from a deadly sword.  
11 Grab me and rescue me from the power of foreigners,  
who speak lies,  
and make false promises.

12 Then our sons will be like plants,  
that quickly grow to full size.  
Our daughters will be like corner pillars,  
carved like those in a palace.  
13 Our storehouses will be full,  
providing all kinds of food.  
Our sheep will multiply by the thousands  
and fill our pastures.

14 Our cattle will be weighted down with produce.  
No one will break through our walls,  
and there will be no terrified cries in our city squares.

15 How happy are the people who experience these things!  
How happy are the people whose God is the LORD! (Psalm 144 emphasis mine)<sup>44</sup>

As I read the words of [James 4:15](#), I am reminded of the words of the song, which go something like this: "I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future." We can say, with great confidence, that if the Lord is willing, we shall do this or that. But what a difference there is in the two perspectives James is contrasting. The arrogant fool assumes that he is "the master of his fate, and the captain of his soul." He assumes that he controls his destiny. The Christian knows that God controls the future, and that what God wills will happen. It is not, "What will be, will be," as though no one is in control. It is not, "What I will, will be." It is, rather, "What God wills, will be." Thus we should always speak of the future in terms of whether it is God's will or not. We see the right mindset exemplified by Daniel's three friends:

13 Then Nebuchadnezzar in a fit of rage demanded that they bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before him. So they brought them before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you don't serve my gods and that you don't worship the golden statue that I erected?" 15 Now if you are ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, trigon, harp, pipes, and all kinds of music, you must bow down and worship the statue that I had made. If you don't worship it, you will immediately be thrown into the middle of the furnace of blazing fire. Now, who is that god who can rescue you from my power?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to King Nebuchadnezzar, "We do not need to give you a reply concerning this. 17 **If our God whom we are serving exists, he is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire, and he will deliver us, O king, from your power as well. 18 But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we don't serve your gods, and we will not worship the golden statue that you have erected**" ([Daniel 3:13-18](#), emphasis mine).

James does not want us to miss the fact that anyone who boasts about the future does so out of arrogance. It is arrogance that is at the heart of all disobedience. Humility, on the other hand, is at the



heart of all repentance and obedience. Boasting about the future is arrogant, James tells us, and it is evil. Here is one more sin for which repentance is required.

It is the last verse of this paragraph that I find most interesting. Why would James end this paragraph on arrogance with regard to the future with this warning?

So whoever knows what is good to do and does not do it is guilty of sin (verse 17).

I believe there is a very close connection between verses 13-16 and verse 17. If I am arrogant enough to believe that I will be very successful in a short period of time, then this may become my excuse for not doing now what I know I should do. I see that a poor family in the church needs help, and I have the money to meet their need. But I convince myself that if I invest this money in my “certain” business venture, then I will have much more money to give, next year. There are ministries that need my help, but I salve my conscience by thinking that if I invest my time in my new business, then I will have much more time and money in the future. It is a pious excuse for my disobedience, something at which the Jews in James’ day (and we today) are highly skilled (see [Mark 7:1-13](#)).

By the way, notice that this “**business**” sounds purely hypothetical – it does not even exist. It is the business that I am sure I can succeed at, but have not yet begun to do. I am reminded of the proverb that says,

Wisdom is before the discerning person,  
but the eyes of a fool run to the end of the earth ([Proverbs 17:24](#)).

My confidence concerning my success in the future may very well be my excuse for failing to do my duties in the present. Future (presumed) prosperity becomes my excuse for procrastination. On the other hand, if I realize that my life is but a vapor, and that I am here for a very short time, I am prompted not to hesitate to do the good that is before me to do, without delay.

## A Future Certainty – Judgment Day

[JAMES 5:1-6](#)

1 Come now, you rich! Weep and cry aloud over the miseries that are coming on you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your clothing has become moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be a witness against you. It will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have hoarded treasure! 4 Look, the pay you have held back from the workers who mowed your fields cries out against you, and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. 5 You have lived indulgently and luxuriously on the earth. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the righteous person, although he does not resist you.

The foolish and arrogant<sup>45</sup> presume things about the future that they should not. James has just rebuked them in 4:13-17. His first words in verse 13 are, “**Come now. . .**” Now James will turn to that which is certain in the future, and once again he begins with the words, “**Come now. . .**” (5:1).

False teaching often deals with the future:

Now if Christ is being preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 [Corinthians 15:12](#))

16 But avoid profane chatter, because those occupied with it will stray further and further into ungodliness, 17 and their message will spread its infection like gangrene. Hymenaeus and Philetus are in this group. 18 They have strayed from the truth by saying that the resurrection has already occurred, and they are undermining some people’s faith (2 [Timothy 2:16-18](#)).

3 Above all, understand this: in the last days blatant scoffers will come, being propelled by their own evil urges 4 and saying, "Where is his promised coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." 5 For they deliberately suppress this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water. 6 Through these things the world existing at that time was destroyed when it was deluged with water. 7 But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, by being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly (2 Peter 3:3-7).

False teaching seeks to distort the truth about the future because our view of the future has so much to do with the present. Over and over again, we find the New Testament writers focusing on the future as the motivation for godliness in the present:

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; when it comes, the heavens will disappear with a horrific noise, and the celestial bodies will melt away in a blaze, and the earth and every deed done on it will be laid bare. 11 Since all these things are to melt away in this manner, what sort of people must we be, conducting our lives in holiness and godliness, 12 while waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God? Because of this day, the heavens will be burned up and dissolve, and the heavenly bodies will melt away in a blaze! 13 But, according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness truly resides (2 Peter 3:10-13).

2 Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. 3 And everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure (1 John 3:2-3; see also Romans 8:18-25; 2 Corinthians 4:13—5:11; Philippians 1:21; 3:10-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11; Titus 2:11-13; Hebrews 11:10, 13-16).

James now calls our attention to a future event that is certain. This future certainty has both negative and positive dimensions. We shall deal with the negative dimensions in this lesson, and the more positive aspects in the last lesson.

James 4:1-3 seems to address the disenfranchised, those who desire, but do not possess. The danger for them is that they will sin in order to obtain the things their desires crave. In James 5:1-6, just the opposite is true. These verses focus on the rich who have succumbed to the temptations of the rich. The rich and the poor were first addressed in chapter 1, verses 9-11. The rich were not rebuked for being wealthy, nor were they instructed to give all their wealth away. They were warned not to become proud and arrogant about their wealth. They were to glory in their humiliation, well aware that they, like the grass, will pass away (1:10). In other words, the rich were reminded that their life is but a vapor, which briefly appears and then vanishes (4:14). We see, then, that it is not being rich that is a sin, but rather gaining and using wealth in a sinful way. Tasker writes,

"Neither here nor elsewhere in the New Testament are the rich denounced merely for being rich, but rather for yielding so readily to the temptations to which the rich are especially prone."<sup>46</sup>

The sinful rich are warned that both they and their wealth will all too quickly pass away, and that their hoarded wealth will not do them any good beyond the grave. James tells us why the wicked rich are condemned.

*First, they have obtained their wealth by means of injustice.* Specifically, they have increased their profits by refusing to pay their laborers in a fair and timely fashion, and these people are the ones whose efforts have produced the riches the wealthy enjoy (James 5:4). The cries of the oppressed workers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.<sup>47</sup> The Old Testament law was very clear on this matter,<sup>48</sup> and those who are indicted appear to have knowingly brushed God's Word aside (remember that these were Jews to whom James was writing). The rich have power to help or to harm, while the

poor are powerless. These rich folks have abused their power by oppressing the powerless. This evil has become almost standard practice by large corporations and companies, who purposely delay paying their bills for 90 days or more. They do it simply because they can get away with it, and because it is profitable to do so. Let those who would obtain their wealth wrongly remember that the Lord hears the cries of the oppressed.

The one who oppresses the poor to gain his own increase and the one who gives to the rich—both end up only in poverty ([Proverbs 22:16](#)).

4 Wealth does not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from mortal danger. 5 The righteousness of the blameless will make straight their way, but the wicked person will fall by his own wickedness. 6 The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the faithless ones will be captured by their desires. 7 When a wicked person dies, his expectation perishes, and the hope of his strength perishes. 8 The righteous person is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked turns up in his stead ([Proverbs 11:4-6](#)).

The one who trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf ([Proverbs 11:28](#)).

The wealth of a rich person is like a strong city, and it is like a high wall in his imagination ([Proverbs 18:11](#)).

*Second, the wicked rich have used their wealth wrongly, only to indulge their own desires* ([James 5:5](#)). James began chapter 4 with a warning against the obsession of satisfying one's passions. The rich have far more capacity to do this than the poor. While it is not wrong to enjoy the good things of this life ([1 Timothy 4:4-5](#); [6:17](#)), riches are a stewardship, and the wealthy are encouraged to be "**rich in good deeds**" ([1 Timothy 6:18](#)). Those whom James indicts are only using their wealth in a self-indulgent way, and thus they are abusing their stewardship.

*Third, the wicked rich have used the power of their wealth to condemn and to kill the righteous person who does not resist them* ([James 5:6](#)). We are certainly reminded of the story of Ahab and Jezebel, and Naboth, whose field Ahab desired (see [1 Kings 21](#)). Ahab and Jezebel were able to use their wealth and power to have Naboth falsely charged and then executed. Some see this as an indictment against those wealthy Jewish leaders who brought about the death of our Lord (see [Isaiah 53:7](#); [Acts 3:14](#); [7:52](#); [22:14](#); [1 Peter 2:23](#); [3:18](#)). While the wrongful execution of our Lord is certainly one example of the misuse of wealth and power, I believe James means it to be understood more broadly, for the wealthy may oppress godly saints knowing they will not resist:

18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse. 19 For this finds God's favor, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God. 21 For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. 22 He **committed no sin nor was deceit found in his mouth**. 23 When he was maligned, he did not answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. 24 He **himself bore our sins** in his body on the tree, that we may leave sin behind and live for righteousness. **By his wounds you were healed**. 25 For you were **going astray like sheep** but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls ([1 Peter 2:18-25](#)).

The judgment that awaits the wicked rich is graphically described. *First* of all, the wealth that they have accumulated will not endure, but will perish. Wealth, we are told, was measured in several forms. Their agricultural wealth – like that of corn or grain – would rot. *Second*, their elegant clothing, which was also a form of wealth,<sup>49</sup> would become moth-eaten. *Third*, their silver and gold would rust. Here was

surely the most durable form of wealth, but James tells his readers that it will not accompany us beyond this life.

Notice that in each case the wealth that perishes does so by virtue of being hoarded and not being put to good use. Grain would not have rotted in the hands of the poor. It rotted in warehouses, where it was hoarded. Moths do not attack clothing on our bodies; they attack clothing that is left in storage unused, and the same goes for rust. Things that are left idle and unused rust, not things that are put to use. It is the hoarding of wealth that is evil, when there are needs that it could have met. The picture is one of a stockpile of unused wealth, all of which is now worthless by virtue of non-use. It is this stockpile that testifies against the wealthy in the day of judgment, evidence that they did not use their wealth to minister to the needs of others. How different things would have been had these goods become converted to treasure laid up in heaven:

19 “Do not accumulate for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But accumulate for yourself treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” ([Matthew 6:19-21](#)).

If we are correct in concluding that the Book of James was written quite early, then it was written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. At least a partial fulfillment of these words can be seen in the sacking of Jerusalem, for we are told that when the Romans stormed the city, the Roman soldiers knew that many of the Jews were wealthy. The people who were poorly clothed and skinny were somewhat overlooked by the soldiers, but those who were “fat and sassy” were tortured, because the look of wealth was apparent.

These words from James cannot be any more strongly stated. Barclay comments on the words “**weep and cry aloud**”:

The vividness of the picture is increased by the word which James uses for *to wail*. It is the verb *ololuzein*, which is onomatopoeic and carries its meaning in its very sound. It means even more than to wail, it means *to shriek*, and in the Authorized Version is often translated *to howl*; and it depicts the frantic terror of those on whom the judgment of God has come (*Isaiah* 13:6; 14:31; 15:2, 3; 16:7; 23:1, 14; 65:14; *Amos* 8:3). We might well say that it is the word which describes those undergoing the tortures of the damned.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

The words of our text are the strongest in this epistle, and they are surely intended to give us pause for thought. Very few churches are free of strife of some sort, and James tells us where a great deal of it comes from. When we contend with others we would like to believe that we are “contending for the faith” or “standing up for what is right.” That is always a possibility, but it is not one that James bothers to mention. He tells us that wherever there is strife and contention, there you will find people who are driven by their fleshly desires. Personal, self-seeking ambition is at the root of much strife. When we are so intent to get ahead that we are willing to sacrifice principle and relationships, then we will surely be the cause of strife. When we “take up our cross” and become humble servants, we promote peace and harmony.

Often the self-seeking of which we are guilty is that which we have learned from the world. As much as at any other time in history, the world is hell-bent on seeking personal pleasure, and the church is afflicted with the same malady. The problem is that there is too much of the world in the church, and there is too much of the world in us. James says that this calls for humble repentance, that turns from the world to our Lord, and that resists the devil. True repentance will be marked by humility, and by genuine grief and sorrow at the immensity of our sin.

We are often guilty of playing God, which is the height of human arrogance. We do so when we speak against others in a way that makes us judges, in a way that puts our standards above the Word of God, and in a way that speaks against others behind their backs, so that they cannot defend themselves and cannot be encouraged to seek restoration. We also play God when we speak confidently of the future, when God alone is in control of the future. We need to be reminded that our life on this earth is brief and fragile. Fortunately, our life is in the hands of Him who gave us life. The uncertainty of the future should prompt us to do the good we can do now, and not put it off until later. Presumption about the future promotes procrastination. Grasping the brevity and uncertainty of life should prompt us to do the good we can do today, without delay.

Our text has a great deal to say to us about wealth. I believe it is safe to say that in comparison to the rest of the world, we are all wealthy. We ought to be very careful how we obtain wealth, how we use it, and not to abuse the power that it gives us. Wealth that is hoarded will testify against us in the day of judgment, and we most surely cannot take our wealth with us. We can “lay up treasure in heaven,” but we cannot store up lasting treasure on earth.

James speaks with great severity in our text, almost as though he were speaking to those who were not saved. The fact is that some of his readers probably were not saved. He was writing a general epistle, and there must have been a number of unbelievers who encountered it. If you have never repented of your sin and received the gift of salvation through trusting in the sacrificial death of our Jesus Christ, now is the time to do so. No one's future is more precarious and frightening than the one who is outside of faith in Christ. And if you have received Christ in the past but have come to walk the path of disobedience, this is the time for repentance.

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<sup>36</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

<sup>37</sup> William Barclay says that pride “shuts itself off from God for three reasons. (i) *It does not know its own need*. It so admires itself that it recognized no need to be supplied. (ii) *It cherishes its own independence*. It will be beholden to no man and not even to God. (iii) *It does not recognize its own sin*. It is occupied with thinking of its own goodness and never realizes that it has any sin from which it needs to be saved.” William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 105-106.

<sup>38</sup> See [Proverbs 3:34](#).

<sup>39</sup> I want to be very clear here that I am not saying one can lose their salvation by sinning. What I am saying is that when one chooses to walk the path of sin, they need to understand where that path is leading. This should serve as strong motivation to get off the wrong path.

<sup>40</sup> Barclay, p. 111.

<sup>41</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 99.

<sup>42</sup> We must not overlook the final verses of James' epistle, [James 5:19-20](#).

<sup>43</sup> Personal convictions would be just one example of this (see [Romans 14:1—15:16](#)).

<sup>44</sup> While my primary purpose in citing these psalms is to show that the brevity of life is emphasized in the Bible, I find it most interesting to compare both of these psalms in their entirety to the teaching of the Book of James. Many of the themes James takes up are themes found in these two psalms. One almost gets the impression that James was having his devotions in these psalms the day he wrote his epistle.

<sup>45</sup> Actually, arrogance and foolishness are closely related; see [Proverbs 12:15; 14:16](#).

<sup>46</sup> Tasker, *The General Epistle of James*, p. 109.

<sup>47</sup> “This expression ‘God of sabaoth’ is one of the most majestic of all the titles of God in the Old Testament, drawing attention, as it does, to His sovereign omnipotence. The Hebrew word is found transliterated, instead of being translated, only twice in the New Testament, in this passage where the language echoes Is. v. 9, and in Rom. ix. 29 where it occurs in a direct quotation from Is. i. 9. . . . The use of the expression here in James emphasizes the truth that, though the poor and the oppressed appear to have no champions on earth, they have as their helper and avenger none other than the Lord God omnipotent.” Tasker, p. 113.

<sup>48</sup> See [Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Proverbs 3:27-28; Jeremiah 22:13; Malachi 3:5](#).

<sup>49</sup> See [Genesis 45:22; Joshua 7:21; Judges 14:12; 2 Kings 5:5, 22](#).

<sup>50</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, p. 115.

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## 5. Real Religion Requires Endurance James 5:7-20

### Introduction

Our granddaughter, Taylor, has been anxiously waiting all week to see her other grandparents. They live far away in California and are only able to come to Dallas once or twice a year. Taylor was excited this week because her “Nanny and Papa” were coming to see her on Friday. When Friday arrived, Taylor stationed herself on the window seat, looking out the window for any sign of them. My daughter, Joanna, told us that it was a still couple of hours before they were scheduled to arrive, and so she told Taylor it was going to be quite a while for her to wait there, by the window. Taylor replied, “That’s okay Mom; I’ll just sit here and wait.”

I’m sure that James would have smiled at this, as we did, pleased with the way this child was willing to patiently wait for a very joyful appearance. That, of course, is precisely what James asks us to do – to wait patiently for the return of our Lord:

So be patient, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming ([James 5:7a](#)).<sup>51</sup>

The word “**so**” (or “**therefore**” in a number of other translations) indicates that the exhortation of verse 7 is in some way the result of what has been said in the preceding verses. There is a very direct



relationship between what comes before verse 7 and what follows, but let me first point out something that has changed significantly – the mood of the text. [James 4:1—5:6](#) has a strong prophetic note, with words of warning concerning future judgment, and a clear call to repentance. The earlier verses were an indictment of those who were misusing their poverty or their wealth as a pretext for sin. But in verse 7, we find James speaking much more tender and assuring words of comfort. Now, he is addressing not the abuser, but the abused.

It is my opinion that the dominant theme of these closing verses is the use of the tongue. It has been a theme in every chapter of this epistle. In chapter 1, James instructs us to be “**quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger**” (1:19). In chapter 2, James comes down hard on those who are hypocritical with their words – they speak words of comfort and help, but they do nothing to back them up (2:14-16). He draws an analogy between the emptiness of these words of comfort and a profession of faith that has no accompanying works (2:17ff.). In chapter 3, James speaks directly to those whose speech impacts the lives of many – those who desire to be teachers. In chapter 4, we see the abuse of the tongue in the strife within the church (4:1-2), in the way some saints spoke against others behind their backs (4:11-12), and in the vain boasting of some about the future (4:13-17). In chapter 5, James contrasts the words of some in this life with their weeping and wailing in the day of judgment because of their abuse of wealth and of the poor (5:1-6).

When James calls for patient endurance in 5:7-12, he gives two negative commands regarding the tongue: (1) Don't grumble – verse 9; and, (2) Don't swear – verse 12. As I understand them, the remaining verses give us examples of the positive use of the tongue. In verses 13-15, the tongue of the sick person calls for the elders of the church, who pray (using their tongues) for the sick. The element of confession of sin is also included as a possibility in verse 15, and confession is then encouraged more generally in verse 16. Confession and prayer are important uses of the tongue. Elijah is used as an example of the effectiveness of prayer (verses 17-18). The final two verses instruct us to reach out to the wayward, seeking to restore them to the way of truth they once knew. Surely this involves the use of the tongue as well.

Let us press on, then, to consider these important concluding words of James to see even more characteristics of real religion.

## Taming the Tongue in Difficult Times

### [JAMES 5:7-12](#)

7 So be patient, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. Think of how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the ground and is patient for it until it receives the early and late rains. 8 You also be patient and strengthen your hearts, for the Lord's coming is near. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be judged. See, the judge stands before the gates! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name. 11 Think of how we regard as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and you have seen the Lord's purpose, that *the Lord is full of compassion and merciful*. 12 And above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath. But let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall into judgment.

James calls upon his readers to patiently wait for the coming<sup>52</sup> of the Lord. This patience seems to have a two-fold outworking. *First*, it is the kind of patience that does not seek to retaliate for wrongs committed against us as Christians. We leave the execution of justice to our Lord when He returns to judge His adversaries. *Second*, patience has a positive element, which works itself out as endurance and perseverance. It means that we do not grow weary in well doing ([Galatians 6:9](#); [2 Thessalonians 3:13](#); [Hebrews 12:3](#)).

James gives us an example of this kind of patience by using the illustration of the farmer, who patiently waits for the early and late rains, which will produce the precious fruit of the ground (verse 7b). This illustration would be especially forceful with the Jews. Consider this passage in the Book of Deuteronomy:

8 Now pay attention to the whole commandment I am giving you today, so that you may be strong enough to enter and possess the land where you are headed, 9 and that you may enjoy long life in the land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors and their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 For the land where you are headed as your possession is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, a land where you sowed seed and which you irrigated by hand<sup>53</sup> like a vegetable garden. 11 Rather, the land where you are going as your possession is one of hills and valleys, a land that drinks water from the rains, 12 one the LORD your God looks after. He is constantly attentive to it from the beginning to the end of the year. 13 Now, if you conscientiously attend to my commandment that I am giving you today, that is, to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your mind and being, 14 then, he says, "I will send the rain of your land in its season, the autumn and the spring rains, so that you may gather in your wheat, new wine, and olive oil. 15 I will provide pasturage for your livestock and you yourself will eat until you are satisfied" (Deuteronomy 11:8-15).

This is an incredible passage, and I believe it provides insight into the kind of patience God wants us to exhibit as we wait for our Lord's return. In Egypt, farming was done very differently from farming in Israel. It is the same difference that we see between rice farming in California and the wheat farming done in Kansas. The difference is between land that is irrigated and land that is watered by rain. God reminded the Israelites that in Egypt farming was facilitated by irrigation from the Nile River. One sees essentially the same thing in California and other places where watering is done by irrigation. There is an irrigation ditch nearby that is filled with water, and all one has to do is to push some dirt with his foot to start the water flowing along a particular trench. Thus, as God said, they watered the land with their foot. That's how easy it was.

It was too easy for God's people in Egypt, agriculturally speaking. They could farm without having to exercise faith in God. God wanted His people to learn to trust Him for their daily bread and for their every need. And so He took them to a land that was not watered by irrigation, but by rain. He promised that if His people would abide by His law, He would give them the rains they needed, in their proper time. This meant that the farmer had to work at his farming *when there was no hint of rain on the horizon*. He had to cultivate his fields to prepare them for his crops. Then he had to plant the seed. All of this seems to have been done before any rains had yet come. The farmer went about his labors, trusting in God to bless his efforts, but not seeing the rain while he worked. Then, having done what he could, the farmer had to patiently wait for the rains God had promised. The first rains came early to cause the seed to grow, and then more time passed. Finally, the latter rains came to bring the crop to maturity. Farming in Israel required working and waiting on God.

These displaced Jews are not farmers in the land of Israel, but James exhorts them to practice the same kind of patience. As God promised to provide the necessary rains at their proper time, our Lord promised to return, also at the proper time. No doubt the farmers' faith was tested if the rains did not come as quickly as they would have liked. In the same way, we might wish that our Lord's return would come sooner, too. But we must trust in Him and continue to obey His Word. We must trust that when He comes He will judge the wicked and reward the righteous.

Notice how James skillfully portrays the coming of our Lord in a way that emphasizes its imminence. In verse 7, he speaks of the Lord's return generally, in the future. In verse 8, he speaks of the Lord's return as "**near.**" In verse 9, James tells us He is "**at the door.**" His return is near, and we should be greatly encouraged by this. We should "**strengthen our hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand**" (verse 8). This is a very pointed contrast to verse 5. Let me put the two verses in juxtaposition:

You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter (verse 5).

Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (verse 8).

What a difference there is between the Christian's relationship to the second coming and that of the wicked. The wicked fatten their hearts for the day of slaughter. They are like a turkey, happily eating grain as Thanksgiving Day draws near. The fatter he gets, the more eager its owners are to eat him. This, by the way, is virtually what happened to the Jews in Jerusalem when the Romans sacked the city in 70 A.D. When the Roman soldiers took the city, the poor were conspicuous by their bony frames and tattered clothing. The Roman soldiers did not take nearly as much interest in them. But they knew that many of the Jews were rich, and so they found and tortured the plump, well-dressed Jews to force them to reveal where their wealth was hidden.

James now gives two negative commands related to the use of the tongue. Two specific forms of speech are forbidden: (1) grumbling; and, (2) swearing. Note that each prohibition contains a the threat of judgment if the warning is not heeded:

9 **Do not grumble** against one another, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be judged. See, the judge stands before the gates! (emphasis mine)

12 And above all, my brothers and sisters, **do not swear**, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath. But let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall into judgment. (emphasis mine)

The first prohibition is against grumbling. Why would James choose to focus on this particular use of the tongue? Notice that it is grumbling *against one another* (verse 9). James has already forbidden *speaking against one another* in [James 4:11-12](#). Grumbling is virtually the same thing. Not only is doing so an act of arrogance, of playing God (4:11-12), it is a sin against brotherly love and Christian unity. We know from Israel's grumbling against Moses that their grumbling against God's leadership was really grumbling against God ([Numbers 14:2, 11, 22-29](#)). It is hard to eagerly await the return of the same God against whom you are grumbling. Speaking against one another brings judgment, and the Judge is "**at the door**" (verse 8).

James calls our attention to two examples of the kind of patience he is encouraging. First, he reminds his Jewish readers about their heroes, the prophets. These were men who spoke God's truth to a sinful generation and paid a high price for doing so. They were ignored, rejected, abused, and even killed because of their words. The Jews looked upon them as heroes, and rightly so. James is therefore saying something like this: "Look, you honor the prophets and regard them as heroes, precisely because they endured in the midst of adversity; you should imitate them by persevering under trial."

Second, James calls our attention to Job, who suffered greatly at the hand of God (ultimately), of Satan (directly), of his wife, and even of his friends. I think we would all agree that Job's friends were unjustly accusing Job of unconfessed sins of which he was not guilty. When Job sought to defend himself, they criticized him more severely. Job suffered much and his responses to his affliction were not always what they should have been. Nevertheless, Job did not abandon his faith in God. He may have wanted God to explain what was going on, but Job did not cease to trust in his God.

James seems to be calling our attention to the outcome of Job's sufferings. First, God vindicated Job as a righteous man. He also rebuked Job's friends for being wrong. It was they who had not spoken rightly of God (see [Job 42:7-9](#)). Then God restored Job and granted him even greater prosperity than he had before his testing began ([Job 42:10ff.](#)). Job endured in the midst of adversity, and God both vindicated and blessed him, at the proper time. Though God may have appeared to be harsh during Job's afflictions, He proved Himself to be "**full of compassion and merciful**" ([James 5:11](#)).

The second prohibition is against swearing:

And above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath. But let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall into judgment (verse 12).

There are some who believe that it is cursing that James had in mind here. After all, Job’s wife urged him to **“curse God and die”** ([Job 2:9](#)). While some Christians may be tempted to curse and swear when in great adversity, I don’t think this is what James has in mind in our text. His words closely resemble our Lord’s words in [Matthew 5](#):

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to an older generation, **‘Do not break an oath, but fulfill your vows to the Lord.’** 34 But I say to you, do not take oaths at all—not by heaven, because it is the throne of God, 35 not by earth, because it is his footstool, and not by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. 36 Do not take an oath by your head, because you are not able to make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no.’ More than this is from the evil one” ([Matthew 5:33-37](#)).

The issue here seems to be that of telling the truth. We can see from [Matthew 23:16-22](#) that legalistic Jews (the scribes and Pharisees were the culprits here) had developed some very specialized oaths. The purpose of these technical oaths was to appear to be promising something that they had no intention of fulfilling. One could swear by the temple and feel no obligation to keep his oath, but if he swore by the gold of the temple he was obligated ([Matthew 23:16-17](#)). This kind of oath taking was hypocrisy because it gave the appearance of a most solemn promise, but the reality was that the oath taker had no intention of keeping his promise. Jesus (and thus James as well) forbade this kind of technical oath taking. In reality, Christians should not ever need to take an oath. Our word should be our bond. When we say, “Yes” we should mean yes. Others should not need some further affirmation of truthfulness than our words themselves.

James employs the words, **“above all”** (verse 12) to indicate that this is the most important thing he has to say about the use of the tongue. I believe that James is saying, “The most important thing I have to say about the use of the tongue is that it must speak the truth, so much so that oath-taking would be unnecessary.” There are many cruel and wicked things that can be said with the tongue, but the most dangerous is falsehood. Our Lord is **“the way, the truth, and the life”** ([John 14:6](#)). If we cannot be believed, then we have cast a shadow on the truth of the gospel. Jesus said, **“you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”** ([John 8:32](#)). He also said, **“Set them apart in the truth; your word is truth”** ([John 17:17](#)). Paul said, **“The purpose of this is to no longer be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who with craftiness carry out their deceitful schemes. But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head”** ([Ephesians 4:14-15](#)). A little later he writes, **“Therefore, having laid aside falsehood, each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another”** ([Ephesians 4:25](#)). First and foremost, we must be people of truth. That is what James is saying as well. There is no place for falsehood in the faith. This may help us to see why God dealt so severely with Ananias and Sapphira for lying (see [Acts 5:1-11](#)).

## The Proper Use of the Tongue

[JAMES 5:13-20](#)

13 Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you ill? He should summon the elders of the church, and they should pray for him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick

and the Lord will raise him up—and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness. 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and there was no rain on the land for three years and six months! 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land sprouted with a harvest. 19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, 20 he should know that the one who turns a sinner back from his wandering path will save that person's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

In the preceding verses, James has given two negative commands regarding the use of the tongue – they should not grumble, and they should not take oaths designed to be broken. Now, James turns to the positive use of the tongue. In verse 13, the tongue should be employed in prayer and praises to God. In verses 14-15, the one who is weak and without strength should call for the elders, who will pray for him. In verses 16-18, James gives a more general exhortation to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another (using Elijah as an example of the power of prayer). In verses 19 and 20, James concludes his epistle with the finest use of the tongue – restoring one who has strayed from the truth.

The first positive use of the tongue is found in the context of adversity. The “**suffering**” James refers to is a general term for affliction. This term is found only two other times in the New Testament, and their occurrence is highlighted below:

8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel, 9 for which I **suffer hardship** to the point of imprisonment as a criminal, but God's message is not imprisoned!  
(2 Timothy 2:8-9, emphasis mine).

You, however, be self-controlled in all things, **endure hardship**, do an evangelist's work, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:5, emphasis mine).

This same term is used one time in the Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Old Testament:

The LORD said, “You have compassion for the plant, something that you have not **worked over** nor made to grow, a thing that lasted a night and perished after a night (Jonah 4:10, emphasis mine).

The natural response to adversity is often expressed in inappropriate speech, but this is contrary to the example set by our Lord:

18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse. 19 For this finds God's favor, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God. 21 For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. 22 He **committed no sin nor was deceit found in his mouth**. 23 When he was maligned, he did not answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. 24 He **Himself bore our sins** in his body on the tree, that we may leave sin behind and live for righteousness. **By his wounds you were healed**. 25 For you were **going astray like sheep** but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:18-25; see also Romans 12:17-21).

When adversity comes our way, we need divine wisdom (see James 3:13-18), and we are to pray to God, knowing He will give it to us without reprimanding us (James 1:5-8). Adversity should draw us toward God, and prayer should be our first response to our trials. In response to our prayers, He will give wisdom, strength, and peace of heart and mind (see Philippians 4:6-78).



If one is in good spirits, then he should **“sing praises.”** James has said that, **“All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, . . .”** ([James 1:17a](#)). This being the case, praise is the appropriate response. Here, James sees our praise being expressed in song. Surely this can be seen in the Book of Psalms. In fact, the Book of Psalms is a pattern for our response to adversity, or to prosperity. We have psalms of lament and petition, and we also have psalms of praise. It is evident that James sees music as contributing greatly to our communication with God. Music somehow engages and expresses what is in the soul. In the Old Testament, it would seem that men composed songs which they sang in private, but it would also seem that there was the expectation that these would be sung publicly in worship as well.

Verses 14 and 15 seem to refer to a special circumstance. As I currently understand these verses, they refer to a situation in which a person is very sick and in a weakened condition. They have little strength to do anything; perhaps they have only enough strength to verbalize their desire for a visit by the elders of the church. When summoned, the elders come to the bedside of that person to pray for them. The possibility that sin has been committed and is a contributing factor in the illness is raised, with the assurance that if confession is made, those sins will be forgiven.

James mentions anointing with oil, and there are different opinions as to what role this oil plays. In ancient times, oil was actually employed as a healing agent (see [Luke 10:34](#)). I think that many would simply look upon the oil as symbolic, whether of the Holy Spirit, or of the healing process for which they are praying. In our church, the elders have prayed for a number of people over the years. At times we have used oil, and at times we have not. It is our feeling that it is not necessarily required, but it is still my personal preference to use it, unless circumstances would prevent it. We have always raised the question as to whether or not the ailing person is aware of some unconfessed sin, that might be related to the illness. We then pray that if it is God’s will, the sick person might be healed. We believe that God may heal the person physically, but we do not dare to presume that He must. (James has just cautioned us about presuming upon the future – [James 4:13-17](#).) We believe that affliction can be a test of one’s faith, and even a means to our growth (see [Psalm 73](#); [James 1:2-4](#)).

We need to be careful not to assume that healing is a thing of the past, but we must also be careful not to presume that God must heal because we ask. It is our conviction that God has never been obliged to heal, but that in His grace He does sometimes grant physical healing. In my experience of over 30 years of ministry I have seen several miraculous interventions of God. And, I have seen other instances where God did not heal, but He did give great peace and a wonderful testimony.

I should add that this is the text Roman Catholicism uses to justify the practice of the ritual of extreme unction, an act whereby one is supposedly prepared for death. This most certainly does not fit our text, which looks for the sick person’s recovery, not his demise. William Barclay has a good comment regarding the practice of extreme unction:

“For many centuries the Church consistently used anointing as a means of healing the sick. In fact it is important to note that the sacrament of unction, or anointing, was in the early centuries always designed as a means of cure, and not as a preparation for death as it now is in the Roman Catholic Church. It was not until A.D. 852 that this sacrament did, in fact, become the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, administered to prepare for death.”<sup>54</sup>

Verses 16-18 expand upon the instruction of verses 14-15 in a more general way. In verses 14 and 15, James was speaking of a more specialized case, where someone weakened by their illness would need to call upon the elders for prayer and recovery, and possibly for confession of sins. James now makes this a more general instruction. He calls upon the saints to **“confess your sins one to another and pray for one another so that you may be healed”** (verse 16).



This verse has been greatly abused. It is the basis, for example, of the Roman Catholic doctrine of auricular confession to a priest. Martin Luther is said to have very quickly brushed this away with the words,

“A strange confessor! His name is “One another.”

Quite obviously there is a substantial difference between “one another” and “a priest,” or even “the preacher.”

James is not requiring every believer to publicly confess his sins to the entire church. There may be specific instances where this may be required, as in the case of church discipline.<sup>55</sup> But we know from texts like [Matthew 18:15-20](#) that sin is best dealt with privately. I believe that James is urging those who have sinned against a brother to privately confess their sin to the one they have offended and to seek their forgiveness and reconciliation, just as our Lord taught:

21 “You have heard that it was said to an older generation, ‘**Do not murder,**’ and ‘whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says ‘Fool’ will be sent to fiery hell. 23 So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. 25 Reach agreement quickly with your accuser while on the way to court, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the warden, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not at all get out until you have paid the last penny” ([Matthew 5:21-26](#)).

The inference of [James 5:16](#) is that there will be some sickness that is the result of unconfessed sin related to relationships – sin against a brother or sister in the body of Christ. The first step to healing is confession and reconciliation. This may be the reason that Jesus first forgave the paralytic of his sins, and then healed him ([Matthew 9:1-8](#)). Those who were healed were instructed to sin no more ([John 5:14](#); [8:11](#)).

If I understand James correctly, he is not saying that confession heals us, but that prayer does. He uses the example of Elijah to emphasize the fact that the prayer of a righteous man has great effectiveness. Elijah was a man of like passions, a man like us. He was not perfect, as a study of his life makes clear. His prayer to resign from his ministry and from life itself was rejected by God, who told him to go back to work ([1 Kings 19](#)). But his prayers to stop the rains and to start them were acts of obedience on his part, and God answered them.

Note the fact that the word “**prayer**” is singular, not plural, and so is the word “**man**.” Here, James is not emphasizing the need for persistence in prayer, though our Lord did so ([Luke 18:1-8](#)), along with His apostles ([Ephesians 6:18](#); [Philippians 1:4](#); [Colossians 4:2](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#); [1 Timothy 5:5](#); [2 Timothy 1:3](#)). We should surely be persistent in prayer, but that is not the point here. James is saying that one prayer, prayed by one person, can be exceedingly powerful. It is not confession that accomplishes great things, so that the more we confess, the more miracles God will perform on our behalf. It is not even the number of prayers that we pray, as though the quantity of our prayers moves God. It is the heathen who vainly repeat their prayers ([Matthew 6:7](#)).

I believe two things are in view here. First, unreconciled relationships hinder prayer:

Husbands, in the same way, treat your wives with consideration as the weaker partners and show them honor as fellow heirs of the grace of life. In this way nothing will hinder your prayers ([1 Peter 3:7](#)).

Second, I believe that James is stressing righteousness. James is not saying that many saints should be praying, or that one man is praying many prayers; he is stressing the fact that the one man who is praying his one prayer is righteous. Confession of sin is important, then, because it heals relationships and because it is essential for righteousness.

I need to pause to be sure that I am not misunderstood. I do believe that we should persevere in prayer, until God has made His answer clear to us (see [2 Corinthians 12:8-10](#)). I do believe that it is good for many saints to join in prayer over important matters. But I am strongly opposed to the current trend of thought that states or implies that the number of prayers offered or the number of those praying is what moves God. God delights in the prayers of His people, but prayer is not a work of man that moves God to action due to the volume or intensity of our efforts. We do not need a “moral majority” to move God. We do not need to amass sufficient “prayer power” to see God’s hand. One elderly widow, privately praying in her closet, may effectively bring about great intervention from God. Let us have concerts of prayer, but let us not think that God is moved by mere numbers.

The last two verses of chapter 5 serve as the conclusion to this epistle. Some feel that it is a rather abrupt ending. I would prefer to believe that in many ways it captures the spirit of the entire epistle. From chapter 1 on to the end of the epistle James has spoken about our use of the tongue. Allow me to briefly review:

Chapter 1: In verse 13, some were inclined to say that the source of their temptation (and sin) was God. James forbids this. In verse 19, James tells us to be “slow to speak.” In verse 26, he writes that if one thinks he is religious but fails to control his *tongue*, he is deceiving his heart and his religion is futile.

Chapter 2: The prejudice of the “usher” is shown by what he says to the rich man, in contrast to his *words* to the poor man (verses 2-3). Then, in verses 14-19, deals with hypocrisy, which is often a discrepancy between our *words* and our works. A man who merely *speaks* words of blessing is a hypocrite. It does the man who is hungry and in need of clothing no good to merely pronounce a blessing on him about food and clothing.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 is almost all about one’s words. James specifically addresses those who wish to be *teachers*, warning them of the power of the *tongue* for evil, and of the stricter judgment teachers will consequently receive. The last verses of chapter 3 (13-18) contrast the way godly wisdom works, as opposed to the empty talk of worldly wisdom.

Chapter 4: In chapter 4, we find much more about words. Conflicts and *quarrels* (verse 1) usually begin with verbal warfare. If the lips reveal what is true of the heart, then the *grief*, *mourning* and *weeping* of verse 9 reveal a truly repentant heart, while laughter would be inappropriate. The arrogance that is the opposite of true Christian humility is reflected in our words, first in *speaking against* one another (verses 11-12), and also in *speaking arrogantly* about future success (verses 13-17).

Chapter 5: Up to verse 19, James has said a good deal about the tongue. In verse 1, James refers to the *weeping and wailing* of hell. The unused, hoarded wealth of the rich testifies against them, as do the *cries* of their unpaid (or underpaid) workers (verses 2-4). The righteous exhibit their righteousness by their words – by what they *don’t speak*, as well as by what they *say*. The righteous do not *grumble* (verse 9), nor do they take *oaths* that are not according to truth (verse 12). The tongue of the righteous should call out to God in *prayer* in adversity, and in *praise* in times of blessing (verse 13). The tongue of the one weakened by sickness or sin should *call for* the elders of the church, so that they might *pray*, and he might be healed (verses 14-15). The saints should *confess* their sins against each other, which will facilitate their *prayers* for one another. Elijah’s *prayer* was effective, because he was a righteous man (verses 17-18).

The seeking and practice of wisdom is evident by our words and our works. True religion reflects the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to “**seek and to save those who are lost**” (Luke 19:10). True religion does not turn against a wayward brother (unless required, after the full process of discipline has been carried out – see Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5); true religion seeks to restore a wayward brother (see also 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1-22; Thessalonians 3:14-15; 2 Timothy 2:23-26; 1 John 5:16-17; Jude 22-23).

The words of James 5:20 might be misinterpreted. It is apparent that the one whose soul is saved from death is the wayward one. But whose “**multitude of sins**” are covered? It is surely not the sins of the one seeking to restore the wayward one; it is the sins of the wayward one that is in view. And just who is this one who has “**wandered from the truth**”? I am inclined to think that the words of James are general enough that he may be speaking of both the saved who have departed from the truth, as well as the lost. We know from James 2:19 that one could believe the truth in an academic way and yet not really be saved. We seem to see the same thing in the two soils that fail to produce fruit (see Mark 4:5-7, 16-19). Peter and the writer to the Hebrews also raise this possibility:<sup>56</sup>

1 So get rid of all evil and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 And yearn like newborn infants for pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up to salvation, 3 **if you have experienced the Lord's kindness** (1 Peter 2:1-3).

7 For the ground that has soaked up the rain that frequently falls on it and yields useful vegetation for those who tend it receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is useless and about to be cursed; its fate is to be burned. 9 But in your case, dear friends, even though we speak like this, we are convinced of better things relating to salvation. 10 For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love you have demonstrated for his name, in having served and continuing to serve the saints. 11 But we passionately want each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of your hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and perseverance inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:7-12; see also 1 John 2:19; 2 John 9).<sup>57</sup>

What greater words can be spoken than those that seek to turn a sinner to Christ? What greater work is there on earth than the saving of men's souls? If we have been left here to carry out the work of our Lord, then surely seeking to save sinners is the highest work of all.

Notice how James has changed the focus from the beginning verses of chapter 1 to the closing verses of chapter 5. In the midst of our adversities, our focus initially tends to be on ourselves. James exhorts us to joyfully endure our afflictions and to pray for wisdom. He calls upon us to act in a way that is consistent with true religion. In the closing verses of chapter 1, James says that true religion seeks to assist the helpless and needy, the orphans and widows. In the closing verses of chapter 5, the focus is on others and their need for repentance. The greatest need of all is for the sinner to turn to Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternal life. The greatest need for the saint is to be walking in the Spirit and waiting for the return of the Savior, standing apart from the corruption of the world.

The fruit of the righteous is like a tree producing life,  
and the one who wins souls is wise (Proverbs 11:30).

## Conclusion

As I conclude this message and this short series on the Book of James, I have but one question to ask you: “Is your religion real?” That is, is your religion genuine? Will it save you? That is what the Book of James is about. It is addressed to a group of people (the Jews) who were very religious, but their

words were often more pious than their works (hypocrisy). The malady is common among professing Christians today. Paul warned us about the appearance of religious faith without the reality of it:

1 But understand this, that in the last days difficult times will come. 2 For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, opposed to what is good, 4 treacherous, reckless, conceited, loving pleasure rather than loving God. 5 **They will maintain the outward appearance of religion but will have repudiated its power.** So avoid people like these (2 Timothy 3:1-5, emphasis mine).

I must ask you, my friend, do you truly possess that which you profess? I am not seeking to create doubt in the minds of those who truly believe, but I do wish to challenge the false confidence of anyone who may never have come to faith in Christ for salvation. They make a profession of faith, but James gives us a test as to the reality of that profession in their practice. If James has caused you to see that your profession of faith is empty, then cling to Christ and His work on the cross for your salvation. Trust in Him for the forgiveness of your sins and the assurance of eternal life.

9 What then? Are we better off? Certainly not, for we have already charged that Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin, 10 just as it is written:

***“There is no one righteous, not even one,  
11 there is no one who understands,  
there is no one who seeks God.  
12 All have turned away,  
together they have become worthless;  
there is no one who shows kindness, not even one.”  
13 “Their throats are open graves,  
they deceive with their tongues,  
the poison of asps is under their lips.”  
14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”  
15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood,  
16 ruin and misery are in their paths,  
17 and the way of peace they have not known.”  
18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”***

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For *no one is declared righteous before him* by the works of the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. 21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been disclosed— 22 namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. 24 But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. 25 God publicly displayed him as a satisfaction for sin by his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed. 26 This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus’ faithfulness (Romans 3:9-26).

17 So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come! 18 And all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation. 19 In other words, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s trespasses against them, and he has given us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His plea through us. We plead with you on Christ’s behalf, “Be reconciled to God!” 21 God made the one who

did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we would become the righteousness of God (2 [Corinthians 5:17-21](#)).

4 But “when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our Savior. 7 And so, since we have been justified by his grace, we become heirs with the confident expectation of eternal life” ([Titus 3:4-7](#)).

9 If we accept the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, because this is the testimony of God that he has testified concerning his [Son](#). 10 (The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has testified concerning his Son.) 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his [Son](#). 12 The one who has the Son has this eternal life; the one who does not have the Son does not have this eternal life (1 [John 5:9-12](#)).

If you are truly a Christian, then I must ask you how you measure up to the standard James holds out for the Christian? Do your works add credence to your words? Do you practice what you profess? Not one of us should come away from this book feeling comfortable and complacent. All of us should be challenged to practice true religion on a daily basis. I pray that by God’s grace we shall.

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<sup>51</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

<sup>52</sup> “This particular word used for *coming* in this verse, *parousia*, is used also by Peter, Paul, and John, and by Jesus Himself with reference to His appearing in glory. It was current among the Greeks to describe the official visits of a monarch to a city within his dominions. On such state occasions the royal ‘presence’ (for that is the literal meaning of the word) was such that none could fail to recognize the Sovereign for what in fact he was. By the use of this word in the New Testament for the second coming of Christ, that second coming is contrasted with His first. As the babe of Bethlehem, the carpenter of Nazareth, the Son of Man with nowhere to lay His head, despised and rejected of men, Christ came, so to speak, *incognito*. It was only veiled in flesh that His Godhead could be seen during His earthly life, and then only with the eyes of faith. But His appearance on the clouds of heaven will be such that He will be conspicuous, without any possibility of doubt, as the Judge of mankind, as the Lord from heaven, who will gather His elect together, and summon those already living in union with Him to be with Him for ever and share with Him His eternal glory.” R.V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 117-118)

<sup>53</sup> Literally, with your foot.

<sup>54</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 130.

<sup>55</sup> Public repentance may be called for when a leader has been publicly rebuked for his sin (see 1 [Timothy 5:19-20](#)).

**56** There are texts like [John 2:23-24](#) and 6:66 which could be understood to refer to those who superficially believed in Jesus, but not as true believers.

**57** I confess, I deliberately left off the earlier verses in chapter 6, since my intention here is not to raise questions, but to illustrate that some who profess to be saved may not necessarily be saved. Knowing that Jesus died on the cross for sinners is not the same as trusting in Christ's atoning work for my sins.

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